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Irina Turcu (Sullivan) & Muşata Bocoş

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Abstract

Keywords:
abandoned children of
migrant parents; school
skills; Neamț county;
primary school skills.

For children aged 6-11, participation in primary school classes is mandatory and essential for their development. At this age, children must acquire essential school skills such as reading, writing and mathematics. Studies conducted between 2005-2010 regarding the impact of temporary abandonment of children by their migrant parents indicated many negative effects, including poor school performance linked to their lack of stimulation, guidance and supervision, doubled by complex chores burdening them home (e.g. care of the younger siblings and live stock, housework, field work) especially in rural areas. In 2013 and 2015, Romanian authorities implemented supplementary measures to protect children of migrant parents who are left at home. The present case study in Neamț county rural area aims to check if the new measures have the anticipated benefits and if temporarily abandoned children of migrant parents have a better life now than 10-15 years ago. The study case involved 50 children aged 6-11, 27 of them non-abandoned, 23 temporarily abandoned by either one or both migrant parents. In the past 30 years, Neamț county of Romania has been stricken by unemployment and poverty and had a slow economic development even during the 2006-2008 economic boom, with an average monthly income of only 400-450 euro per month. To evaluate children's school skills, interviews were conducted with parents, pupils, teachers, educational counsellors. Various questionnaires were applied, including the SRP-C and SRP-I questionnaires of BASC-2 Test to assess pupils attitude towards their school and teachers.

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselworte:
verlassene Kinder
von Migranteneltern;
schulische
Fähigkeiten; Kreis
Neamț; Grundschule
Fähigkeiten.

Für Kinder im Alter von 6 bis 11 Jahren ist die Teilnahme an Grundschulklassen obligatorisch und für ihre Entwicklung unerlässlich. In diesem Alter müssen Kinder grundlegende schulische Fähigkeiten wie Lesen, Schreiben und Mathematik erwerben. Zwischen 2005 und 2010 durchgeführte Studien über die Auswirkungen des vorübergehenden Ausscheidens von Kindern durch ihre Eltern mit Migrationshintergrund wiesen auf zahlreiche negative Auswirkungen hin, darunter schlechte schulische Leistungen aufgrund mangelnder Stimulation, Anleitung und Aufsicht, durch komplexe Aufgaben verdoppelt, die sie zu Hause belasten (z. B. Betreuung der jüngeren Geschwister und Vieh, Hausarbeit, Feldarbeit), insbesondere in ländlichen Gebieten. In den Jahren 2013 und 2015 haben die rumänischen Behörden ergänzende Maßnahmen zum Schutz von Kindern von Eltern mit Migrationshintergrund ergriffen, die ihr Zuhause verlassen haben. Der vorliegende Studienfall im ländlichen Gebiet des Kreises Neamț zielt darauf ab zu prüfen, ob die neuen Maßnahmen den erwarteten Nutzen haben und ob es den vorübergehend verlassenen Kindern von Eltern mit Migrationshintergrund besser geht als vor 10 bis 15 Jahren. Der Studienfall umfasste 50 Kinder im Alter von 6 bis 11 Jahren, von denen 27 nicht aufgegeben und 23 vorübergehend von einem oder beiden Migranteneltern aufgegeben wurden. In den letzten 30 Jahren war der rumänische Landkreis Neamț von Arbeitslosigkeit und Armut betroffen und verzeichnete auch während des Wirtschaftsbooms 2006-2008 eine langsame wirtschaftliche Entwicklung mit einem durchschnittlichen monatlichen Einkommen von nur 400-450 Euro. Um die schulischen Fähigkeiten der Kinder zu bewerten, wurden Interviews mit Eltern, Schülern, Lehrern und Erziehungsberatern durchgeführt. Es wurden verschiedene Fragebögen verwendet, einschließlich der Fragebögen SRP-C und SRP-I des BASC-2-Tests, um die Einstellung der Schüler gegenüber ihrer Schule und ihren Lehrern zu auswerten.

1. Introduction

Studies conducted between 2005-2010 regarding the impact of temporary parental abandonment of child indicated a number of negative effects, among them being poor school performance of the abandoned children due to the lack of stimulation, guidance and supervision,

doubled by complex tasks that burdened them (the care of the younger siblings, housework), especially in rural areas.

Recognizing the need for additional protection for children temporarily abandoned by either one or both

parents, Romanian authorities have taken several legal measures to protect children of migrant parents:

- **ANPDCA Order no. 219/15.06.2006** regarding the identification, intervention and monitoring of the children deprived of the care of their migrant parents;
- **Law 272/2004** of child protection.

Order 219 stipulates that Romanian citizens with minor children in care and who wish to work abroad leaving their children home shall notify the Public Social Assistance Service (SPAS) / the city hall of residence of their intention to migrate and shall indicate the person who is appointed as their children's caretaker for the duration of their absence.

In 2013, the Romanian Parliament amended Law no. 272/2004 on child protection introducing a distinct section for children of migrant parents left at home stipulating, among other things, the obligation of parents to notify the social assistance services (SPAS) with a minimum 40 days before leaving the country of their intentions.

