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Education and Poverty – Assessments of Beneficiaries of Social Aid for Guaranteed Minimum Income

Silvia-Florina COJANU^{1*}, Cristina STROE²

Abstract

Poverty in Romania is a significant problem, in search of adequate efficient solutions. Many scholars point to education as perhaps the most important means to achieve the objective of poverty alleviation. The available literature reflects on the multidimensional disadvantage that poor children face in their families and communities, both in terms of availability and quality of educational services offered to them and in terms of the cumulative factors that determine the manner in which they are able to pertain to existing opportunities. Research brings to the forefront the importance of attitudes and values, as behavioural determinants that should be studied in order to understand the strategies employed in tackling poverty. In this paper we focus on the manner in which poor Romanian families conceptualise education, its effects on their quality of life, on poverty reduction and personal development, assuming that the manner in which people perceive the role of education and the quality of the educational services available to them will determine their investment in terms of time, personal effort and financial resources. Beneficiaries of social assistance for poverty alleviation (guaranteed minimum income) were surveyed in October 2016, using a nationally representative sample (600 respondents). Results show that, while the respondents acknowledge education as an important means to achieve a better life, with improved employment and social opportunities, thus adhering to mainstream values, most of them face significant difficulties in offering their children the minimum necessary conditions for learning and a decent living.

Keywords: *Poverty; education; perceptions; behavioural economics.*

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1. Introduction

In Romania, poverty is an important issue associated to persistently high income inequality. Poverty affects mainly certain identifiable groups – young people, families with many children, disabled persons, the Roma minority, the rural population, the inactive, etc. [3]. In fact, in 2017 it is acknowledged that “Education and health outcomes remain unsatisfactory, especially for the most affected by poverty and social exclusion.” [4]

Thus, the understanding of the poverty phenomenon gains strategic importance for Romania, as it might generate necessary knowledge for adequately improving the existing poverty alleviating policies.

2. Problem Statement

Many scholars point to education as perhaps the most important means to achieve the objective of poverty alleviation. The literature connecting these two topics – poverty and education – is very rich, approaching phenomena from different perspectives.

Many studies focus on deficits in school readiness of children from families in economic distress compared to children from more financially secure families. Research demonstrated that deficiencies in terms of language acquisition (manifested through language processing speed) are evident in children from poor families as early as 18 months [9]. This gap only widens in time, adding up towards a significant disadvantage for children of poor families in terms of school readiness [1], [14] or [15].

Some studies tried to identify certain aspects than could partly explain these differences. Lareau [12] identified significant differences in parenting approaches between middle class families and families of lower economic status, with middle class parents practicing the “concerted cultivation” of their children, thus offering more exposure to organized and developmentally useful activities. In light of the results of our research, we consider that these differences are mainly generated by differences in available resources and not necessarily by differences in attitudes and values.

Yet, these issues should be further studied and should be addressed through well designed and targeted policies oriented towards interrupting the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Research was focused on the theme of poverty propagating behaviour [10] and an important such example consists in the deficit of investment in education. While this type of behaviour was observed, the explanations are still a matter of further investigation.

Other studies bring to the forefront a multidimensional disadvantage of children in poor communities, generated by school resource deficits. Often, poor children of impoverished communities attend schools that face insufficient financing. These schools often employ teachers with lower qualifications or inexperienced teachers [2], with negative effects on the educational outcomes. Yet, longitudinal studies show the significant positive effect of early intervention (in terms of high quality and adequately targeted educational services/programs offered) on later life outcomes, mainly through improved labour market integration [5], [6] or [15]. Thus, we consider education to be a key element in fighting the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next.

But, education requires a cumulative investment, both from the individual and his family and from the community/government. Thus, in order to tackle the potential positive effects on poverty reduction and development, certain conditions should be accomplished, both in terms of availability and quality of educational services and programs and in terms of personal willingness and capability to tackle opportunities. Behavioural economics points towards the importance of mental models, defined to include categories, concepts, identities, prototypes, stereotypes, causal narratives, and worldviews [16], as behavioural determinants.

In fact, these behavioral determinants are the focus of the present research. We wanted to explore the manner in which the poor families from Romania conceptualise education and its value, its effects on their quality of life, on poverty reduction and their personal development. We considered this to be extremely important, as perceptions on the role and importance of education could determine the investment of the families in terms of time, personal effort and financial resources.

Thus, as the scientific literature refers to an insufficient investment in education of poor families, we wanted to explore further and see if this identified behaviour could find the most realistic explanation through attitudes and values of the poor or through limitations imposed on their choices by their lack of resources.

3. Research Questions

The main questions of our research were:

What are the perceptions/attitudes towards education and its role in escaping poverty of the poorest of the poor in Romania?

