 Romanian High-School Students "Left Behind" in the Context of Circular Migration: Some Determinants of School Achievement

Nicoleta-Laura Popa

Nicoleta-Laura Popa
Romanian Academy, Iasi Branch, Bucharest, Romania
E-mail: npopa@psih.uaic.ro

Abstract

A large number of school-aged Eastern European children have been "left behind" by their parents who temporary live and work abroad. A limited number of studies at national level were conducted and even fewer have been introduced to the international audience. The present study attempts to add some dimensions to the body of research available on the topic, by investigating potential relations between perceptions of school environment, academic motivation and school performance among Romanian children left behind. An adapted version of What is happening in this classroom? questionnaire (Fraser et al. 1996) was applied for investigating participants' perceptions of school environment. Academic motivation was measured with Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al. 1992) and the average grade for the previous semester was considered the indicator of school achievement. One-hundred seventeen secondary school students participated in the study, out of which 57 with temporary migrating parents. Results indicate that parents' absence slightly affected students' school achievement, and perceptions of school environment and academic motivation vary along with average grades. The outcomes of the study are discussed against available literature, emphasizing the need for more empirical support of the findings.

Key words: migration, children left behind, achievement, classroom climate, academic motivation

Introduction

Patterns of Romanian out-migration changed dramatically in the last twenty years, and associated social outcomes diversified. Consistent research efforts have been invested in depicting economic and sociological facets of Romanian migration flows, while educational implications were rather neglected.

In the context of Eastern European work migration, the "left behind" phenomenon became an important issue in the countries of origin, regardless the group affected by family members' migration (either children or elderly). Empirical evidences about social and educational challenges faced by children affected by parental migration are mostly available for households in Latin American, Caribbean or Asian countries (Parrenas 2005, Asis 2006). Undoubtedly, educational performances among children left behind constitute a central point in research on the issue in question. Regardless the volume of parental remittances and the quality of care provided by the supporting adults in the home-country, school achievement among children left behind is reported as declining (Jampaklay 2006), while other studies sustain that educational performances are not significantly influenced by parental migration (Kuhn 2006). Parental absence due to temporary migration may not necessarily lead to emotional disturbances or delinquent behavior, but children left behind, especially by their migrant mothers, experience migration as a form of abandonment (Parrenas 2005), a primary
source of loneliness and poor social adjustment within the peer-group (Battistella and Conaco 1998).

Studies conducted in Eastern European countries produced similar results: Bulgarian children left behind are predisposed to school dropout (Guentcheva et al. 2003), Polish children display lower school performance and increased vulnerability to deviant behavior (Rosinska-Kordasiewicz and Urbanska 2006), while the lack of parental guidance and control produces emotional and behavioral problems in Ukrainian children (Tolstokorova 2009). Several research reports are available for children living in Moldova, in the absence of their migrant parents (Molodikova 2008): they enjoy improved living conditions, but are exposed to risks as drug abuse, school dropout and socially undesirable behavior.

A study conducted by Toth et al. (2007) suggests that school achievement among Romanian children left behind by their migrant parents tend to be reduced, although they value education, under the pressure of their families, willing to invest more in further professional training than non-migrant families. A recent research on cultural effects of Romanian workforce migration (Badescu et al. 2009) emphasizes profound changes produced at the level of family relations and shared values: parents are more aware about the importance of education and press their children to continue their studies, while acknowledging their children’s need for independence and increased access to resources. The indirect exposure to cultural diversity enhanced respondents' civic involvement and social confidence, but negatively affected children's educational achievement and educational aspirations. Similarly, a survey on children from a Western Romanian county concludes that parents' absence is not a risk factor for school achievement, as students with a low socio-economical family background experience similar educational difficulties (Hatos 2011). It is clear that the effects of parental absence should constitute subject of further research and clarifications.

The present study and methodology

The present study focuses on school achievement, perceptions of classroom environment and academic motivation among a sample of Romanian children left behind by their migrant parents. A large body of research focused on potential associations between psychosocial dimensions of class and school environments and students’ academic outcomes. For example, we can mention the studies conducted by Goh and Fraser (2000) and Kim and Kim (1996) that indicate strong correlations between students’ perceptions of their classrooms, achievement in school-subjects, attitudes towards school etc. Motivational background of school achievement lies at the center of educational research, as motivation is understood as strong psychological mechanism in supporting learning. In a comprehensive review of theories and studies focusing on this specific issue, Covington (2000) underlines the importance of considering motivation when studying educational outcomes.

Based on the available literature, we presumed significant variations of school achievement, perceptions of classroom climate and academic motivation among children coming from migrant and non-migrant families.

Instruments

Students' perceptions of classroom environment were investigated with the questionnaire What is happening in this class? (Fraser et al. 1996), which consists in eight subscales (each including ten Lickert scale items): student cohesiveness, teacher support, involvement, autonomy, investigation, task orientation, cooperation and equity. A separate score was computed for each subscale by summing results for individual items. Reliability coefficients of the Romanian version used in the present study have rather high values ranging between .83 and .93.
Educational motivation was measured with Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al. 1992), which includes twenty-eight items subdivided into seven subscales assessing three types of intrinsic motivation (intrinsic motivation to know, to accomplish things and to experience educational stimulation), three types of extrinsic motivation (external, introjected, and identified regulation) and amotivation. Subscale scores were computed by summing results for corresponding Lickert scale items. Reliability levels for the Romanian version used within our study for secondary school students are satisfactory, ranging between .68 and .79.

The level of school achievement was analysed based on average grade for the first semester of the school year 2010/2011.

