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HOW DOES SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM AFFECT ROMA CHILDREN'S LITERACY SKILLS?

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Abstract

Many studies and reports suggest that the literacy levels of Roma children are significantly lower in comparison to the ones of their peers, and that this issue is prevalent throughout Europe. Literature in this field indicates that Roma children's school absenteeism is a disheartening reality that has a detrimental impact on their educational outcomes. Roma children's knowledge gaps widen because children do not regularly attend school. As a consequence, they have limited access to meaningful educational resources and to substantial language input. In this paper several empirical studies were brought into discussion to help explain to what extent and how school absenteeism influences Roma children's literacy development. The findings indicate that school attendance plays a critical role in the development of Roma children's vocabulary and reading comprehension. Various factors can account for absenteeism: the personal context, the family context, the school context, and the community context. Each context is addressed in depth to provide understanding of how absenteeism affects the literacy of Roma children in multiple ways.

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1. Introduction

Roma is Europe's largest minority that struggles with living in extreme poor socio-economic conditions. According to a survey conducted by the Fundamental Right Agency in all EU member states, at least eight out of ten Roma were at risk of poverty (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2012). For this minority, poverty is conducive to discrimination, poor academic achievement and low employment rates. Therefore, a common interest of all member states of the European Union has been to address these issues and to design national Roma integration strategies that would lead to Roma empowerment and promote equal access to education, employment, health and housing (European Commission, 2018, Introduction). Several reports and provision papers (The Right of Roma Children to Education. Position Paper, 2011 (UNICEF, 2011); The situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States. Survey results at a glance, 2012 (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2012)) indicate that Roma children enrolled in various compulsory educational levels lag behind their non-Roma peers as concerns their academic achievement. To address this issue, the initiative entitled EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 (European Commission, 2018) indicated as a main goal to improve the educational level of this at-risk population, namely to ensure that all Roma children complete at least primary school (European Commission, 2018, Introduction). In addition to acquiring numeracy skills, social skills or digital skills, the primary level provides a basis for the development of literacy skills. Therefore, this goal has been proposed in view of consistent feedback that on the one hand, Roma learners struggle more with being entirely or functionally illiterate (Barany, 2002) and, on the other hand, drop-out rates already begin for Roma-children at the primary level (UNICEF, 2011, p. 16) generating thus a decline in participation in secondary or tertiary levels.

Education can act as a means of reducing poverty and can provide the necessary starting point to minimize the socioeconomic gap between Roma and non-Roma learners. As regards the improvement of education for young Roma at risk, the European Union indicates a set of measures that are meant to address learners' needs, to offer tailor-made teaching and learning methods, to encourage parents to provide the necessary support and to improve teacher training (European Commission, 2018, pp. 95-97).

2. The role of socio-economic status on literacy development of Roma children

Various research studies indicate that children living in poverty struggle with an achievement gap that emerges even before kindergarten and widens over time (Heckman, 2006; Magnuson & Duncan, 2006). In this case, several factors can influence, in varying degrees, the development of pre-literacy skills: the home environment, the family's income, parents' educational level, the time spent with child or the error correction that is provided at home.

In the past years, it has become common knowledge that poverty determines low literacy skills (Buckingham et al., 2013; Sirin, 2005). Still, not much literature has focused on investigating the literacy skills of children living in extreme poverty as these are difficult to reach and include in a longitudinal study. Empirical research comes to explain some possible mechanisms between learners' reading comprehension level and their socioeconomic status. For instance, Dolean et al. (2016a) showed that the phonological awareness (a precursor of reading skills) of Roma children is significantly lower compared

with the level exhibited by their non-Roma peers. Nevertheless, when the researchers accounted for the socio-economic status, the difference between the two groups decreased significantly. Lervåg et al. (2019) conducted a longitudinal study which concluded that initial levels of reading comprehension between Roma and non-Roma children at the elementary level were as high as one standard deviation. Thus, Lervåg et al. (2019) found that socioeconomic status (SES) often referred to as comprising the family's income, parents' education and their occupational status was a unique predictor of reading comprehension and vocabulary. However, the literacy skills of the two ethnic groups were not different once the SES was controlled statistically, indicating that one of the main challenges of Roma children is their low SES. Another empirical research investigating the development of early reading skills found that Roma children performed poorer than their non-Roma peers, but as soon as the two groups were controlled statistically for SES, the difference was not significant anymore (Dolean et al., 2019). What is alarming is that the two studies showed that the gap between the Roma and non-Roma groups increases over time. Therefore, it is important to understand the mechanisms that explain this phenomenon.

