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Family's Role in Sustaining the Educational Trajectory of Children from Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Communities

Otilia APOSTU[1]

Abstract: Youth participation in education is, at the same time, a right and an obligation. Regarding it from the standpoint of different actors involved in the educational process reveals various perspectives of approaching and analyzing school participation. The family is one of the key actors of school participation with a significant input not only on the material and financial aspects of it, but also at the level of attitudes and practices valued and developed in relation to the child and his/her educational trajectory. Beyond all the determinants of a child's school participation, regarding, for instance, educational policies, implemented strategies, or financial investments in education, the family has a critical role in his/her educational trajectory and future social and professional inclusion. The following aspects determine this essential role of the family: family's great influence on the child's first years within the context of primary socialization; family's continuous action as a "model" for the child; the cultural capital that the family promotes; the sound understanding that it has regarding the child's needs; and, finally, the amount of trust that the family invests in the school. The family's influence on school participation of children from socially and economically underprivileged communities has, oftentimes, negative connotations translated into risks of absenteeism and dropping out of school. Starting from this general hypothesis, the present study aims at identifying and analyzing the family related factors that influence the school trajectory of children coming from socially and economically underprivileged communities.The entire analysis is framed by collaborative approaches that sustain a real and functional partnership between school and family.

Keywords: education, family, disadvantaged communities, school participation, partnership school-family.

Introduction

Youth participation in education is equally a right and an obligation for them. Depending on the different actors involved in the educational process, young people's participation in education reveals different approach and analysis perspectives. The decision makers in the educational system,

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members of school and local community, local community representatives, students' families are all determinants for what has to be the schooling of the young people in the education system, willing to be a complex system that actively contributes to the active and effective integration of the young people into the community (Apostu, 2012, p. 125). Each of these actors has a specific influence, thus the children's educational path is nothing more than a sum of the influence of all these factors. We will limit the analysis below, to one of these actors – the family - thanks to its special status in the context of this analysis: supplier and, at least theoretically, permanent supporter of the school's *working material* - the children. Hence, there are multiple implications: family's awareness of their duty of sending children to school: "the responsibility of children's education is no longer solely the responsibility of teachers, but also of the parent or legal guardian who is bound to take measures to ensure the student is attenting school "(Fartuşnic, 2012, p. 55); the support (financial, material, moral, psychological, etc.) that the family must provide throughout their children's schooling period; family assumption of the role of real partner in education and training of children, along with school. In this context, the family stands out as the main actor of children's school attendance, with a potential and desirable contribution not only materially and financialy, but also attitudinal and cultural.

Beyond all other determinants of a child's school attendance, from individual (natural given, personality traits), to school related (class organization, school contents, teacher training, etc.) and to systemic ones (educational policies, implemented strategies or financial investments in education), the family has a decisive role in the educational trajectory and in the future social and professional inclusion of children. This determinant role is attributed, on the one hand, to the attributes that the family naturally has: the factor and context of the primary socialization of the child, co-participant in the secondary socialization of the child, the permanent status of role model for the child, the cultural capital the family inherits and transmits to their children. On the other hand, this role is attributed due to the rights and obligations the parents have towards their children, but can not be exercised to true value but by understanding the real and concrete needs of the children, as well the family investing the trust capital in the actions of institutions and actors with an educational role.

The whole discussion acquires specificity, and sometimes negative connotations, translated into absenteeism and school abandonment when it is contextualized in the socially and economically disadvantaged

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communities. Starting from this general hypothesis, the present study aims to identify and analyze the family factors influencing the school trajectory of children from socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

Using data gathered in various sociology surveys focused on children at risk of drop-out and school absenteeism, the study aims to highlight the family context elements that, at least in socio-economically disadvantaged communities, determine the schooling of children at the appropriate age, despite the action and inflection of other factors supporting school participation. The fulfillment of the goal will be facilitated by the establishment and realization of specific objectives with an emphasis on inverse measures at the level of the targeted population, as well as by the attempt to establish a series of support elements for supporting the school participation of the children, despite the unfavorable family context. The objectives of the study focus on:

Thus, the study proposes an analysis of the particularities of the school trajectories of children from disadvantaged communities, the identification of family factors with a significantly negative influence on the school trajectory of children, identifying possible solutions that can contribute to the development of a real school-family partnership that will contribute to increasing school attendance.