Parents applying for jobs abroad have the obligation to present at the employment agencies the paper issued by SPAS/local town hall testifying the fulfilment of their obligation under the new law. SPAS or the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) must track all cases of children left home by their migrant parents and take the necessary measures to prevent the separation of children from their families, to assess how abandoned children maintain relationship with their absent parents, if they need psychological counselling and identify the specific support services the community can offer to the family/ person taking care of the abandoned children.

Social service workers have the obligation to reassess the situation of abandoned children every 3 months. If there are compelling reasons to believe that their physical, mental, intellectual or moral development may be in jeopardy, the social workers must notify the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) to establish special protection measures such as emergency institutionalization.

In August 2015, at the proposal of Save the Children Romania, the Government approved a procedure

monitoring rearing and caring of children abandoned by at least one parent working abroad. All schools must send to the Public Social Assistance Service (SPAS), in the last quarter of each calendar year, an information note on children who are living with one parent, the other one working abroad, children whose both parents left to work abroad, children of single parents who left to work abroad and children whose parents returned home after working abroad for at least 12 months. Schools are required to send a list of all the children in these categories to SPAS within 15 days of the request. The lists include all personal data and home addresses of these children and their families.

After receiving the information note, SPAS has the obligation to visit each of the listed children at home and check if the migrant parents duly notified their departure and designated their children's caretakers. In order to be eligible to take care of the children of migrant parents, a person must be of the consenting age, belong to the extended family and fulfil all the material and moral conditions necessary for the upbringing and care of the children. In addition, the legal caretakers have the obligation to provide SPAS with the absent parents' contacts and prove that they keep in touch with them.

2. Theoretical foundation

For children between the ages of 6-11 years, participation in primary school classes is mandatory and essential in their development. At this level, children must acquire certain essential skills for the rest of their lives: reading, writing and mathematics. It is not possible to talk about a normal development of the child at these ages without taking into account the extent to which the above mentioned skills are acquired. "School learning is the typical form of learning in pupils. It takes place in an institutionalized framework, under the guidance of the teacher, being guided by curricula, programs and textbooks with the aim being for the student to assimilate knowledge, skills, theories and laws as well as the formation of applied and creative mental operations necessary for their intellectual and adaptative progress." (Răduţ-Tăciu, Bocoş, Chiş, 2015, p. 123). "Learning defines the acquisition of skills." (Chiş, 2005, p. 70).

Children aged 6 (at the beginning of the preparatory class) should have a vocabulary of approximately 2500 words and know the rules of correct oral language. This is a very important aspect since children have to engage in conversations with teachers and peers and be able to

express their thoughts and ideas, their intentions, needs and feelings in a socially acceptable manner.

Another important aspect during this period is the development of their listening skill: primary school pupils gradually learn to listen to explanations and arguments of teachers and colleagues and follow directions and reasoning.

Learning to write and read at this age is crucial for their development of language, with reading providing an essential contribution to the development of vocabulary. Various school activities support the development of language as pupils learn specific terminology during their years in primary school. Reading and writing further determine the development of oral language and the intellectual development of children, contributing to their ability to reason, argue and demonstrate.

In primary school, pronunciation and writing difficulties and errors may occur, sometimes mild (transient), others more complicated and persistent indicating learning difficulties and speech problems such as dyslalia, stuttering, dysgraphia, dyslexia. Teachers and the parents often need the support of psychologists and speech therapists to properly identify such disorders and intervene.

3. Research methodology

In 2018 provided the largest number of work migrants within the European Union. To investigate if the new legal measures to protect abandoned children have the anticipated benefits and if there are major changes in terms of the living conditions, health, psycho-social development and school competences of temporarily abandoned children by either one or both parents a case study was conducted between 2016-2017 in Neamţ county.

The study involved 50 children aged 6-11, 27 of them living with both parents, 23 temporarily abandoned by either one or both parents: 12 children abandoned by their fathers and under their mothers' care, 4 children temporarily abandoned by their mothers and under their fathers' care and 7 children temporarily abandoned by both parents and under the care of their maternal grandparents (6) and mother's sister (1).

All 50 children learn in three primary schools in two large communes of Neamţ county: Girov (7400

inhabitants) and Bodeşti (5147 inhabitants). Together they have 11 villages in their administration (Boţeşti, Căciuleşti, Dăneşti, Doina, Gura Văii, Popeşti, Turtureşti, Verşeşti, Căciuleşti, Bodeştii de Jos, Corni, Oşlobeni).

In the last 30 years, Neamţ has been one of the most affected counties in Romania by economic migration of workers. It is one of the poorest counties in Romania with a slow economic development even during the "economic boom" of 2006-2008. In 2016, at the beginning of the present research, the average monthly income was 1546 lei (€343) compared to 1480 lei (€329) in Harghita, the poorest county in the country that year. In 2018, according to the National Institute for Statistics, Neamţ county registered the fourth lowest monthly average net income in Romania, not much higher than the lowest one.

To evaluate the school skills of the 50 participants, interviews were conducted with parents, pupils, teachers and educational counsellors. Various questionnaires applied, including the SRP-C and SRP-I questionnaires of BASC-2 Test to assess pupils attitude towards their school and teachers. We were particularly interested in the following areas:

- acquisition of school skills specific to the primary school, mainly reading, writing and mathematics;
- participation of pupils in class activities;
- children's attention and involvement in the class tasks and homework.