3. Problem Statement

An extensive body of research discusses the harmful effect of school absence on learners' academic achievement (Ansari & Purtell, 2018; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Graeff-Martins et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2021). Absenteeism (or non-attendance) refers to absences from compulsory education which can be backed up by evidence (e.g., motivated by health problems that are persistent) or which cannot be explained. The causes of absenteeism rarely amount to just one factor. The issue of absenteeism is important to address once it is acknowledged the impact that education can have to alleviate poverty and improve job opportunities for people. Learners who are regularly absent from school are at risk of falling behind and develop knowledge gaps which are difficult to surmount. An outcome of non-attendance is dropping out of school as absenteeism can be considered as a precursor for dropout (Sabates et al., 2013).

School absence can be "one mechanism through which low family income impacts children's academic success" (Morrissey et al., 2014, p. 741). Ready (2010) indicates that learners who are absent from school usually come from economically disadvantaged households. Extreme poverty has a direct impact both on school enrolment and attendance (UNICEF, 2011). High dropout rates and absenteeism of Roma children are often connected to discrimination in the school environment, teaching methods, curricula and language use (UNICEF, 2011, pp. 20-21). When children attend school, they are offered "a language-rich environment, opportunities to develop social competence [...] experiences that nurture work-related skills such as persistence, problem-solving, and the ability to work with others to accomplish a goal" (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014, p. 2). Thus, missing school has an impact on developing both their literacy skills and other 21st century skills (critical thinking, problem-solving, intercultural skills, etc.).

The development of phonemic awareness (PA) plays a salient role in the discourse surrounding literacy skills. PA is considered a predictor of decoding skills (Deacon & Kirby, 2004). Dolean et al. (2016a, p. 46) indicate that the outcomes of an initial assessment of 1st grade Roma children pointed out that these learners "already had a significantly lower level of PA, compared to their non-Roma peers, and the difference was marginally significant even after accounting for SES". In terms of PA development, it

can be stated that after the completion of a medium-intervention programme, Roma children were “able to learn at the same pace as their non-Roma peers once the same quality of instruction is provided” (Dolean et al., 2016a, p. 48). In light of these findings, by attending the 1st grade, Roma children have significantly increased their PA level (Dolean et al., 2016a) through meaningful language exposure. This testifies the importance of school attendance for this minority group.

4. Research Questions

The following research question guides this current paper: In what ways does absenteeism affect Roma children’s literacy skills?

5. Purpose of the Study

This paper attempts to discuss how school absenteeism influences Roma children’s literacy skills. In addition, it intends to indicate various factors that can account for Roma children’s absenteeism.

6. Research Methods

The paper aimed to provide an overview of empirical research conducted to further understand the role of absenteeism on Roma children’s literacy development.

7. Findings

One plausible hypothesis is that Roma children’s low literacy skills are explained by their poor school attendance. Many studies have indicated that Roma children struggle with school attendance. A survey conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2016, p. 3) on 34 000 Roma respondents in Europe indicates that “50% of Roma between the ages of 6 and 24 do not attend school”. A previous report indicates that at least “10% of Roma children aged 7 to 15 in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, France and Italy are [...] not attending school” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2012, p. 14). In addition, kindergarten participation of Roma children has considerably lower levels (37%) in comparison to their non-Roma counterparts (World Bank 2012, p. 12). Furthermore, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2012, p. 13) indicates that in Greece less than 10 % of Roma children are reported to be in preschool or kindergarten compared to less than 50 % of non-Roma children. Not benefitting from early childhood education, which lays the foundation for developing learners’ pre-literacy skills is conducive to not having a good starting point when compulsory education begins.

A research conducted in Greece by Kiprianos et al. (2012) indicates that beginning with the first year of primary education, the ratio of school attendance for Roma children drops gradually. When they reach the sixth grade, most Roma learners in Greece drop out of school (Kiprianos et al., 2012, p. 681).

Three empirical studies have documented the extent to which school absenteeism affects Roma children’s literacy development. One intervention study that aimed to improve Roma children’s reading fluency in the second grade (Dolean et al., 2016b) concluded that these learners developed their reading

fluency at a slower rate compared with their non-Roma peers from the same class. However, Roma children had significantly more absences during the intervention program compared to their peers. When the absenteeism level was accounted for statistically, there was no statistically significant difference between the fluency development rate of Roma children and their non-Roma peers. This study indicated that Roma children's reading fluency is influenced by their rate of absenteeism. A longitudinal study (Dolean et al., 2019) that measured the development of fluent decoding skills of Roma children and their non-Roma peers concluded that absenteeism partially mediated the effects of socio-economic status on reading development. This was particularly true for Roma (but not non-Roma) children, given the large number of absences of Roma children (an average of 26 absences in 2 years, compared to 7 absences on average, of non-Roma children). This data may suggest that parents who live in high poverty tend to value school less than parents with higher SES. This acknowledges the importance of the support offered by the family in encouraging learners' participation in classes. A third study that followed longitudinally Roma children for 3 years pointed out that school absenteeism predicted directly the development of vocabulary and reading comprehension beyond IQ or SES (Lervag et al., 2019). These findings indicate that school attendance plays a critical role in the development of these skills and that by missing school, Roma children do not benefit from significant opportunities to develop their vocabulary and reading comprehension skills.

