

CONSEQUENCES ON SCHOOL PARTICIPATION AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIAN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

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Abstract

In families that have at least one parent working outside the country's borders, known as transnational families, emotional support provided to children is affected after the migration. The phenomenon of school dropout among children whose parents are working abroad is increasing in families affected by poverty, even after the parents' departure. The literature also emphasizes that the school drop-out is connected more to the lack of surveillance and parents' authority. The aim of this paper is to explore the consequences on school participation and child development in Romanian transnational families. A quantitative research methodology was employed in this regard. The survey-based research had as a target group parents/grandparents from families who have children up to 17 years from Romanian transnational families. The total sample size was 804 parents/grandparents. The survey was carried out in two developing regions of Romania most affected by poverty and temporary/permanent migration. Our results indicate that the lack of financial support creates the risk of school absenteeism. The dysfunctionality of the family's educational function also has consequences on the child's development and school participation. Findings provide new insights regarding consequences on school participation and child development in Romanian transnational families.

Keywords: transnational families, school dropout, child development.

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Résumé

Dans les familles dont au moins un parent travaille hors des frontières du pays, dites familles transnationales, le soutien affectif apporté aux enfants est affecté après la migration. Le phénomène de décrochage scolaire chez les enfants dont les parents sont contraints de travailler à l'étranger est en augmentation dans les familles touchées par la pauvreté, même après le départ des parents. La littérature souligne également que le décrochage scolaire est davantage lié au manque de surveillance et d'autorité des parents. L'objectif de cet article est d'explorer les conséquences sur la participation scolaire et le développement de l'enfant dans les familles transnationales roumaines. Une méthodologie de recherche quantitative a été employée à cet égard. La recherche basée sur une enquête avait comme groupe cible les parents/grands-parents de familles qui ont des enfants jusqu'à 17 ans issus de familles transnationales roumaines. La taille totale de l'échantillon était de 804 parents/grands-parents. L'enquête a été menée dans deux régions en développement de Roumanie les plus touchées par la pauvreté et la migration temporaire/permanente. Nos résultats indiquent que le manque de soutien financier crée le risque d'absentéisme scolaire. Le dysfonctionnement de la fonction éducative de la famille a également des conséquences sur le développement et la participation scolaire de l'enfant. Les résultats fournissent de nouvelles informations sur les conséquences de la participation scolaire et sur le développement de l'enfant dans les familles transnationales roumaines.

Mots clés : familles transnationales, décrochage scolaire, développement de l'enfant.

Rezumat

În familiile care au cel puțin un părinte care lucrează în afara granițelor țării, cunoscute sub numele de familii transnaționale, sprijinul emoțional oferit copiilor este afectat după migrație. Fenomenul abandonului școlar în rândul copiilor ai căror părinți sunt nevoiți să lucreze în străinătate este în creștere în familiile afectate de sărăcie, chiar și după plecarea părinților. Literatura de specialitate subliniază, de asemenea, că abandonul școlar este legat mai mult de lipsa de supraveghere și de autoritate a părinților. Scopul acestei lucrări este de a explora consecințele asupra participării școlare și dezvoltării copilului în familiile transnaționale din România. În acest sens a fost folosită o metodologie de cercetare cantitativă. Cercetarea bazată pe anchetă a avut ca grup țintă părinți/bunici din familii care au copii până la 17 ani din familii transnaționale românești. Dimensiunea totală a eșantionului a fost de 804 părinți/bunici. Ancheta pe baza de chestionar a fost realizată în două regiuni de dezvoltare socio-economică ale României, cele mai afectate de sărăcie și migrație temporară/permanentă. Rezultatele noastre indică faptul că lipsa sprijinului financiar creează riscul absenteismului școlar. Disfuncționalitatea funcției educaționale a familiei are și consecințe asupra dezvoltării copilului și asupra participării școlare. Rezultatele oferă noi perspective cu privire la consecințele asupra participării școlare și dezvoltării copilului în familiile transnaționale din România.