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4. Results

All of the 50 primary school pupils participating in our Neamţ county study case speak correctly and have a fairly good pronunciation, appropriate for their age. None suffer from speech disorders at present. Two of the 23 temporarily abandoned children had speech delay before attending school and both benefited from therapy.

Of the 50 children who participated in the Neamţ county study case, 48 have acquired the necessary school skills (reading, writing, mathematical computation) and are properly performing their school assignments. Two children were diagnosed with dyscalculia: one is a girl of 6 who lives at present with her mother and stepfather but experienced domestic violence in her early life before her mother divorced her biological father, and the other one is a first grader, 7 years old and temporarily abandoned by both parents. She lives with her grandparents since she was born.

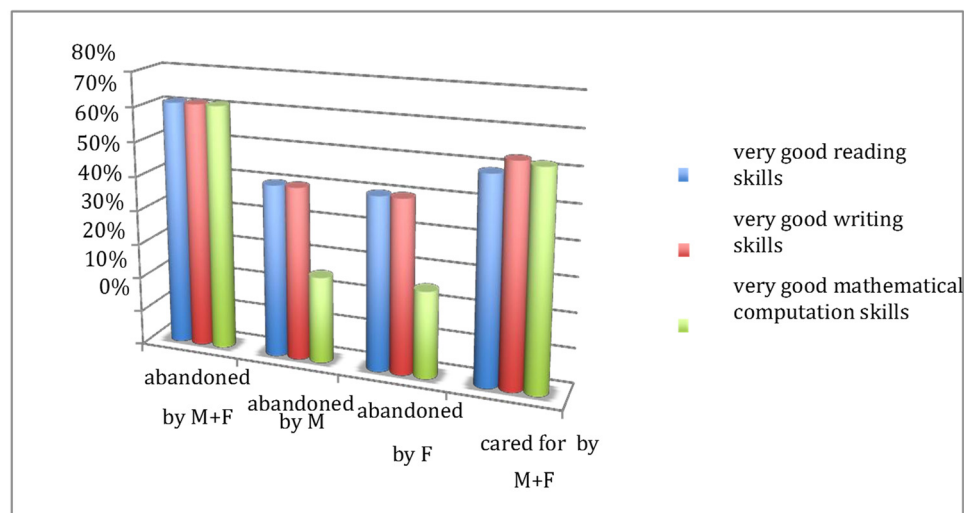


Figure no. 1. The degree of mastery of the main school skills

Reading. Most children participating in the present study have good reading skills:

- 63% of non-abandoned children and 56.5% of the temporarily abandoned children have very good reading skills;

- 33.3% of non-abandoned children and 30.4% of the temporarily abandoned children have good reading skills;

- 3.7% non-abandoned children and 13% temporarily abandoned children read sufficiently well according to their age but the differences are not statistically significant.

There are some differences within the group of temporarily abandoned children, but they are statistically

insignificant: children abandoned by both parents and raised by grandparents have better reading skills than all the other children, while children temporarily abandoned by their mothers and raised by their fathers have the most modest reading skills compared to all the other children. These differences are explained by the fact that grandparents tend to keep their grandchildren more inside their homes (where they can supervise them better) and children spend some of their spare time reading (71% children raised by their grandparents read in their leisure time). Unfortunately, it comes with a cost: 43% of these children are overweight or obese. Fathers tend to involve their children more in physical activities, with children raised by their fathers and temporarily abandoned by their mothers being the most active sub-group of all the 50

participants: all 4 children have normal weight and all 4 play outdoors and have some sort of sport activities.

None of the study case participants has insufficient reading skills.

Table no. 1. Acquisition of school skill: reading. Current situation

Reading						
Current situation			Frequency	Percentage of total sample	Percentage of validated data	Cumulative percentage
Not abandoned	Validated data	enough	1	3,7	3,7	3,7
		good	9	33,3	33,3	37,0
		very good	17	63,0	63,0	100,0
		Total	27	100,0	100,0	
Abandoned temporarily	Validated data	enough	3	13,0	13,0	13,0
		good	7	30,4	30,4	43,5
		very good	13	56,5	56,5	100,0
		Total	23	100,0	100,0	

