

EFFECTS OF PARENTS' CIRCULAR MIGRATION ON STUDENTS' SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: EXPLANATORY VARIABLES

Nicoleta Laura POPA, PhD
Romanian Academy, Iasi Branch

Abstract: *The failure of educational systems to accommodate the needs of circular migrant students determined increases in numbers of school-aged Romanian children “left behind” by their migrant parents. The present study focuses on school achievement among children left behind, as well as attributional style and perceptions of parental behaviors, two dimensions previously associated with educational attainment. Two hundred and five high-school students participated in the study, out of which one hundred thirty-four have at least one migrant parent. The average grade for one semester was taken into account as an indicator of school achievement level, while attributional style and perceptions of parental behaviors were investigated with two adapted, self-administered instruments: Attributional Style Questionnaire (Peterson et al, 1982), respectively Parent Perception Inventory (Hazzard et al, 1983). Results are apparently mixed: parents’ migration has limited effects on students’ school achievement, while both perceptions of parenting behaviors and attributional style are affected. Based on these findings, we suggest deeper concerns for training students left behind towards adaptive explanatory styles and for maintaining good transnational family relations.*

Keywords: circular migration, students left behind, school achievement, explanatory style, parental behaviors

1. Introduction

Migration may be considered one of most acute reality of the contemporary world, and has complex implications for economical, social, cultural and educational developments. According to some of the latest European demographic reports, Romanians living across the national borders in EU constitute one of the largest migrant groups (Vasileva, 2009; Flander, 2011). Economic migration is certainly supported within EU community through regulations on free movement and employment (EC 2005a and 2005b), which determined high numbers of circular or temporary migrants, working and living abroad for a limited amount of time and changing destinations rapidly.

Recent pedagogical literature analyzing educational developments determined by increased migration movements, signals deeper concerns of specialists (Luchtenberg, 2004; Adams & Kirova, 2006; Brind, Harper & Moore, 2008), suggesting the need to assess potential effects and to provide responsive educational interventions. More and more international studies focus on explanatory research designs for low educational

attainments among migrant students (Stanat & Christensen, 2006; Michaelowa & Bourdon, 2006). Some of the factors frequently associated with educational underachievement among students affected by migration are social and economical inequalities in destination societies, lack of interest for early interventions, early educational segregation in some of the European school systems, low self-image and self-esteem among migrant students resulted from ignoring ethnic minorities whenever new school curriculum is proposed, deficiencies in school management (lack of cooperation between teachers, poor educational resources, low parental involvement etc.), low preoccupation for bilingualism or plurilingualism, and, ultimately, societal discrimination (Adams & Kirova, 2006; Brind, Harper & Moore, 2008).

Although the present study deals with implications of parental circular migration on school achievement among Romanian students left behind by migrant parents, some of the previously mentioned information is certainly valuable in understanding the education-related outcomes of these new forms of intra-European migration. On the other hand, we have to stress the lack of research efforts invested at European level for clarifying some of the unaccounted outcomes of work migration, namely the phenomenon of children left behind by their migrant parents.

Romanian research oriented towards educational effects of recent migration is rather limited and refers mainly to school results of Romanian children left behind by at least one circular or temporary migrant parent (Gherguț, 2007; Irimescu & Lupu, 2007; Toth et al., 2007; Luca, Gulei & Azoitei, 2007). Although no agreement was reached to this point, children separated by both parents and cared for by members of extended families are mostly exposed to educational failure, but school results are not significantly lower when compared with those obtained by their peers from non-migrant families, if socio-demographic variables are controlled (Sava, 2010). Additionally, negative effects of parental absence is compensated through higher access to communication technologies and equipment, as well as overall improved life conditions. The deepest negative effects of parental migration are depicted in relation with their social and emotional life (Robila, 2011).