Cuvinte cheie: familii transnaționale, abandon școlar, dezvoltarea copilului.

1. Introduction

After joining the European Union, more parents from Eastern European countries migrated abroad for employment, while their children remained at home. In Romania, in December 2020, according to the administrative data of The National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and

Adoptions, 75,136 children were registered as having at least one parent working abroad. Of these, approximately 70 percent (52,474 children) had only one parent absent, and 30 percent (22,662 children) were completely without parental care, having both parents left abroad (13,253 children) or coming from families where the parent sole breadwinner was away (9409 children). However, the official numbers underestimate the phenomenon as long as only few parents seem to inform the authorities that they intend to migrate to work abroad, leaving their children at home. Parents' migration for work outside the country's borders has both positive and negative consequences for the family members remaining in the country of origin. The aim of this paper is to explore the consequences on school participation and child development in Romanian transnational families based on the survey-based research carried out in two developing regions of Romania most affected by poverty and temporary/permanent migration.

2. Theoretical framework

Scientific literature provides mixed evidence regarding the effect of migration on child development. Among them, a considerable number concerns the impact of remittances on living standards in transnational families. There are studies that have shown a positive effect of remittances on human capital investment. Evaluating the impact of remittances, Edwards and Ureta (2003) found that these reduced the risk of school dropouts in El Salvador. The same was demonstrated for Mexico (Lopez-Cordova, 2005) and also for Ecuador, where Calero *et al.* (2009) show that remittances increased school enrolment and reduced child labour. At the same time, the positive effect of remittances on the school attendance and retention was demonstrated by Alcaraz *et al.* (2012) who found that the fall in remittances due to the 2008-09 global economic crisis in Mexico decreased school attendance of children in remittance-recipient households. However, the absence of parents may have a psychological cost for children in transnational families and may change decision-making process within the household (Gianelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010). Left behind children may have increased responsibilities and duties, their involvement in work tasks may grow and thus they will spend less time on school-related activities. Consequently, they may register unsatisfactory results at school or even they may drop out of school. Similar conclusions are obtained by Mastrotillo and Fagiolo (2015) who show that migration has a negative effect on school enrolment of children left behind in Albania. Toth *et al.* (2008) presented data from a representative study accomplished in Romania in which more than 60% of the respondents considered that the children with parents abroad perform worse than their peers at school and miss many classes.

The act of migration is not always a guarantee that a migrant will send remittances (Gassmann *et al.*, 2018). To have a better understanding regarding the children's schooling benefits from the migration of their parents or remittances, it is necessary to see the effect of remittance and migration separately (Jabbar, 2022). Although remittances from abroad have a large positive impact on school

attainment, when the migration is included in the model, this effect disappears (Acosta, 2011). Bucheli *et al.* (2018) highlight the fact that the positive income effects of remittances on children's education are more visible in poor households, where budget constraints are relaxed by receiving remittances, than in wealthier families.

But migration for work outside the country's borders to improve the family's standard of living may have negative consequences on the family left behind, especially on children. The researchers (Artico, 2003) uses attachment theory as framework to understand the experiences of the children left behind arguing that the children left behind will face feelings of abandonment, loss of identity, and loneliness, aspects that will mark their personal development. Parental migration can have long-term implications for the development of the children left in the country of origin and for their entire future adult life. The increased responsibilities in the household when parents migrate (especially for older children), the lack of parental supervision and the low social interaction will make the children to neglect their school (McKenzie & Rapoport, 2011).

Ginther and Pollak (2004) showed that parental migration changes the leadership in the family, giving more power to older males who are often less educated and understand less the importance of investment in human capital as regards to their grandchildren.

Studies in the field (Manyeruke *et al.*, 2021) indicate that when both parents migrate, children have experienced emotional symptoms, literacy problems, poor prosocial behaviours and poor psychological well-being, because the children receive little social support. The age of the child at the time of the parent's departure, family cohesion and economic security are central to ensuring the well-being of children in transnational family arrangements.