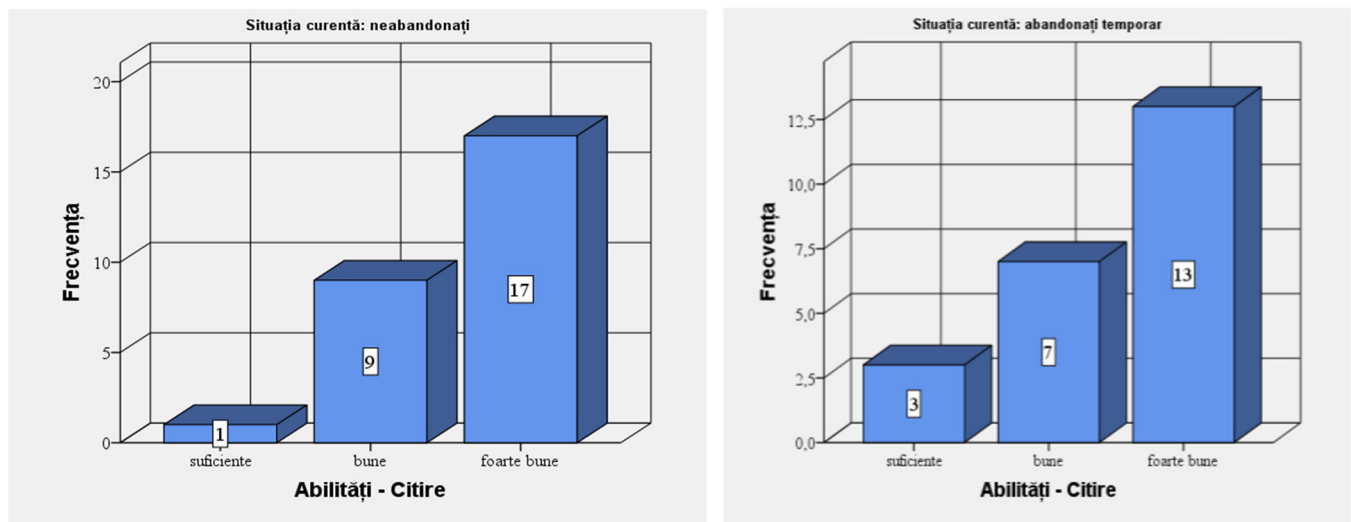


Figure no. 2. Acquiring the school skill – reading

Writing. Writing skills are very similar to reading skills. The two groups of children (abandoned and non-abandoned) do not differ significantly statistically with regard to their writing skills. ($\chi^2 = 1,563$; $df = 2$ $p = 0.458$).

Table no. 2. Acquisition the school skill – writing

Writing						
Current situation			Frequency	Percentage of total sample	Percentage of validated data	Cumulative percentage
not abandoned	Data validated	enough	1	3,7	3,7	3,7
		good	8	29,6	29,6	33,3
		very good	18	66,7	66,7	100,0
		Total	27	100,0	100,0	
abandoned temporarily	Data validated	enough	3	13,0	13,0	13,0
		good	7	30,4	30,4	43,5
		very good	13	56,5	56,5	100,0
		Total	23	100,0	100,0	

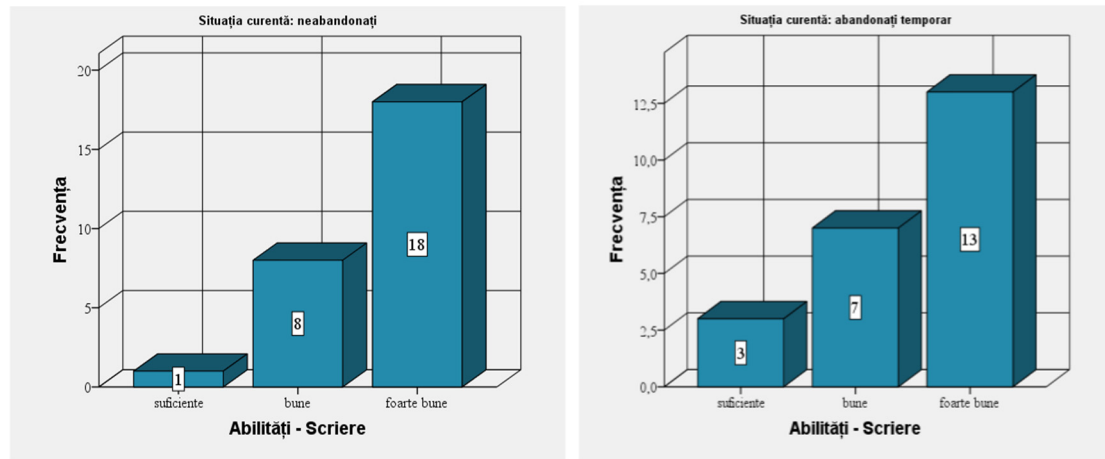


Figure no. 3. Acquisition of the school skill – writing

Mathematics. Mathematical computation skills appear to be very good for a higher percentage of the non-abandoned children but the result of the Chi-Square Test shows that the two groups do not differ statistically significantly ($\chi^2 = 2.333$; $df = 2$; $p = 0.311$).

Table no. 3. Acquisition of the school skill – mathematical computation. Current situation

Mathematics

Current situation			Frequency	Percentage of total sample	Percentage of validated data	Cumulative percentage
not abandoned	validated data	enough	2	7,4	7,4	7,4
		good	8	29,6	29,6	37,0
	Total	very good	17	63,0	63,0	100,0
			27	100,0	100,0	
abandoned temporarily	validated data	enough	5	21,7	21,7	21,7
		good	7	30,4	30,4	52,2
	Total	very good	11	47,8	47,8	100,0
			23	100,0	100,0	