What are the main poverty imposed limitations in accessing educational programs and activities, as experienced by the poorest of the poor in Romania?

What are the perceptions of the poorest of the poor in Romania on the quality of educational programs and activities offered to their children?

4. Research Methods

The data presented in this paper was collected through survey on guaranteed minimum income beneficiaries.

The guaranteed minimum income is a social assistance benefit granted to the poorest of the poor, for poverty alleviation. It is a means tested benefit, granted to those whose income per household is situated below a law regulated threshold. There were 241.992 guaranteed minimum income beneficiaries in Romania, according to the data of the National Statistics Institute in July 2016.

The data was collected in October 2016, through a representative sample on national level for this group (beneficiaries of social aid for the guaranteed minimum income, of working age).

The sample was probabilistically designed, stratified at national level and county level considering the shares of guaranteed minimum income beneficiaries in urban and rural areas. We used multistage stratified random sampling, taking into consideration the distribution of beneficiaries on counties and areas of residence (urban/rural), as reflected in available administrative data from the Ministry of Labour. After that, the localities and households were selected randomly. The face to face data collection took place in October 2016.

There were 600 respondents, of working age, ensuring representativity, at a 95% confidence level, with a maximum margin of error of 4%. All respondents of the sample are of working age, with 48.3% of respondents in the 31-50 age group, 12% of respondents in the 18-30 age group and 39.7% of respondents in the 51-65 age group. In the same time, 43.8% of respondents are male and 56.2% are female. While 40% of respondents have been to school for four years or less, 40.7% of respondents have gymnasia studies (8 school years). Only 5% finished high school. Also, 84 respondents were selected from urban areas and 516 were selected from rural areas.

The research methodology was developed by the authors of the paper, but sampling and data collection were subcontracted.

This ample survey focused on perceptions of the poorest of the poor on poverty – causes, behavioural influences, most appropriate strategies, policies and measures to tackle it, etc. In this paper, only partial results are analysed. While certain questions were targeted towards all the respondents of the sample, other questions were only applicable to parents of children still in education, thus they were applied to a reduced sample of 313 respondents.

5. Findings

The survey results are quite interesting, as they show that, while the respondents acknowledge education as an important means to achieve a “better life”, with improved employment and social opportunities, many of them also face difficulties in offering their children the minimum conditions for learning and a decent life – three meals a day, an appropriate space for homework or a minimum of school supplies, etc.

5.1. Perceptions on the role of education (600 respondents)

Insight 1 – Importance of education

In fact, 52% of respondents disagree to the statement „*Nowadays education is less important, it is more important to know how to make money*”, with 19% strongly expressing their disagreement, thus emphasizing their belief in the importance of education. In the same time, 42% agree to the statement, suggesting a certain perception on societal values, acceptability and desirability, with a strong emphasis on the financial results.

Figure 1

Insight 2 – Relevance of transmitted knowledge

Respondents positively assess the usefulness of the information and knowledge transmitted in the school context. In fact, only 28% of respondents consider that “*What you learn in school is not really helpful in real life*”.

The rest of almost 70% of respondents disagree to this statement, thus affirming the importance and utility of the school transmitted knowledge in the context of people's everyday life.

Insight 3 – The social value of education

The respondents acknowledge the fact that education is valued by the society and offers access to a better life. In fact, only 9% disagree to this. Almost 40% of respondents totally agree and almost 50% agree to this statement. Thus education is seen as the manner in which to access a “better life” and a good social position.

Insight 4 – The economic value of education

The answers to the following question perhaps explain why “people with a higher education have a better life”, as it is perceived that the longer individuals stay in school, the more they increase their chances of accessing jobs with higher wages, more than 80% agreeing to the statement.

Figure 2

Insight 5 – Social network might compensate for lack of skills

All the while, it is important to acknowledge the existence of the perception that social networks are important pools of opportunities, resources that might even compensate for lack of skills or educational deficits, facilitating the access towards the objective of “doing well in life”. Thus, a significant 70% of respondents agree to the statement “If you are well connected socially, you will do well in life even without much schooling”.

Figure 3

5.2. Poverty imposed limitations (reduced sample of 313 respondents)

Insight 6 - Lack of financial resources for school supplies

Most parents – 66% - are confronted to economic difficulties when trying to offer proper conditions for learning to their children, as they cannot offer them the needed school supplies.

Figure 4

Insight 7 - Lack of financial resources for extracurricular activities

While 78% of respondents assess the beneficial role of extracurricular activities for children development, only 8% consider that extracurricular activities, such as languages or sports, are not necessarily needed to cultivate a child's potential.