Gianelli and Mangiavacchi (2010) found that children are more likely to dropout school when they are older, less likely to dropout the higher the level of education of their parents, suggesting the intergenerational transmission of poverty vulnerability and the persistence of education inequality. Male children are more vulnerable than female children to the risk of dropping out and over-age attendance during primary school. The economic status of the family, as well as the employment status of parents, influences the frequency of dropouts.

School participation of children is an important aspect with consequences not only on the individual level, but also at social and economic level. Migration of parents could negatively influence the school participation of children and it is recognised as one of the social causes that could lead to school dropout (Gorghiu *et al.*, 2020; Stancu & Popp, 2020; Trancă, 2019). The scientific literature is scarce with regard to the efficiency of different types of measures targeted to lower the school dropout among the children in transnational families. Several authors (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Yeoh & Lam, 2006) consider that further studies should be conducted in order to understand the phenomenon, before designing measures to tackle the negative effects of migration on the children left behind (including measures to reduce school dropout). Many of the existing studies are qualitative

studies and focus on the causes and effects (positive/negative) of the migration of parents on children left behind, although Mazzucato & Schans (2011) consider that studies that integrate large-scale quantitative methods with qualitative methods could provide the most comprehensive understanding.

Some authors (Yeoh & Lam, 2006) consider that effective measures regarding the negative effects of parent migration should be developed at different levels: individual, household, community, region and country, while in case of children, measures to respond to the needs of different age groups should also be taken into account. Another aspect that should be considered by policy makers is the gender of the migrant parent, as well the involvement of schools in implementing different support programmes.

In a comparative study between Romania and Bulgaria, Popova (2018) acknowledges that children from transnational families are in a greater risk of dropping out from school. Other exploratory national studies (Pescaru, 2015) point to the same conclusion. In her analysis, Popova (2018) recommends a series of measures that could improve the overall situation of children left behind. Among these, those recommendations that regard a stronger participation of all responsible institutions for children's rights protection at the local level in the process of identifying the children with migrant-parents, could increase the educational participation of children from transnational families.

National qualitative studies (Gorghiu *et al.*, 2020) conducted among teachers revealed a multitude of issues related to the dropout of children left behind, as well as the role and responsibilities of a teacher, the difficulties encountered in communication between teachers and families or the low involvement of public authorities. Considering the complexity of the phenomenon, the authors of the study identified solutions to prevent and diminish the school dropout in relation to the educational policies at national and European level (e.g. raising awareness regarding the importance of school participation, combating the discrimination and segregation within schools) and in relation to the educational and social practices (e.g. improving the relation with parents and pupils through a greater involvement of parents in education, lifelong learning for teachers with regard to the prevention and the reduction of school dropout, increased public funding allocation to improve access to transportation for families with low income) (Gorghiu *et al.*, 2020).

Some authors argued that research and measures to tackle the negative effects of parent migration on the children left behind should consider the different types of transnational families or the duration of separation (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). In a quantitative study conducted among Polish pupils with migrant parents, Clifton-Sprigg (2018) identifies different effects with regard to education performance, in relation with the fathers' level of education and the duration of migration. Pupils whose migrant parents left abroad for less than 12 months, those whose fathers graduated at least high school, those pupils that prior to parental leaving had good educational results, or in case of those with no additional household responsibilities, the impact was positive.

Cheianu-Andrei *et al.* (2011), analysing the effects of the migration on families left behind in the Republic of Moldova, used a qualitative approach to identify the needs of children with migrant parents. The authors emphasized that the lack of support and parental control, the caring responsibilities for siblings and the lessening in relations between children and parents lead to school absenteeism. The authors propose measures to increase the school attendance based on the experts interviewed that include measures for children left behind (e.g. continuous supervision of children left, continuous communication with children, socializing activities within the school, continuous information of parents regarding how to manage the separation from children as a result of migration), teachers (motivation, training), local authorities (e.g. partnerships development with all the entities involved, social services), central authorities (legal framework improvements, a national system to register children staying behind).