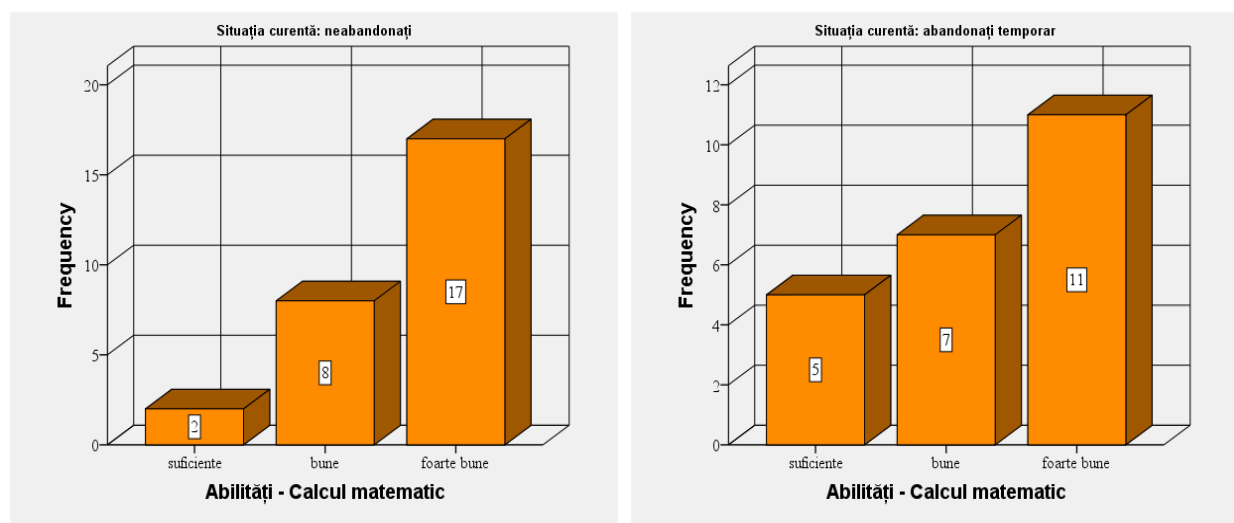


Figure no. 4. Acquiring the school skill – mathematical computation

Oral language. The two groups of children do not differ statistically significantly ($\chi^2 = 0.655$; $df = 2$; $p = 0.721$) from this point of view.

Table no. 4. Oral language. Current situation

Oral language			Frequency	Percentage of total sample	Percentage of validated data	Cumulative percentage
Current situation						
not abandoned	validated data	good enough	2	7,4	7,4	7,4
		good	12	44,4	44,4	51,9
		very good	13	48,1	48,1	100,0
		Total	27	100,0	100,0	
abandoned temporarily	validated data	good enough	3	13,0	13,0	13,0
		good	11	47,8	47,8	60,9
		very good	9	39,1	39,1	100,0
		Total	23	100,0	100,0	

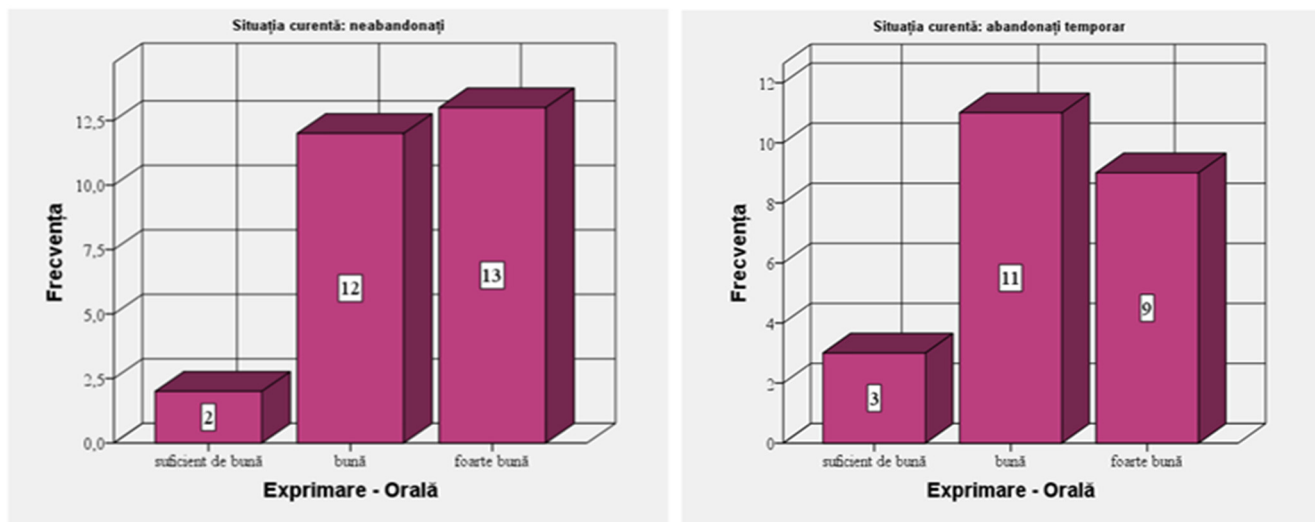


Figure no. 5. Oral language

Learning difficulties. There is one child in each group of children - non-abandoned and temporarily abandoned - having learning difficulties. Both have dyscalculia.

