Perceptions of school climate among children of Romanian migrants

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Abstract

The study focuses on perceptions of school climate among Romanian children affected by parental/family migration. The sample includes 250 high-school students: 82 from families with no migration history, 92 left behind by migrant parents, and 76 schooled abroad. Perceptions of school climate were measured with a self-administered, adapted version of a questionnaire developed by Fraser et al. (1996). Results indicate significant variations among the three groups of participants in terms of perceived students’ cohesiveness, autonomy and investigation. The study offers preliminary insights into the situation of Romanian children with a migration background, emphasizing the need for empirical evidence.

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1. Introduction

Romanian migration exploded in the last decades, although the scope and the depth of the phenomenon vary along with the phases of country’s economic transition. The peak of Romanian temporary migration flows has been documented for the period 2001-2006 (Sandu, 2010), and main countries of destination for Romanian migrants remain Italy and Spain, as noted in the latest EUROSTAT reports (Flander, 2011).

Most of the Romanian migrants included in recent studies worked abroad two or more times, usually with different destinations and then returning to the country of origin. A high percentage of Romanian migrants declare their intention to return, continue to invest in the country of origin and support their family members left behind (Sandu, 2009).

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The research about effects of Romanian migration on children and education-related dimensions is limited and mainly covers the issues associated with the situation of children left behind, attempting to clarify implications of parental migration for school achievement and various psychological variables as self-esteem, anxiety and depression, behavioural disturbances etc. Reviewing the available research on Romanian children left behind by their migrant parents, one could conclude that the results indicate a mixed picture, depicting both positive and negative effects. 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. Bădescu, Stoian & Tânase (2009) emphasized that migrant parents are more aware about the importance of education, while acknowledging their children’s need for independence and increased access to resources. Similarly, a recent survey concludes that parents’ absence is not a direct risk factor for school achievement, as students with a low socio-economical family background experience similar educational difficulties (Hatos, 2011).

High levels of depression among children left behind by their migrant parents have been reported in a study coordinated by M. Robila (2011). Besides increased incidence of depressive thoughts, it indicates that higher parental support produces beneficial effects on students’ academic achievement, and improved parental monitoring reduces children’s behavioural problems. These results are confirmed by a recent study using data obtained from a sample of adolescents living in an urban area from the Western part of Romania (Șava, 2010), which analysed some facets of social inclusion/exclusion of children left at home by migrant parents. The findings emphasize that teenagers in the target group tend to internalize their psychological problems, increasing potential risks for their psychological health. Other risks are presented as overestimated, because no significant differences were to be reported in terms of educational, social or economical difficulties after controlling for confounding variables.

A large body of international research on migrant children and deriving educational challenges is available, but studies on Romanian migrant children migrating are rather rare. The risks faced by Romanian migrant children, changing schools and school systems, are still to be described through systematic research. An overview of language and culture diversity in Spanish schools (Eirini, 2001) revealed that according to Spanish teachers Romanian children fall in a category of migrant students experiencing identity problems, as they cannot fully encapsulate the host culture and consequently their aspirations for higher education is lower than those of their native classmates. The author explains these outcomes based on poor teacher preparation for dealing with culturally diverse classrooms, and on the “pull-out” educational approaches, placing migrant children in segregated school groups in order to facilitate Spanish language learning. A study conducted by G. Ion (2011) for investigating educational continuities and discontinuities between school approaches designed for primary school pupils in Romania (the home country) and Spain (the host country) provides insights about communalities facilitating a good adjustment of Romanian migrant children schooled in Spanish educational institutions, such as valuing discipline, linguistic competence and participation. The study also argues that autonomy, group work and social participation of Romanian migrant students in activities outside the Spanish school would need further improvements, and prejudices faced within the school environment act as barrier for Romanian children, in terms of social contacts with their peers.

Our approach is also upheld by research focusing on associations between psychosocial dimensions of classroom and school environments and students’ academic performances. The studies conducted by Goh & Fraser (1998, 2000) indicate strong relations between students’ perceptions of their elementary level classrooms, achievement in several school-subjects, attitudes towards school and schooling, and self-esteem. Similarly, Kim & Kim (1996) reported views of classroom related variables as important determinants of attitudes towards science subjects among middle and high-school students.
2. Purpose of the study and research question

Considering the available research on educational effects of migration, but also on school climate, the present study draws on empirical data to investigate whether parental/child migration status influences students’ views of their classrooms.

The central research question to be answered focuses on potential differences among Romanian students differently affected by family migration (students left behind by migrant parents and migrant students schooled in different European school systems) and students from families with no migration background, in terms of perceptions about school climate.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The sample included 250 Romanian high-school students: 82 from families with no migration history, 92 left behind by migrant parents, and 76 schooled abroad (in Italy and Spain). Participants’ age ranges between 15 and 18 years, 197 are girls and 53 boys. Students enrolled in Romanian schools included in the sample attend regular programs in educational institutions from the counties of Iasi and Botosani, and those enrolled in Italian and Spanish schools attend (in addition to the compulsory school program) an elective course in Romanian language, culture and civilization organized by the Institute for Romanian Language, and supported by the Romanian Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports in several countries with large communities of Romanian migrants. All students schooled abroad have been enrolled in Romanian schools before migrating with their families.