3. Data source and methodology

The data source that was used in this article was a survey developed by the authors within the project „Effects of migration experiences on families, children, and communities left behind: methods of assessment and strategies for mitigating the risk of social exclusion” (PN 19130203 financed by the Romanian Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization under the Nucleu Program Inov Soc implemented by The National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection – INCSMPS).

The questionnaire developed by the authors covered 5 research areas: (1) characteristics of transnational families; (2) economic consequences; (3) consequences on school participation and child development; (4) family cohesion and solidarity; (5) possible solutions to improve the quality of life of transnational families, with a focus on the people left in the country. For the purpose of this article, we used only the results from the research area 3, *consequences on school participation and child development*.

The interviews were conducted with 804 parents/grandparents from families who have children up to 17 years old and who have a parent (or both parents) who has gone to work outside the country's borders (Table 1). The selection of development regions was made based on the analysis of Romanian National Institute of Statistics indicators related to poverty and temporary and permanent migration, and we selected the two regions of Romania most affected by poverty.

Considering the lack of identification data for the investigated population that would have facilitated the use of a probabilistic sampling technique (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2000; Rotariu, 1999) the authors chose to use a non-probabilistic random sample (quota sampling). Quota sampling method is a non-probability sampling and it can be defined as a sampling method of gathering representative data from a group (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Application of quota sampling ensures that sample group represents certain characteristics of the population chosen by the researcher. It involves a two-step process where two

variables can be used to filter information from the population. It can easily be administered and helps in quick comparison.

Table 1. The structure of the sample

Economic development regions	No . of cases
North East	403
South East	401
The role of the person interviewed within the family	
Parent	402
Grandparent	402
Residential area by development region	
North East Urban	101
North East Rural	302
South East Urban	101
South East Rural	300
<hr/>	
Total sample	804

The survey based on a standardized face-to-face questionnaire was applied using TAPI Tablet Assisted Personal Interview technique between June – July 2022. An informed consent was obtained from all participants in the survey. The data were analysed using IMB SPSS 20 statistical software.

4. Results and discussion

The scientific literature on the process of emigration of Romanians (Gorghiu *et al.*, 2020; Stancu & Popp, 2020; Trancă, 2019) addresses a variety of topics, from the economic and social effects of emigration, remittances, demographic profiling of migrants, to brain drain and circular and return migration etc. Previous research carried out within the same research project, „Effects of migration experiences on families, children, and communities left behind: methods of assessment and strategies for mitigating the risk of social exclusion”, focus groups with parents/grandparents and local authorities involved in solving the problems of transnational families showed that the main reason why Romanians go to work abroad is an economic one. Lack of employment opportunities in the country of origin, low wages, low purchasing power, lack of prospects of owning a home are the determinants of Romanians' migration for work.

Considered a positive effect of migration, remittances, defined as financial transfers that compensate for the loss of human capital and brain drain due to emigration, have contributed in some families' cases to the improvement of the school situation of the children, reducing the poverty and confirming the reason why the migration took place, that of improving the family's standard of living. Our study shows that approximately one fourth of the people interviewed, 25.9 percent in the case of parents and 27.6 percent in the case of grandparents indicated an *improvement of the school situation of the children after the departure of the*

parent/parents to work abroad, the use of remittances in this case producing positive effects on children's school behaviour (Figure 1). The percentage of those who indicated a *worsening of the child's school situation* is extremely small. The results indicate that more than half of the interviewed persons, grandparents and parents who remained in the country, consider that the departure of the parent outside the borders of the country did not produce any change in the school situation of the child after the departure of the parent/parents to work abroad, 60.7 percent in the case of parents and 58.0 percent in the case of grandparents. This can be interpreted as a non-influence of remittances on school behaviour, raising in this regard the issue of the reasons why the parent went abroad and of the positive and negative effects on the child resulting from the parent's departure for work outside the country's borders.