At international level, the issue of school abandonment and the determining factors continues to be analyzed, debated due to its current and generalized nature. There are varied studies that offer statistical information on school drop-out in direct connection with the role of the family during the schooling of children and their school success, as well as qualitative analyzes focused on the specifics of the family related to the school course of the children. For example, international data suggest that "young people from low-income families are likely to be in higher education compared to the proportion of such families in the population." (OECD, 2012, p. 15).

In the scientific studies, two main approaches can be identified. On the one hand, there are studies that analyze the issue of school drop-out from the perspective of family risk factors, such as family structure and organization, family climate, social and economic issues, lack of family support for schooling either due to lack of interest or due to the low level of parental education and, implicitly, the inability to help their children with homework or other school-related requirements (Bernard, 2011). On the other hand, there are studies addressing the problem of school drop-out from the perspective of family factors as a support for school dropout

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prevention. Here are aspects such as emotional support, child's relationship with an adult that are significant for the child, positive family climate or family style, school support (Born, Lafontaine, Bernard, Georges, 2008).

We are here, rather, in a positive approach that supports parental engagement, a syntactic that is increasingly taking place in scientific studies on the relationship between family and school drop-out, focusing on family support for preventing abandonment. Three main elements are taken into account: parents' participation in school activities (participatory dimension), supporting the child in carrying out the activities required by the school such as homework, attending the library, etc. (cognitive dimension), school aspirations of parents and interest in school (personal dimension) (Born, Lafontaine, Bernard, Georges, 2008, p. 58).

Regardless of the perspective, we position ourselves in the more general approach of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) that support the existence of a social reproduction based on family-built habitus as the basis of habitus at school or other contexts of socialization, formation, development (Bourdieu, Passeron, 1977, pp. 43-44). The habitus developed in the family is the basis the family continues to build together with the school and other education and training agents, but none of these agents have an absolute role to play in the child's schooling and school drop-out.

We are therefore critical of the approaches to school drop-out that have placed the whole responsibility on the inequality of opportunities to participate in education and school drop-out at family and social level, without taking into account the school's influence on this phenomenon (Jencks, et. al., 1972).

The analysis we propose in the following gives the family a major role in participating in the education of children (or, conversely, a significant contribution to school drop-out), but this role must be seen in the context of the other determinants of school drop-out: personal, school-related or social.

The analysis is among the topical issues of the education system in Romania, given that "in recent years a large proportion of children do not participate in education due to the family, economic and socially disadvantaged conditions" (Horga, et. al., 2017, p. 87). In the communities facing socio-economic disadvantage, the role of the family in relation to school attendance is even more obvious. In these circumstances, the entire analysis is based on quantitative and qualitative data provided by the schools included in the UNICEF campaign for school attendance "Come to

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school!"[2], as well as the families of children enrolled in these schools. The data were collected through various monitoring tools developed within the intervention, as well as through quantitative and qualitative surveys conducted in the various thematic studies carried out in schools participating in the campaign (quality assurance in school, continuation of secondary school graduates, school resilience, violence in school).

The approach proposed in this study capitalizes on the results of these research but, for the argumentation of the specific aspects of the family's role in supporting the participation of children from disadvantaged communities in education, we appeal to the secondary analysis of the data obtained in these communities. The data provided are synthetic information obtained through quantitative and qualitative data obtained at the level of schools and communities participating in the "Hai la şcoala!" Campaign, and their in-depth and customized analysis at the level of the family segment is proposed because, starting from the secondary analysis of empirical data, to develop generational perspectives on the family's contribution to supporting the participation of children in disadvantaged socio-economic communities in education. The data obtained at the level of the schools / communities included in the Campaign concerned various aspects but their synthetic approach and analysis will focus on a few dimensions relevant to the proposed analysis: the composition / specificity of the family in which the child lives, the level of education of the parents, economic family, the cultural specificity of the family.