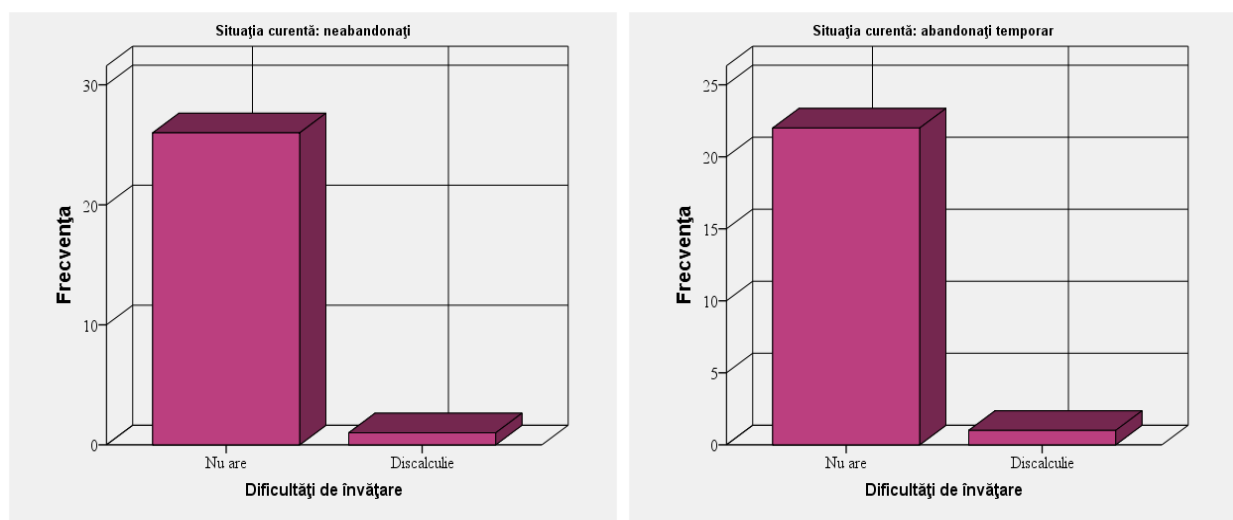


Figure no. 6. Learning difficulties

Attention in class. 51.9% of non-abandoned have very good levels of attention in class and 39.1% of the temporarily abandoned children but there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups of children. ($\chi^2=1,107$; $df=3$; $p=0.775$).

Table no. 5. Attention in class

<i>Attention in class</i>		Frequency	Percentage of total sample	Percentage of validated data	Cumulative percentage
Current situation					
Non-abandoned	Validated	always pay attention	14	51,9	51,9
		most of the times pay attention	9	33,3	85,2
		they lose attention easily	3	11,1	96,3
		they focus hard,	1	3,7	100,0
		daytime dreaming			
	Total		27	100,0	100,0
	Validated	always pay attention	9	39,1	39,1
		most of the times pay attention	9	39,1	78,3
		they lose focus easily	3	13,0	91,3
		they focus hard,	2	8,7	100,0
		daytime dreaming			
Abandoned	Total		23	100,0	100,0

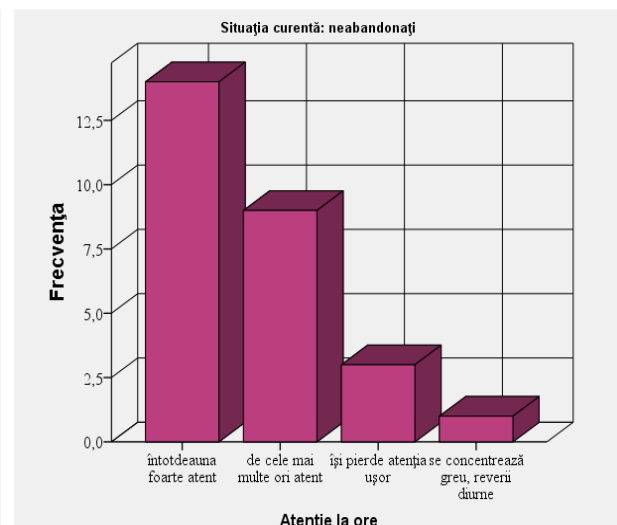
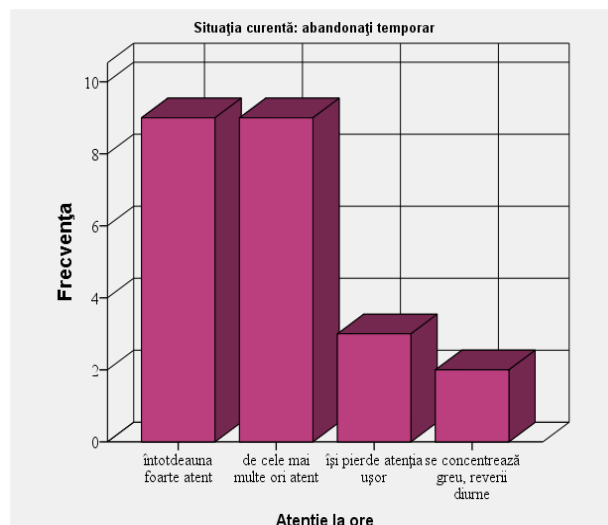


Figure no. 7. Attention in class

85% of the 27 non-abandoned children and 83% of the 23 temporarily abandoned children have good and very good school skills, are diligent, involved and active in classes, always completing their tasks and homework. Only one non-abandoned child in the preparatory class loses his focus during class activities (4% of the non-abandoned children).