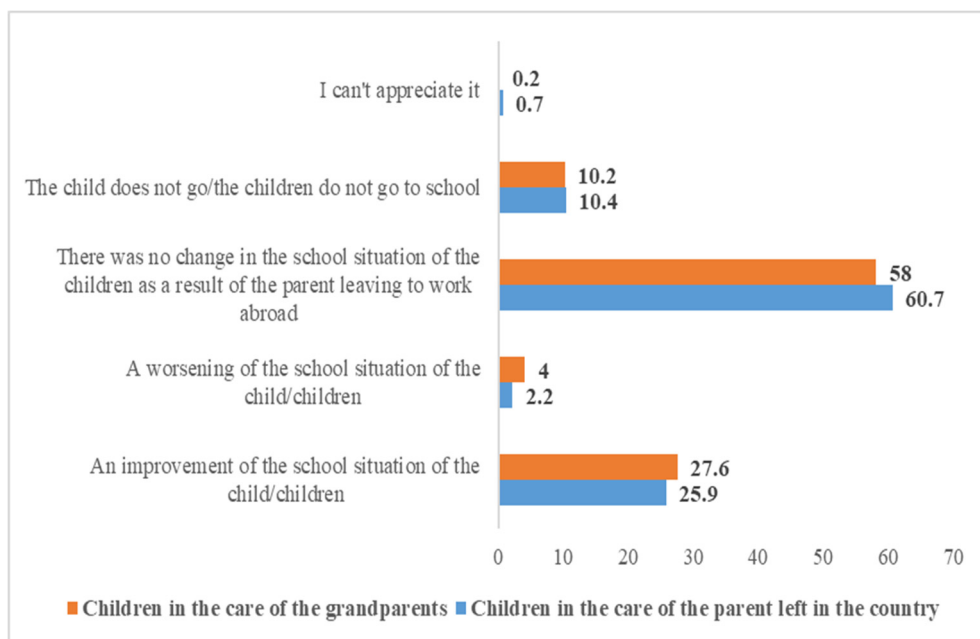


Figure 1. Main changes produced in the school situation of the child after the departure of the parent/parents to work abroad (%)

Source: INCSMPS database, authors' own conception

Respondents mentioned as the main negative effect on the child caused by the parent leaving the country for work the *setting of the state of sadness* after his departure, this setting being reported by 61.1 percent of parents and 53.9 percent of grandparents who provided an answer in terms of the presence or absence of the indicated behaviour (Figure 2). This indicates a dysfunction at the level of the family's affective function caused by the changes in the parental role that a child from a transnational family experience, otherwise confirmed in the international specialized literature. The state of sadness produces other unwanted behavioural changes, *children being more withdrawn, they no longer play as they used to,*

behaviour reported by 26.8 percent of parents and 34.6 percent of grandparents. The results obtained through our research indicate that the improvement of the economic function of the family following the departure of the parent to work outside the country's borders has negative effects on a function with an extremely important role on the child's development, namely the emotional and educational function of the family.

Although school absenteeism is only reported in a few cases, especially by the grandparents (4.1 percent), the answers could also be influenced by the family members' fear that reporting this behaviour would produce undesirable repercussions for the family. The pressure of the intervention of the child protection services was also one of the reasons why some of the respondents refused to participate in the survey. There are reported cases, also in very small numbers, but with a higher prevalence in the case of children left in the care of grandparents (4.2 percent) of intensification of problems with classmates.