The present study draws on empirical evidences collected in a larger research project aiming to uncover variables related to school achievement among Romanian children affected by parental and family migration, which includes students left behind by migrant parents, migrant students schooled in different educational systems, and returned migrant students, previously attending educational programs abroad. In this paper we report partial research data for Romanian students affected by parental migration, left behind in the home-country by at least one migrant parent. The central aim of the study is to highlight potential variations in students' perceptions about parental behaviors and explanatory styles, according to family migration history. Moreover, the two variables are also approached as determinants of school performances, in order to prepare a more comprehensive research frame, which needs to include additional explanatory dimensions (G.Kelemen, 2011). Obviously, complex structural models proposed for explaining school achievement are desirable, if compared with fragmented approaches which isolate one factor or another (Schreiber, 2002). Therefore, we need to stress from the beginning the limits of our demarche,

taking into account only few of the explanatory variables related in the literature with school achievement. However, both parental behavior and attributional style have a high relevance in explaining school performance of children from families affected by circular migration, as noted in previous contributions.

Family support was mentioned in relation to educational attainment, regardless the age groups covered in the research samples (Singh et al, 1995; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). Studies suggest that children can have successful school records, even if they come from families with low socio-economic status, but most successful students benefit from high quality parental involvement (Schoon & Parsons, 2002). Based on a study on a representative sample of American adolescents, Feinstein & Symons (1999) concluded that parental involvement influences adolescents' attitudes toward school and school performance. Obviously, there are studies that state just the opposite, indicating a growing impact of discrete variables on adolescents' school achievement, in addition with a lower impact of parental practices (Sacker et al, 2002).

Explanatory or attributional style was also connected with school achievement, regardless the subjects' age (Park & Kim, 1998; Bridges, 2001; Khodayarifard, Brinthaup & Anshel, 2010). Numerous studies have supported the connection between pessimistic attributional style (internal attributions in case of failure and external attributions in successful situations) and depressive symptoms (Abramson et al., 1999), but there are also studies indicating high correlations of explanatory styles to success in various educational and professional activities, and even health. Recent studies on the relationship between explanatory style and academic performance are contradictory: some show that students with pessimistic attributional style obtain significantly better results on tests than those with an optimistic explanatory style (Gibb et al, 2002), while others show that students who produce depressive attributions obtain lower average scores than their peers, in all main academic areas (Fosterling & Binsler, 2002).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample included two hundred and five high school students enrolled in urban school, aged between 15 and 18 years. One hundred thirty-four of them are affected by parental temporary migration (see also Table 1 bellow).

Table 1. Structure of the sample according to family migration history

Family migration history	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
No migrant parent	71	34.6	34.6
Temporary migrant mother	50	24.4	59.0
Temporary migrant father	52	25.4	84.4
Temporary migrant parents	32	15.6	100.0
Total	205	100.0	

2.2. Instruments

Adolescents' perceptions of parental behaviors were investigated with an adapted version of *Parent Perception Inventory (PPI)* developed by A. Hazzard, A. Christensen and G. Margolin (1983). The instrument includes eighteen items, structured in two parts illustrating positive and negative parental behaviors. Students are asked to rate the frequency of each described behavior on a Lickert scale (1= behavior is absent; 5= behavior is highly frequent). The original inventory is characterized by high internal homogeneity, and external validity (both convergent and discriminant) is satisfactory (Hazzard et al, 1983), and result are confirmed by later studies conducted in different cultural environments (e.g., Durning & Fortin, 2000). The version applied within the present study has satisfactory levels of internal consistency: alpha Cronbach's reliability coefficient is .80 for the scale of positive parental behaviors and .70 for the scale of negative parental behaviors.

The effect of age on students' perceptions has been reported as non-significant, whereas gender has a significant impact: male students tend to report higher frequency for positive parental behaviors than female students. Also, if two versions of the inventory are administered for maternal and paternal behaviors, subjects tend to assess more severely negative maternal behaviors, and family socio-economic factors determine more negative perceptions of parental behaviors (Glaser, Horne & Myers, 1995; Durning & Fortin, 2000). Studies conducted in disruptive families, marked by parental violence, sustain the hypothesis that marginal social status of the family modifies children's perceptions on frequent parental behaviors (Baumann & Kolko, 2002).