The results of this study can help to better understand the family contexts of children in disadvantaged communities, at risk of drop-out and school absenteeism, and to develop strategies to encourage school participation by supporting the family. The whole analysis is framed by collaborative approaches that support a real and functional partnership between school and family.

Characteristics of children from socially and economically disadvantaged communities

Children in socially and economically disadvantaged communities have, at the outset, the disadvantage of the general situation at the community level, which, through the effects they generate on the local

[2] UNICEF initiative of supporting school attendance by developing systems for intervention at school level, adapted to the specific of disadvantaged communities. The UNICEF campaign was carried out between 2010 - 2015 at nationally and included 221 schools in 39 counties and Bucharest.

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community, amplifies the social, economic and cultural inequalities between its members, and those of communities that do not face the disadvantaged situation. Children in such communities are "beneficiaries" of a dual disfavor: on the one hand because of the context in which they were born, which is deficient from a social, cultural and economic perspective and, on the other hand, due to the deepening of these deficiencies produced at the level of personal and professional development of children. For example, let us consider the lack of material and financial resources of these children that lack access to various means of information and documentation, the low level of education of parents who cannot become real support during the children's schooling process, throughout which they need motivation for learning, help solving homework, or orientation in choosing the future course (school and professional); To perpetuating patterns of school failure from parents to children or from older brothers to younger ones. Considering these and knowing that the family is the first socialization framework of the child, in which the basis of its subsequent development is a basic factor of subsequent socialization, the issue of the family environment is placed in a complex debate that confronts a state of fact determined by the economic, social and cultural situation in which there are also rights that they must provide to children, by their status of guardianship institution.

The existence of children in a disadvantaged community implies certain characteristics, among which the risk of abandonment and school absenteeism. We do not generalize the statement, but we point out the potential character of the disfavoring situation of the community in general and the family in particular, the risk of absenteeism and school abandonment. The monitored data from the schools involved in the UNICEF campaign shows that of the total number of students enrolled in schools in disadvantaged communities, about 15% are in high risk of school drop[3] in the absence of specific, targeted interventions. It should be noted that the data refer to the primary and secondary school population, where according to national data, school drop-out ranges from 1.4% to 1.8% over the last 7 school years (Apostu et al, 2016). The risk of absenteeism and school abandonment increases with the increase in the level of education, with a slight downward trend towards the end of the education cycle. Thus, if in the case of children at risk of dropping out of school, less than half are

[3] Determining the situation of risk of students has been set based on identification and monitoring instruments, that sum up items reffering to individual, family and school factors.

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in primary school (about 45%), while over 50% of children at risk of school drop-out are in gymnasium (about 53%).

The urban and rural cleavage indicates another characteristic of children at risk of school drop-out: children at risk of school drop out come from rural rather than urban environment, with a ratio of 1 in 3 in favor of urban. This can be explained by the socio-economic development of urban areas in relation to the rural environment, as well as by the increased level of education, training and information of a higher proportion of families in urban areas than in rural areas. The data draw attention to the need to support rural education through tailor-made strategies and policies so that the residential environment no longer determines the risk of school dropout. National data shows, however, that the rural environment is, at least in terms of school abandonment, in a situation of disfavoring the urban environment, with the difference being 0.5-0.7 percentage points over the city in the last years (Apostu et al., 2016).