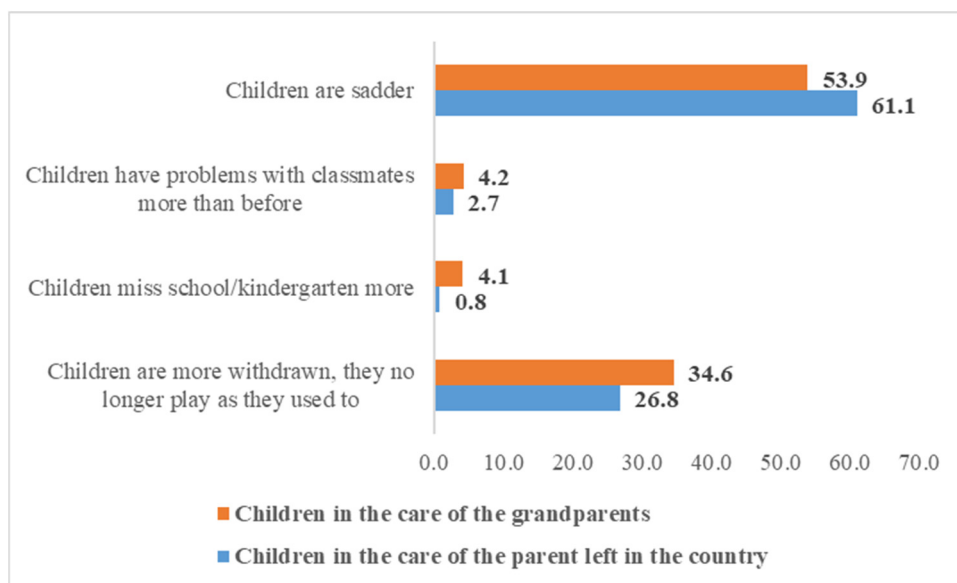


Figure 2. Other changes produced in the in the child's behaviour after the departure of the parent/parents abroad to work (%)

Source: INCSMPS database, authors' own conception

Recent studies confirm that children left behind should benefit from social support in schools, especially in rural areas in countries where they might be pressured to enter labour market (Wassink & Viera, 2021), as well as from the development of social programmes that responds to local needs in order to improve their educational outcomes (Valentine *et al.*, 2017). Our results also indicate changes in terms of an intensified relationship between family and school after the departure of a parent/parents to work outside the country's borders, this being reported as a more pronounced situation in the case of families where the children

remained in the care of grandparents (31.3 percent, compared to 14.7 percent in the case where the child stayed with one of the parents). Also, the grandparents from the rural area mentioned in a higher percentage than those from the urban area an intensification of the relationship with the school after the departure of the children's parent(s) to work outside the country's borders (33 percent in the case of the grandparents from rural area, compared with 26.5 percent in the case of the grandparents from urban area). However, 56.7 percent of the grandparents whose children were left in their care after the parents left to work abroad declared that there was no change in the family's relationship with the school after the child's parent(s) leave to work abroad (Figure 3).