Explanatory style was measured with an adapted version of *Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ)*, Peterson et al., 1982), with a satisfactory reliability - alpha Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$. The questionnaire requires participants to imagine hypothetical school-related events (positive and negative) and to rate on a seven-point scale whether the causes of the respective events are determined by one-self or others (internality vs. externality), whether the causes are stable or unstable (stability vs. instability), and whether they affect the subject isolately or generally (specific vs. global). Based on participants' responses, several scores for different characteristics of explanatory style can be computed: locus of control (internal or external), differential locus of control (the tendency to attribute internal causes to positive effects rather than to external events and vice-versa), stability (stable or unstable causes), differential stability (attributing stable causes for positive events and unstable causes for negative events and vice-versa), and gloality (specific or global causes for positive and negative events). Positive scores of differential locus of control indicate self-enhancing explanatory pattern, while negative scores illustrate self-effacing attributional patterns. Similarly, positive scores of differential stability indicate optimism in explaining life events, while negative scores indicate pessimism. The adaptive explanatory style is presented throughout the literature as a combination of optimism and self-enhancement.

Participants' school achievement was estimated based on average school grades for one semester of the school year 2010-2011, as indicated by classroom teachers. The Romanian grading scale comprises ten levels: 1 is the lowest, 10 the highest and 5 is the passing grade.

2.3. Procedure

The instruments have been self-administered in collective sessions under the supervision of classroom teachers, and detailed instructions were provided by the researcher. Instructions included information about confidentiality and anonymity of research data, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The data were collected in four high-schools from two North-Eastern counties in Romania; the schools were indicated by school inspectorates as enrolling high numbers of students affected by temporary parental migration.

3. Results

Migration history of the family (circular or temporary migration of parents, with all variations considered) significantly influences dependent variables considered in our study – students' school achievement, their perceptions about positive and negative parental behaviors, and explanatory styles. Academic performances are modified under the effect of temporary parental migration, although the effect is significant at the upper confidence limit, $F(3, 201) = 2.55$; $p = .05$. Students with both parents temporary working abroad obtained significantly lower average school grades ($M = 7.75$; $SD = .86$) than students benefiting from the presence and direct care of their parents ($M = 8.15$; $SD = .70$), $t(101) = 2.47$; $p < .05$, while the absence of one migrant parent does not generate statistically significant effects on school performances.

Likewise, students' perceptions about positive parental behaviors modify according to family migration history, $F(3, 199) = 4.17$; $p = .01$, while perceptions about negative parental behaviors do not vary significantly, $F(3, 199) = .16$; $p = .91$ (See also Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2. Perceptions of positive parental behaviors – Mean (M) and Standard deviation (SD)

Family migration history	Perceptions of positive parental behaviors	
	M	SD
No migrant parent	3.33	.77
Temporary migrant mother	3.67	.87
Temporary migrant father	3.77	.63
Temporary migrant parents	3.65	.65

Thus, students with migrant fathers report in average the highest frequency of positive parental behaviors, followed by students with temporary migrant mothers and

both parents working abroad, while students benefitting from the direct support of both parents report in average the lowest frequency. Variations in this respect are explained through significant differences between students with no migrant parents and students with mothers working temporary abroad, $t(119) = -2.28$; $p < .05$; students with no migrant parents and students with temporary migrant fathers, $t(121) = -3.42$; $p < .01$; students with no migrant parents and students with both parents temporary working abroad, $t(99) = -1.98$; $p = .05$. Differences between the three groups of students affected by parental migration in terms of perceptions about positive parental perceptions are non-significant.

Table 3. Perceptions of negative parental behaviors – Mean (M) and Standard deviation (SD)

Family migration history	Perceptions of negative parental behaviors	
	M	SD
No migrant parent	2.30	.54
Temporary migrant mother	2.30	.80
Temporary migrant father	2.34	.50
Temporary migrant parents	2.24	.72

Result also indicate significant variations in terms of explanatory styles: parental migration significantly influences locus of control, $F(3, 186) = 4.46$; $p = .00$; stability, $F(3, 186) = 7.22$, $p = .00$ and differential stability, $F(3, 183) = 5.68$; $p = .00$. Thus, students with temporary migrant parents tend to explain events through external causes, whereas participants with no migrant parents make rather internal attributions, $t(92) = 2.47$; $p = .01$. Father's absence determines an external attributional style ($M = 5.14$; $SD = 1.00$), while mother's absence affects more subtle this dimension of explanatory style ($M = 4.72$; $SD = .72$), $t(94) = -2.15$; $p < 0.05$.