Children abandoned by both migrant parents and reared by their grandparents seem to have some of the best results in school. Older studies showed quite a different situation back in 2006-2010 when children abandoned by

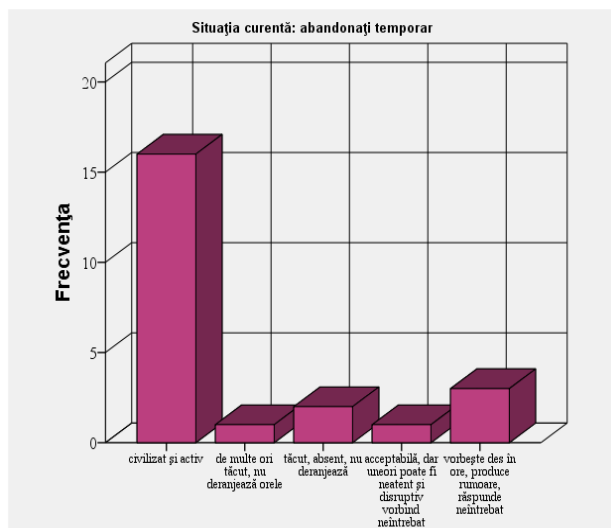
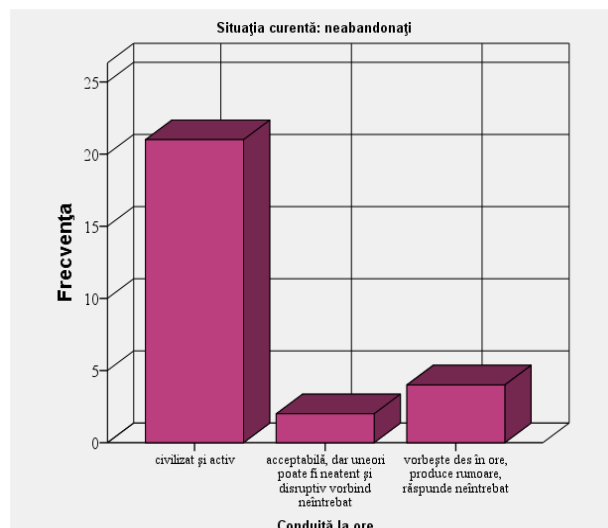
both migrant parents were the most vulnerable and had the lowest school performance. Back then, many of these children were left in the care of older siblings (most of them preteenagers or teenagers), neighbours and other people unrelated to them. We can conclude that it is not the presence or absence of parent(s) the most influent factor for good school results in primary school children but the quality of their care, the love and support they receive from their caregivers as well as the caregivers' attitude towards school and learning in general.

With regard to pupils' **attention in classes and completion of tasks**, only 2 children of 50 have shown major concentration problems in classes due to emotional problems (depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress). Five of the 23 temporarily abandoned children have sometimes attention problems (one temporarily abandoned by his mother and aged 6, the other 4 temporarily abandoned by the fathers), 22% in their group. Only 2 of 27 non-abandoned children have focus problems in classes (7% in their group).

The work assignments in the classroom - way of accomplishment. Most of the children participating in

this case study carry out their work assignments in the classroom. Of the 23 children in temporarily abandoned by parents, 2 need help (9%) and another 2 (9%) hurry to solve them and make mistakes. Of the 27 children raised by both parents, only 3 need to be helped to complete the work assignments in the classroom (11%).

There are no statistically significant differences between the two groups of children neither in terms of the assignments performed in the classroom ($\chi^2 = 6,242$; $df = 3$; $p = 0.100$).



Class attendance. As shown in the table below, most of the 50 children participating in Neamț county study case regularly attend their classes, with the rare absences being mostly due to their health preventing them attending classes least they infect their colleagues with anything contagious.

Table no. 8. Attendance at classes. Current situation

Attendance at classes						
Current situation			Frequency	Percentage of total	Percentage of validated data	Cumulative percentage
Non-abandoned	Validated data	Participate daily	24	88,9	88,9	88,9
		Absent from time to time , only when ill	3	11,1	11,1	100,0
		Total	27	100,0	100,0	
Abandoned	Data validated	Participate daily	17	73,9	77,3	77,3
		Absent from time to time , only when ill	5	21,7	22,7	100,0
		Total	22	95,7	100,0	
	No data	1	4,3			
	Total	23	100,0			

Deviant behaviour. Deviant behaviours are rare in the 50 participants in the Neamț county case study as shown in the table below.