In the same time, 76% of parents questioned said that they don't have enough money to offer extracurricular activities to their children, although, as their previous answers showed, they considered them to be important and useful for children's development.

This result offers a new perspective of understanding for Lareau's theory of "concerted cultivation versus natural growth" [5], as it seems that

the lack of resources generates the choice of parenting, rather than a significant difference in terms of values.

Insight 8 – Lack of minimal resources for a decent living

It is significant that a large percentage of parents – 44% - cannot afford to offer their children three meals a day, which is a minimum to a decent life of a child. This is very concerning information and it should represent an important alarm signal for policy makers.

Figure 5

Insight 9 - Lack of adequate learning space

Almost 60% of respondents acknowledge the fact that they cannot offer an appropriate space to their children for homework and learning. Only 36% of the parents submitted to the survey are able to offer to their children an adequate space for learning and school related activities.

Insight 10 – Lack of time or commitment

Parents understand the importance of school attendance and do not keep their children from school in order to involve them in household work. In fact, 64% of parents assess the statement “Sometimes my children miss school because they have to work in the household” as untrue or rather untrue. It is significant that a large percentage (45%) assess the statement as untrue, thus affirming their strong believe that children should not be kept from school attendance in order to be used in household chores.

Yet, almost 20% of parents accept that it happens for their children to miss school in order to work. The high percentage of parents that refused to answer the question is also significant, considering that some social benefits may be suspended in case of unmotivated school absences.

Figure 6

Also, while 23% of respondents consider that their children are not interested in learning, 38% of parents affirm their children's motivation towards getting an education. In the same time, by assessing the statement "My children are not interesting in learning" as "rather untrue", 27% of the parents surveyed may in fact state that their children have a certain lack of motivation towards schooling.

5.3. Perceived quality of educational programs/activities and school environment

While some parents (32%) assess that their children face a different, negative treatment from teachers, due to the fact that they are poor, most parents (60%) don't think that their children face marginalization due to their families' poverty.

It seems that other children are more inclined to react to the lack of resources of their colleagues, marginalizing them, with 38% of parents considering that their children face negative behaviours from their colleagues. In the same time, 56% of parents don't think that their children are marginalized in school by their colleagues due to their poverty.

This might be interpreted in at least two different ways. Positive school practices that foster inclusion and non-discrimination may partially explain the results. Another explanation may reside in the fact that poor children often live in poor communities, learning in schools were most or many children are confronted to difficult economic circumstances, thus in a rather uniform environment that is not conducive towards financial status based discrimination.

Almost 65% of parents trust their children's schools to offer high quality education, while only 15% of parents doubt the quality of the educational services that their children receive. In fact, 45% of the parents expressed their strong believe in the quality of education the schools offer to their children. Yet, the fact that 20% of respondents chose the "Don't

know/Don't answer" response shows that, perhaps, many parents don't have information needed in order to make an assessment.

Figure 7

6. Discussions

The statistical representativity of the survey sample for the Romanian guaranteed minimum income beneficiaries (of working age) offers credibility and relevance to the results, mostly in regard to general attitudes towards education and its value for accessing better employment opportunities, social status and personal development. The sample closely follows the distribution of beneficiaries on counties and urban/rural areas of residence, according to Ministry of Labour statistical data.

In the same time, questions referring to poverty imposed limitations/difficulties in accessing educational programs/activities, as well as questions referring to the quality of these programs were directed towards respondents that parent at least a school aged child, thus to a smaller sample of only 313 respondents, lacking statistical representativity. While this was necessary, as personal experiences were considered crucial for a valid insight on investigated themes, the survey results should not be generalised to the whole population. Yet, they offer a valuable insight on the experience of parenting school children while confronted to significant poverty imposed constraints and could represent a starting point of a more in depth investigation.

7. Conclusions

The highly controversial "culture of poverty" theory that was developed in the 70's reflected on poor's attitudes and values conducive to specific and sometimes counter-productive behaviours [13]. There were

numerous critics of this approach, yet the “blaming of the poor” for their situation continues to exist in society [8].

Thus, investigating values, attitudes, and causal narratives is extremely important, not only for an in-depth knowledge of the way the poor face their situation and of the solutions they consider best for poverty alleviation, but also for reducing the stigma.

Our results show that beliefs and attitudes regarding education of beneficiaries of social aid for poverty alleviation are aligned to the mainstream approach:

- education is valued as a means to achieve economic independence, offering access to better employment opportunities,
- education is perceived to be associated to social advantages in terms of social acceptance and social status.

Yet, parents of our target group face significant difficulties in providing for their children with the minimal conditions necessary in order to adequately fructify the schooling experience – three meals a day, adequate learning space, necessary school supplies, etc.

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