If the level of education and the environment of residence are (re)confirmed by official statistical data at national level, as elements associated with school dropout, lesser known aspects are students' absenteeism. Thus, the monitoring of schools included in the UNICEF Campaign for School Participation "Go to School!" shows that absenteeism increases with the level of education that children are involved in, and that unmotivated absenteeism is well represented, with higher values among boys. This discussion could be elaborated, but we will confine ourselves to highlighting the lack of involvement of parents in sending and motivating children to go to school, as well as the lack of mechanisms for schools to stimulate school attendance. The parents' lack of involvement is evident through multiple aspects: leaving children alone at home for varying periods of time and not getting involved in school preparation for children; keeping children at home to work in or out of the household, or caring for younger siblings; taking children for a period of time from school, to accompany their parents in seasonal activities away from their home town (for example, selling products in markets, harvesting, etc.). One more aspect is noted in the case of increased school absenteeism in disadvantaged communities: it is more obvious among boys than girls, either as a result of early family reliance (lack of understanding) and lack of control on the part of the children, or as a result of the early involvement of boys in lucrative activities, being attributed to their workforce status within the family.

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In addition to all these specific features and sustained, in some cases, by official national data, a feature of the communities of origin of children at risk of school drop-out is overlapping. In most cases, they come from poor communities, where the income of the population is at the minimum subsistence level, or even below that threshold. To this it adds the "age" of the community, the data clearly confirming that chances of school dropout are much more prevalent in poor and elderly communities, than in the poor and younger. Also, the increase in the risk of school drop-out is due to the overall development of the community: children in a developed community have a higher risk of dropping out of school compared to children in a community with uneven development.

Family factors influencing the school participation of children from disadvantaged communities

The residential environment and the overall economic situation of the community are elements that can accentuate the negative influence on the risk of school drop-out of individual, family or school factors. In view of focusing the discussion on the role of the family in the schooling process of children, with the above-mentioned arguments, we will deepen the analysis of the children's schooling, and in particular of the risk of dropping out of school, in relation to the family environment of belonging. The main elements of family specificity to which we refer in the following, are: the structure of the family, the level of parental education, the socio-economic situation of the family.

The structure of the family of the child

At the level of common knowledge, socially and economically disadvantaged communities are associated with marital instability, monoparentality, divorce, family abandonment. There are situations where data from schools participating in the UNICEF campaign highlighted them punctually and contextualized. Moreover, there have been identified communities with so-called dominant tendencies for a generalized family pattern (many couples in a consensual union, many single-parent families, many families with one parent or both parents working abroad, whose children were left in the care of grandparents or other relatives). However, it should be noted that it is not the family structure and type of organization that are decisive for children's schooling and the risk of school dropout. Of the schools participating in the campaign, about 70% of students at risk of

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abandonment come from organized families and live with both parents. Without claiming data from the national sample, we observe the general trend in schools located in disadvantaged communities, where living with both parents is not decisive for the sustained school attendance of children. Instead, the same data show that the situation of the child in a single parent family is strongly associated with good school attendance, and placing the child in the care of other relatives or state institutions is generally associated with satisfactory schooling. Hence, the idea that it is not a familiar model of belonging which determines the schooling of children from disadvantaged communities, but others are the elements that make a major contribution to attending school and continuing the higher education path.

The level of parenting education

Parental education can be a determinant for children's schooling in general, by providing models, but also by better understanding the valences of education and its usefulness by those who have completed a higher level of education. Generally, in schools in socially and economically disadvantaged communities, the level of parental education is limited to the level of compulsory education when they were included in the education system, or is limited to the level of education provided by the school in the community (usually, gymnasium or professional education). However, there are also communities where the general level of education is lower, the gymnasium graduates being poorly represented and recurring in the male population. These are traditional Roma communities, where participation in education is limited for the feminine population, according to the traditional precepts of the local community, where the school did not find effective mechanisms to support the participation of girls in education.

Whether it's about graduating middle school, professional school or high school for parents, the principles that lead many of them to support their children's education are related to a similar level of education with their own, or even less, if the school in their community only provides a maximum of middle school education ("he should attend eight classes and that's it", "he should finish at least eight classes", "he should attend school as much as I did, and it is enough", are the parents' statements without knowing about the level of compulsory education, or without taking into account the children's interests, needs or developmental abilities - focus group among Dâmbovița parents, Buzău during the monitoring visits).