7.1. Causes of absenteeism

Various factors can account for absenteeism and thus, this concept is a multifactorial one and it comprises different perspectives. Black et al. (2014, p. 2) indicate a multi-layered cause which stems from a personal factor that transitions towards becoming a community factor. Building on this perspective, this current paper has identified in the literature various elements underpinning absenteeism of Roma children. These findings can be grouped into four main categories:

- Personal context (level of motivation, academic performance, gender, etc.)
- Family context (family's low income, parent involvement, etc.)
- School context (teachers' level of preparedness, language, etc.)
- Community context (discrimination, etc.)

Personal context

The outcomes of education can vary for certain groups of learners, especially for minorities that struggle with poverty and discrimination. Therefore, "the incentives to remain in school are clearly less for the Roma than for majority populations" (O'Higgins & Ivanov, 2006, p. 13) because they cannot visualize the manner in which education can improve their standard of living. The lack of these stimuli can favour the materialization of school absence. Motivation represents a powerful incentive that influences "learning behaviours and [...] learning outcomes" (Zhang et al., 2020). Accordingly, low levels of motivation have a direct impact on academic achievement even when other demographic and social characteristics are taken into consideration (Wigfield et al., 2006).

The fact that 18 % of the Roma respondents stated that they attend compulsory school at an educational level that is lower than the one corresponding to their age (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016) brings more evidence in the discussion related to the low level of Roma

children's academic performance. Thus, this downgrade towards a lower school level might also constitute a cause of absenteeism.

Absenteeism can be viewed in relation to the gender dimension. On account of this, "three quarters of Roma women do not complete primary education, compared with one fifth of women from majority communities" (UNICEF, 2011, p. 16). Data may indicate that Roma women miss out on their education because of the Roma community's lifestyle and traditions which are deeply rooted in their socio-cultural background.

Family context

The family's low income can influence absenteeism to the extent that Roma children do not have the necessary clothing, food and school supplies to participate in the formal educational setting. In addition, in Roma communities, parents are often illiterate and cannot provide the necessary support or create "adequate educational climate within their families" (Biro et al., 2009, p. 273). Moreover, parents' views on the necessity of attending compulsory education are relevant to consider. As such, Dolean et al. (2016b, p. 47) indicate that "Roma families might not place a great value on their educational level because their income does not depend on it".

School context

The school context can also favour school absence if learners do not receive the support they expect or if the teaching does not take into account their learning needs. Thus, teachers' expectations and learners' expectations need to reach a common ground. However, one important aspect to consider refers to the teacher's subject-matter knowledge. In this regard, Berliner (2017, p. 24) indicates that "it is not uncommon for the weakest students in academic subjects to be assigned teachers that are low in quality". Thus, the knowledge gaps that arise can demotivate learners and can leave room for school absence.

Empirical evidence comes to support the fact that in the case of Roma children, bilingualism can be a potential mediator between SES and reading comprehension (Lervåg et al., 2019; Dolean et al., 2019). By using in the formal educational setting, a language that is not their mother tongue, Roma children might have gaps in vocabulary and insufficient decoding skills. The "lack of educational resources written in students' mother tongue coupled with lack of teachers who are able to speak learners' mother tongue" (Pop, 2020, p. 71) can generate a level of insecurity that is conducive to lack of motivation and knowledge gaps that favour school absence.

Community context

Bullying and discrimination can be regarded as forms of vulnerability connected to a child's ethnicity. Surdu et al. (2011, p. 89) indicate that only 4% of the respondents experienced discrimination in school as opposed to other instances (health system, workplace environment, etc.) where numbers were higher. In addition, their research concluded that "47% of the interviewed parents think that in school a Roma child is generally treated the same as a non-Roma child, whereas 39.9% answer that a Roma child is usually treated worse. (N=985)" (Surdu et al., 2011, p. 89). The various types of discrimination experienced by Roma children can be conducive to absenteeism.

8. Conclusion

Absenteeism affects Roma children's literacy in multiple ways. Firstly, the phonological awareness that develops at the kindergarten level enables children to acquire pre-literacy skills. However, as the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2016, p. 10) indicates, only about half of Roma children participate in early childhood education. Secondly, absenteeism has a negative impact on Roma children's decoding skills (Dolean et al., 2019; Dolean et al., 2016b). Thirdly, absenteeism influences the development of vocabulary and reading comprehension (Lervåg et al., 2019). Therefore, Roma children's knowledge gaps widen because they do not regularly attend school. The paper also aimed to indicate various factors that can be a cause of absenteeism.

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