Participants from families with no migration history make more stable attributions, generalizing causes of successes and failures ($M = 4.84$; $SD = .63$) than students with both parents temporary working abroad ($M = 4.23$; $SD = .62$), $t(92) = 4.25$; $p = .00$. Students with temporary migrant fathers report the most stable attributions ($M = 4.99$; $SD = .72$), and thus are exposed to extrapolations of events' causes in successful or failing situations than students affected by mothers' absence ($M = 4.68$; $SD = .80$), $t(94) = 2.01$; $p < .05$.

Differential stability, in other words the level of optimism, vary between students from families with no migration background and students with temporary migrant parents: although scores of all students included in the sample are positive, students with temporary migrant fathers are closest to pessimism than other groups ($M = .47$; $SD = 1.27$), followed by students with both parents temporary living abroad ($M = .49$; $SD = 1.21$) and those affected by mothers' absence ($M = .75$; $SD = 1.13$). The three subgroups of participants affected by parental migration report significantly lower optimism than students from families with no migration history - $t(115.79) = 2.64$, $p < 0.05$; $t(109) = 3.33$; $p < 0.01$, respectively $t(92) = 2.76$; $p < 0.05$.

Further connections between variables have been supplementary investigated through a correlational analysis, in order to prepare a deeper predictive approach, with parental behaviors and explanatory style as determinants of school achievement among children left behind by migrant parents. Differential stability (optimism vs. pessimism) correlates significantly and moderately with students' school performances, except academic achievement of students with both parents temporary working abroad – $r = .42, p < .05$ (for children from non-migrant families); $r = .45, p < .05$ (for children with migrant fathers), respectively $r = .44, p < 0.05$ (for children with migrant mothers). All other dimensions of explanatory style, as well as perceptions about parental behaviors accidentally correlate significantly with students' school performances.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The central problem of the present study highlights some effects of current migration patterns on Romanian high-school students' school achievement and associated characteristics, as perceptions of parental behaviors and explanatory styles. Beyond circumscribing a certain area of interest – circular or temporary migration and its impact on students' academic performances – our approach focused on perceptions of parental behaviors and explanatory styles among a sample of Romanian students left behind by their migrant parents.

Although there are no previous studies dealing with the same dimensions of analysis, the literature offers some clues about the relation between school achievement, parental support and attributional style. Based on these prior foundations, we analyzed the specificity of these links in the case of students left behind by migrant parents.

Our initial assumptions are partly supported by the findings, as some significant influences of family migration history have been found in relation with school achievement. The data of Romanian reseaches focusing on similar issues do not entirely sustain these results, although they stress the high incidence of school absenteeism and dropout among children left behind by migrant parents (Irimescu & Lupu, 2007; Toth et al., 2007; Luca, Gulei & Azoitei, 2007). Our findings may be also easily criticized in this respect, if the weaknesses in assembling the sample and in designing the general research framework are considered. In order to provide more reliable outcomes about the influence of parental circular or temporary migration on students' school achievement, future studies should embrace more accurate research designs, considering all relevant demographic variables.

The sample included adolescents and according to the literature we would expect non-significant variations in parental support and behavior among this age group (Sacker et al, 2002); however, results indicate significant differences between students from families with no migration history and students left behind by migrant parents. The latest group develops an idealized image of parental behaviors, reporting less frequent negative interventions. Additionally, explanatory style is also affected by migration history in the families: students left behind develop less optimistic attributional explanations, which place them closer to depressive explanatory patterns.

In line with previous studies on similar issues (Bridges, 2001; Khodayarifard, Brinthead & Anshel, 2010), explanatory style of of students left behind by migrant parents correlates significantly with their school performances.

Beyond a certain concern for deeper analysis and understanding of current findings, we can suggest at least two dimensions of psychological and educational interventions founded on results already available: attributional training for all students in developing more optimistic, specific, and therefore adaptive and balanced explanations for success and failure, and encouraging migrant parents to preserve and consolidate close communication relationships with their children left behind, even though mediated by technology.

Acknowledgements

This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU 89/1.5/S/56815 [Knowledge based society: research, debates, perspectives].

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