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Parents with low levels of education generally tend to encourage a reproductive behavior on their children, about participation in education, either because they do not understand how education can contribute to raising the quality of life (due to lack of information and especially lack of experience), or because they take up models of people with low education but "successful" in these parents' opinion (examples given by these parents being people from the community who have migrated managed to develop different businesses, or examples of singers of *manele*). One thing which is also confirmed by data from schools in disadvantaged communities: the higher the level of parental education, the lower the chances of school failure. In this context, the need to increase the level of parental education is highlighted once again, the impact being discovered at different levels: support for children's schooling, but also integration into the labor market with implications for the family's economic standards, increased self-esteem, overcoming the status of socially assisted for some of the parents, etc. A possible solution for mitigating the effects of the low level of parental education and its implications would be to organize, in disadvantaged communities, "second chance" classes or professional training programs for parents with a low level of education, impacting on their employability and understanding the role of education and training for an increased quality of life.

The socio-economic situation of the family

The economic situation of the family is a determinant of low participation in education, many studies claiming that lack of resources and, implicitly, investment in education increase the risk of sporadic attendance of school, and the risk of school dropout: "children and young people in the poorest families, members of the Roma communities, those living in rural areas and children with special educational needs (CES), have the slightest chances of attending education, staying in school, and continuing their studies at a higher level" (Varly, et al., 2015; Fartuşnic, 2012).

Beyond this conditioning of school participation by the economic situation, and the economic situation of the level of education, in the context of disadvantaged schools, the discussion about the economic situation of the families became a stereotypical topic, often being invoked by both parents and the teachers in order to explain the low participation in education for children from disadvantaged communities. In reality, the situation is somewhat different, even if conditional participation in education is

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maintained by the higher income level: families invoke the poor economic situation for their children's low school frequency, while the arguments attributed to them by other school actors are rather referring to disinterest and lack of external constraints; school, through its teachers, invokes the poor economic situation of their students to justify their low participation in education or school abandonment, but without knowing any concrete data on the economic situation (survey data in disadvantaged schools indicate a significant share of the non-respondents among teachers, about the economic situation of the children's families in the school). The precarious economic situation remains, however, a reality, even if it is poorly known by teachers, and the effects of the precarious economic situation on school participation can be countered by introducing social policies and programs to support school participation, for example through scholarships. Data obtained from schools indicated that scholarships for children contribute significantly to improving school attendance (students in risk of abandonment, who benefit from a social scholarship, have a better schooling attendance than those who do not benefit from it). Let us not forget, however, that beyond the social / social assistance component that children need in order to participate in education, and for which the school is often a mediator, it (school) must assume and manifest the role of a court education and training. Its main role is to develop children's competences so that by empowering them, their professional insertion and, implicitly, the earning of income are facilitated. Thus, the school can significantly contribute to raising the quality of life of individuals, reducing the risk of dependence on social assistance services, and „la réduction des coûts sociaux des conséquences du décrochage scolaire" (Bernard & Michaut, 2012, p. 8).

The precarious economic situation of families has led to a widespread practice in disadvantaged communities, such as the involvement of children in work from younger ages. Seasonal work, care for younger siblings, the pursuit of lucrative activities in or out of the household, are situations that contribute to a low school frequency and increased risk of abandonment. Not only the involvement of children in lucrative activities during classes is the impediment to school attendance, but also the lack of time for preparing homework (knowing that homework is a general requirement within the Romanian education system), lack of time for involvement in extracurricular activities, or lack of information that a consistent participation in education brings.

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The social context and family pattern are generally reproduced by children from families living in deprived communities. There is a tendency in the schools included in the UNICEF campaign to take the pattern of school attendance from the family or older siblings. Thus, the abandonment of one of the older brothers is an argument for not taking part in the education of the other brothers, or for a sporadic frequency. More obvious is the example of the retained students, also associated with a clear family pattern: similar "antecedents" to older brothers or the lack of support for participation in education by the family, materialized in a negative attitude towards the school and the activities carried out within it.