3.2. Instrument

Students’ perceptions of classroom environment were investigated with an adapted version of the questionnaire *What is happening in this class?* (Fraser, Fisher & McRobbie, 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 is computed for each subscale by summing results for individual items. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach’s alpha) of the Romanian version used in the present study have satisfactory values, ranging between .83 and .93.

3.3. Procedure

The instruments were self-administered in collective sessions by classroom teachers, in the case of Romanian students with no migration history in the family and students left behind by their migrant parents. The same data collection procedure was applied for Romanian students schooled either in Italy or Spain. The Institute for Romanian Language facilitated the contact between the researcher and the Romanian teachers involved in teaching Romanian language, culture and civilization. Informed consent was obtained for all participants.

4. Results

The analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) conducted for investigating the effects of parental/child migration on participant’ perceptions of school climate revealed a significant impact for student
cohesiveness, $F(2, 247)= 4.72, p< .05$; perceived autonomy in solving school tasks, $F(2, 247)= 8.04, p= .00$; and investigation skills required in managing learning activities, $F(2, 247)= 8.36; p= .00$. The highest mean scores for the dimensions differentiating the three groups of participants in terms of perceptions of school climate were generally computed for Romanian children left behind. To exemplify, mean scores ($M$) and standard deviations ($SD$) for perceived student cohesiveness among the three groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean scores ($M$) and standard deviations ($SD$) for perceptions of student cohesiveness

| Student cohesiveness scores | N  | M    | SD  |
|-----------------------------|----|------|-----|
| Students with no migration history in the family | 82 | 34.21 | 7.00 |
| Students left behind by migrant parents | 92 | 35.82 | 8.11 |
| Migrant students | 76 | 33.09 | 7.73 |

Further analyses through $t$ tests for independent samples have been conducted for the three dimensions of school climate significantly influenced by students’ migration background, in order to refine the results. Effect size (Cohen’s $d$) is reported for significant $t$ test values. Findings suggest that students left behind by their migrant parents tend to perceive as more intense classroom cohesiveness, assumed autonomy in solving school tasks, and investigation skills required by challenging classroom activities than Romanian migrant students schooled abroad – $t(166)= 2.22, p< .05, d= .34; t(166)= 4.01, p= .00, d= .62$; respectively, $t(166)= 4.05, p=.00, d= .63$. Children left behind by their migrant parents also report more independence in approaching classroom activities, and higher levels of involvement in problem-solving and inquiry-based tasks, as perceived to be expected by the classroom teachers, than children with no migration history in the family – $t(172)= 2.77, p< .01, d= .42$; respectively, $t(172)= 2.58, p=.05, d= .39$. Although mean scores for perceptions about classroom cohesiveness, autonomy and investigation skills among the group of students with no family migration background are generally higher than among the group of migrant students schooled abroad, comparisons resulting in non-significant differences.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Results indicate a medium effect of either parental or whole family migration on participants’ perceptions of school climate. High-school students left behind by their migrant parents generally obtain higher scores for dimensions of the school climate covered by the study, while the lowest scores are reported for migrant students schooled abroad. These research outcomes are consistent with some recent findings of similar studies conducted on Romanian students left behind (Sava, 2010; Hatos, 2011), but additional data are needed for producing more reliable conclusions. Most of the studies do not support the idea of educational difficulties encountered by Romanian children left behind, even if they indicate higher school absenteeism and dropout rates (Toth et al. 2007).

A rather unexpected effect of parental migration resides in improved students’ perceptions on some dimensions of classroom climate, such as classroom cohesiveness and autonomy in approaching learning tasks. These results illustrate potential positive changes in classroom behaviours of students affected by parental migration, due to their need to overcome difficulties outside the school life with limited adult assistance. Their perceptions about dimensions of classroom climate may be also an effect of their determination to succeed in school, as a first step in improving their future life conditions. The overall negative effect of migration on Romanian teenagers’ perceptions about school climate, especially in terms of peers’ interactions in the classroom, autonomy and the use of investigation skills is also supported by
the literature, as they probably must overcome social and communication barriers (Ion, 2011). The lack of previous research on this specific group of migrant students narrows foundations for further discussions, but also encourages more similar approaches.

Results of the present study have to be interpreted with caution, given certain research limits (small sample, few variables, a cross-sectional approach), but they offer additional insights about some educational effects of current Romanian migration trends and patterns. Beyond the need of further research on the topic, we may suggest some educational implications of our findings: although children left behind by their migrant parents show positive views of school climate, their educational achievement should remain a serious concern for teachers, parents and caretakers, while inclusion of Romanian migrant students into their classrooms may be supported through complex programs of intercultural education, aimed to reduce potential prejudices and stereotypes. In line with educational researchers arguing that high-quality instruction and minimized inequalities in student treatment may contribute to increases in school achievement, we suggest that efforts should be mainly oriented towards these goals.

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