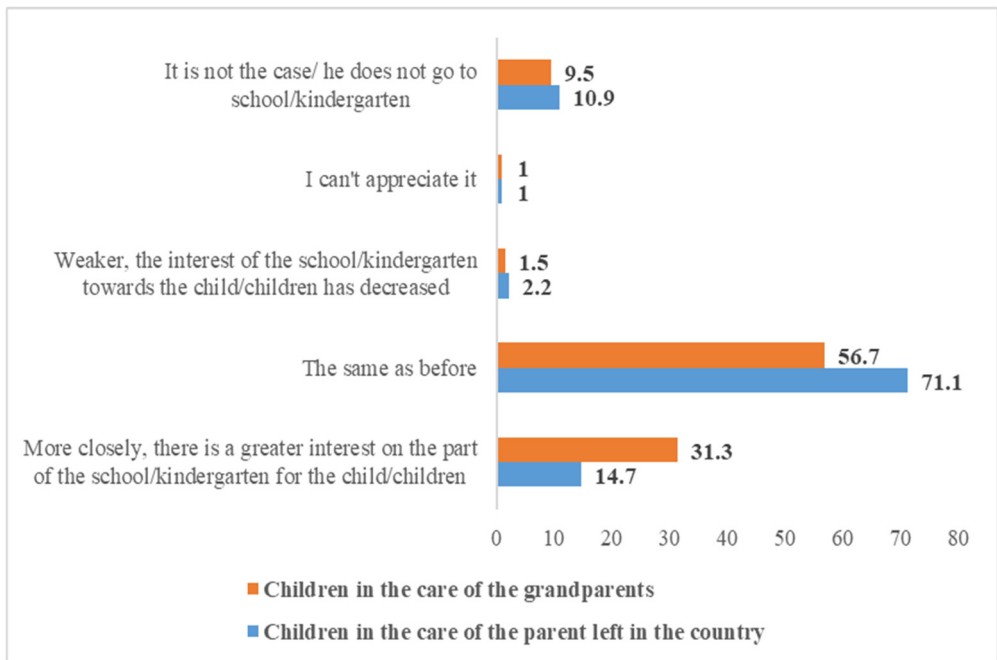


Figure 3. Evaluation of the family's relationship with the school after the child's parent(s) leave to work abroad (%)

Source: INCSMPS database, authors' own conception

In Romania, the specialized literature (Ducu, 2018; Matei & Bobârnat, 2021) indicated an increase in the phenomenon of Romanian citizens migrating outside the country in recent years, which has affected the structure and functionality of the family in general. When children are left behind in their country of origin, emigration becomes a destabilizing factor for the family, even if there are several economic benefits. Thus, for families, and especially for those with children, migration brings changes in terms of family functions, including the status and roles of family members (Matei & Bobârnat, 2021). Children who remain in their country of origin may become a social problem when a person is not designated by

the family to take care of them. The social impact can be high, especially in poor communities, where state intervention is needed.

The results of the study must be seen in the context of the existence of some methodological limitations. The main limitation is given by the use of a non-probabilistic sample in the absence of a sampling frame based on administrative data regarding Romanian transnational families. However, quota sampling used offers a strong saturation of the data considering that they represent the problems of homogenous groups of people, parents and grandparents from transnational families, giving to the obtained results the power to outline the problems of Romanian transnational families.

5. Conclusions

Our results indicate that the dysfunctionality of the family's educational function has consequences on the child's development and school participation and can lead to an increase in the phenomenon of school absenteeism. Migration of parents abroad for work had implications for the emotional experience of family members, especially children. In the development of the child, the emotional support provided by the parents is very important. The physical distance from at least one of the parents in transnational families produces changes in the parental role that in many cases influence the emotional state of the child, possibly leading to isolation behaviours and absence from school.

Studies on reducing the negative effects of migration (Antman, 2011; Vanore *et al.*, 2015) have revealed the need to develop types of policies/measures/actions at all levels of intervention in order to include the social groups that are affected. Although the help of remittances contributes to the improvement of the material situation in transnational families, a series of social costs, dropping out of school, deviant behaviour, or even delinquency, require intervention measures at the micro level, local community, as well as at the meso level, to develop inclusive social policies for children from these families, especially those affected by an increased risk of poverty. Findings provide new insights regarding consequences on school participation and child development in Romanian transnational families.

Further research could identify measures to cope with social problems experienced by Romanian transnational families. Policies in this area should help to reduce barriers that discourage parents from informing authorities of their departure and provide adequate support for left-behind children and their carers, including social, psychological and legal services. A special attention must be given to the children who remain in the care of their grandparents, who in turn, due to their age, face difficulties even in managing their own lives, the care of a minor child representing a responsibility that can raise a series of problems that can be difficult to manage by an old person.

Funding

This work was published under the Nucleu Programme, supported by the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, grant number PN19130203 (project title (En):

Effects of migration experiences on families, children and communities left behind: methods of assessment and strategies for mitigating the risk of social exclusion/(Ro): Efectele experiențelor de migrație asupra familiilor, copiilor și comunităților lăsate în urmă: metode de evaluare și strategii de atenuare a riscurilor de excludere socială).

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