**Participants**

The sample included one hundred seventeen Romanian secondary school students, aged between 15 and 18 years, eighty-nine girls and twenty-eight boys enrolled in public urban high-schools. The presents study reports the research results for pupils left behind by both parents involved in circular migration at the time of the data collection (fifty-seven participants) and for children currently living in nuclear families, benefiting of the support of both parents (sixty students). In terms of permanent residence, the sample was balanced including fifty-four students with families residing in urban areas and sixty-three from rural areas. Students from rural areas included in the sample are daily involved in transfers by train or bus from villages to the cities.

**Procedure**

The measures have been self-administered at the end of the second semester of the school year 2010/2011, and classroom teachers reported average grades for the first semester of the same school year. Informed consent has been obtained from all students volunteering to participate in the study.

**Results**

Although some researchers suggest significant differences between students left behind by their migrant parents and children from non-migrant families in terms of school achievement, our results do not entirely support a similar pattern of educational performances: average grades are generally lower for students affected by parental migration, but the differences are not statistically significant. The highest level of school achievement was documented for girls coming from non-migrant families (M= 8.25; SD=.60), who perform significantly better than boys (M= 7.23; SD=.84) with a similar family situation [t(58)= 3.99; p= .00].

Results for perceptions of school climate indicate students left behind with migrant parents perceive as more intense tasks requiring problem-solving and investigation skills (M= 35.45; SD= 6.81) than students with non-migrant parents (M= 32.63; SD= 7.55) - t(115)= 2.11; p< .05. They are also more likely to approach learning tasks more autonomous and to choose personalized models of action in school contexts than their peers [t(115)= 2.29; p< .05].

In terms of academic motivation, results indicate significant differences between children affected by parental migration (M= 11.93; SD= 5.79) and children raised in non-migrant families (M= 9.06; SD= 5.37) only for the amotivation scale [t(115)= 2.55; p< .05].

Variations of the considered variables within the two groups of students have been further explored, by considering gender and residence areas (urban/rural). No significant difference has been found between girls and boys from non-migrant families for dimensions of classroom environment, while girls with migrant parents tend to be more task-oriented than boys, investing more efforts in completing school activities [t(55)= 3.05; p< .01]. In contrast, academic motivation scores do not vary according to gender among children left behind.
Within the group of students with non-migrant parents, significant differences were observed between girls (M= 19.47; SD= 5.79) and boys (M= 15.28; SD= 2.44) for intrinsic motivation to experience educational stimulation [t(17.62)= 2.33; p< .05], while gender does not account for differences within the group of participants affected by parental migration.

If family permanent residence is considered, data for students from urban and rural areas with non-migrant parents indicate more positive perceptions of the first subgroup of students cohesiveness in the classroom [t(58)= 3.39; p< .01], involvement in school activities [t(33.79)= 2.29; p< .05], autonomy in solving learning tasks [t(58)= 2.26; p< .05], task orientation [t(58)= 2.64; p< .01] and cooperation with classmates [t(58)= 2.85; p< .01]. Generally, means for perceptions of school climate dimensions are higher for students residing in urban areas than for those coming from villages.

In the case of children left behind for their migrant parents, students from urban areas express less determination in accomplishing school tasks (M= 35.79; SD= 7.30) than their peers from rural areas (M= 40.46; SD= 6.16) - [t(55)= -2.60; p< .05].

Associations between perceptions of classroom climate dimensions, academic motivation scores and school achievement have been also investigated: correlation coefficients (Pearson) indicate significant but moderate connections between school achievement and perceived teacher support (r= .21; p< .05), task orientation (r= .28; p= .01), and equity in the classroom (r= .33; p= .00). Intrinsic motivation to accomplish school task account for the strongest significant correlation with academic achievement (r= .47; p= .00), while external regulation of academic behavior for the weakest (r= .24; p= .00). As expected, amotivation is negatively connected to school achievement, regardless the migration background of participants' families, although the value of the correlation coefficient is not significant.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Overall, the results indicate only a weak effect of parental migration on participants' level of school performance although average grades are lower for students with both parents involved in work migration. However, we should mention a general tendency of girls to obtain higher average grades than boys, as a sign of better adjustment to challenges within school settings. These research outcomes are in line with some recent findings of similar studies conducted on Romanian students left behind (Sava 2010, Hatos 2011), but more data is needed for launching more reliable conclusions on school achievement variations according to family migration situation.

A rather unexpected effect of parental migration resides in improved students' perceptions on some dimensions of classroom climate, such as involvement in problem-solving activities and increased autonomy in approaching learning tasks. These results illustrate potential changes in classroom behavior of students affected by parental migration, due to children's need to overcome all difficulties outside the school life with limited adult assistance, which may eventually be translated similarly within the educational environment.

The results for the academic motivation scale are closer to the initial study assumptions, as scores for amotivation are significantly higher for children left behind by their migrant parents. Amotivation in academic situations may be related with hopelessness or low interest level in further education, but deeper approaches are needed for clarifying these results, as a part of the available literature suggests the opposite tendency (e.g. higher academic motivation, Rosinska-Kordasiewicz and Urbanska 2006).

Variations of perceptions about classroom psychosocial dimensions and academic motivation favoring children with permanent residence in rural areas, regardless the migration situation of the family was certainly expected, as these children are psychologically more prepared and determined to succeed in school, as a first step to improve their life conditions. Although our results are interpreted with caution given the research limits (rather small...
sample, few variables associated with academic achievement included in the research design, a cross-sectional approach), they do offer additional information about the situation of children with migrant parents.

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