Elements of culture

Mother language is a strong identity element and an emblem of the communities with an ethnic minority population. Supporting the use and promotion of the language of different communities with a minority population is encouraged, and valuable in the context of promoting the spirit, the local specificity. As the language spoken at the community level differs from the teaching language, and the teaching language is not promoted or used at community level, children encounter problems of adaptation and school integration with the onset of schooling. In these contexts, strategies for using the mother language in school and a progressive, integrated language learning process are necessary in such a way that language is not an impediment to schooling, and that the mother language is a facilitator for further development.

Just as sensitive as the issue of mother tongue is the issue of keeping the traditions of the communities. The issue is more evident in traditional Roma communities, most often faced with an economic and social disadvantage. In these communities, many times, the lack of participation of girls in education invokes the Roma tradition of early marriages and the low education of girls. However, without generalization, the idea of having communities in which the invoked tradition is a cliché invoked by families, to mask a lack of interest and valorisation of education and training, must be advanced. However, the custom of girls' low level of education remains, transmitted and reproduced by the family, with significant effects on girls' non-schooling rates. Intervention measures require adaptation to the local specificity of each community, correlated with highlighting the long-term benefits of participation in education and training.

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Conclusions and recommendations

The family's involvement in children's schooling is a necessity, but it is not always a reality, and in disadvantaged communities, the issues discussed are all the more obvious. To increase school attendance and children's advancement, a large number of intervention programs are necessary, from financial support programs, social assistance to socially and economically disadvantaged families, to support measures aimed at vocational training and reconversion of parents. All this needs to be accompanied by parental awareness campaigns about the role and valence of education, and implicitly about the motivation to send their children to school and support them therein.

The involvement of parents in various activities organized in schools included in the campaign, and conducting various surveys to identify the needs and interests of parents reveals a number of possible contexts and directions of action. These relate to changing the parents' attitudes towards education and training, correlated with increasing confidence in the role and the ability of the school to contribute actively to the education and training of children, with effects on their social and professional insertion. For this, the school must find the activities, the contexts in which parents become active partners of the school, to succeed in stimulating them, attracting them as real partners, this only being possible through information, communication and initiative.

Parenting counseling activities and the development of additional parenting skills would be a plus for the aforementioned families. From the simple participation of parents in school activities, with propagation effects at the level of more and more parents from the community (of peer-mediation activities with other parents, or the development of skills among students, etc.), there can be described a long series of actions that parents could undertake to support the participation in education of children from disadvantaged communities.

For all these approaches to be possible, a convergent action of all community-based resource actors is required. The bottom-up experiences of schools in disadvantaged communities that have succeeded in involving parents in supporting their participation in education highlight three categories of key actors: informal leaders, school mediators, support / traveling teachers. *Informal leaders,* precisely through their status, managed by collaborating with the school and through a good knowledge of the community, but also by enabling personal relationships to involve parents in

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school life or for extracurricular activities, or for the rehabilitation of school infrastructure. *Mediators,* by their status as representative of the community, but also as members of the local community, were able to establish cooperative relationships between school and the community, between school and the local authorities, cooperation which in some cases, has developed real community networks. *Support / itinerant teachers* have represented in some disadvantaged communities, the only people who listened and understood the difficulties the children and families in disadvantaged communities are experiencing (Horga, et. al., 2016, p. 36). Perhaps their specialization, or their ability to work with people that are "different", or maybe their ability to address each case and work differently, have transformed them, in some communities where these professionals were the only competent counseling, into real resource persons within the community, who attracted parents to school by discussing and addressing the issue of participation in education from the household perspective, and its ability to support the school participation of children.

The participation in education of children from disadvantaged communities is still an issue on the agenda of policy makers, and parents' involvement in this issue is a must, whose potential solution is an approach individualized to each community, adapted to the local specific and their needs and interests.

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