Table no. 9. Deviant behaviours. Current situation

<i>Deviant behaviour</i>					
Current situation		Frequency	Percentage of total	Percentage of validated data	Cumulative percentage
Non-abandoned	Validated data	No deviant behaviour	23	85,2	85,2
		Self-aggressive, sometimes aggressive towards peers and teachers	1	3,7	88,9
		Reckless behaviour, bravery	1	3,7	92,6
		Physical violence	1	3,7	96,3
		Physical and verbal violence	1	3,7	100,0
		Total	27	100,0	100,0
Abandoned	Validated data	No deviant behaviour	22	95,7	95,7
		Physical and verbal violence	1	4,3	100,0
		Total	23	100,0	100,0

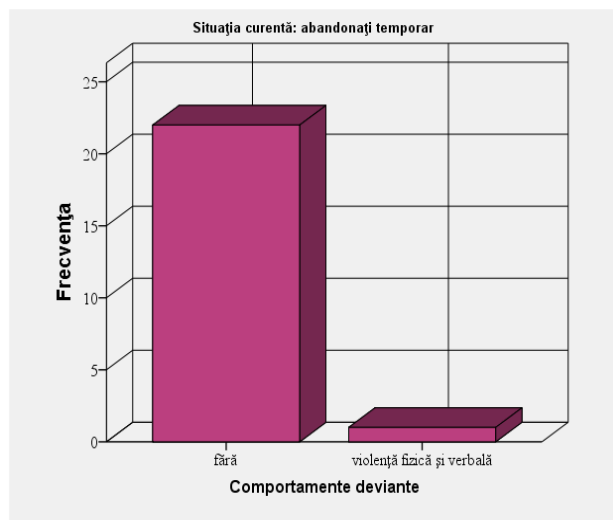
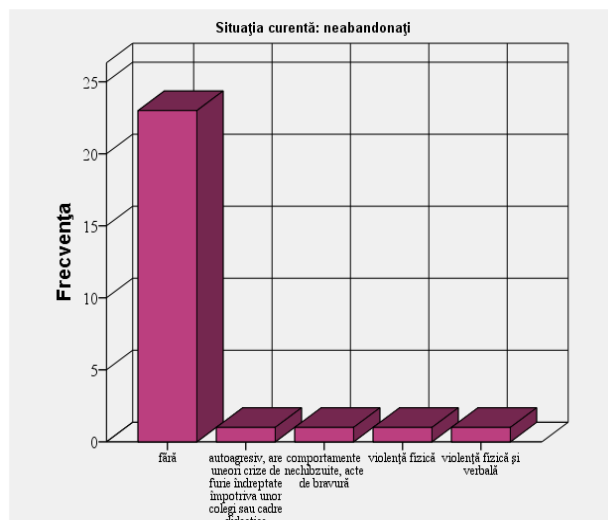


Figure no. 11. Deviant behaviour

Disciplinary actions. No disciplinary action was taken against any of the 50 children in the Neamț county study case. Children with emotional and behaviour problems and their parents benefited from counselling and/or psychotherapy.

5. Discussions

85% of the 27 non-abandoned children and 83% of the 23 temporarily abandoned children have good and very good school skills, are diligent, involved and active in classes, always completing their tasks and homework. Only one non-abandoned child in the preparatory class

loses his focus during class activities (4% of the non-abandoned children).

Children abandoned by both migrant parents and reared by their grandparents seem to have some of the best results in school. Older studies showed quite a different situation back in 2006-2010 when children abandoned by both migrant parents was the most vulnerable and had the lowest school performance. Back then, many of these children were left in the care of older siblings (most of them preteenagers or teenagers), neighbours and other people unrelated to them. We can conclude that it is not the presence or absence of parent(s) the most influential factor for good school results in primary school children

but the quality of their care, the love and support they receive from their caregivers as well as the caregivers' attitude towards school and learning in general.

6. Conclusions

1. Non-abandoned children are more attentive in classes and complete their tasks and homework more often than temporarily abandoned children.
2. Children of fathers who have temporarily left Romania for work tend to have more attention problems in classes and in doing their tasks and homework. Mothers of children with fathers who have temporarily left Romania for work tend to be more tolerant with regard to homework completion and sometimes allow their children to go to school unprepared. Mothers are also more willing to do their children's homework and spare them of most chores.
3. Grandparents who rear their grandchildren are very supportive and value school and learning and insist on children going to school properly prepared every day. Most grandparents wish for their grandchildren to continue their studies at high school and possibly at university.
4. Adults' attitude towards school and learning is a crucial factor in motivating children to study and fulfil their daily school tasks. If adults value school, children are more likely to value school too especially if teachers do not overload them with tasks and homework. Absent migrant parents keep almost daily in touch (and often even several times a day) with their children and talk about school and study on phones and video-calls. They also encourage their children to study and show their appreciation towards children's good results in school and even help them with their homework from time to time. Technology assisted parenting may not be as good as direct parenting but proves to be of great help. Migrant parents do not feel disconnected from their children and children know that their absent parents know a lot about them, their school, friends and activities.
5. The attitude of children's caregiver towards teachers greatly influence pupils attitude towards their teachers. If adults are respectful, children are respectful too. In the rural area of Neamţ county where the present study case was conducted, adults' attitude towards school and teachers is mostly respectful and positive: education is important, educated people have better jobs in Romania and in other countries. Teachers can help children study and be prosperous later in life. Teachers know how to do their job and adults do not interfere much with them. As a result of this, all of the 50 children who participated in the study case love going to school.
6. If children's caregivers exempt them of their homework or help them too much and too often with their homework, children get lazy both at home and in the classroom.
7. Well-trained and enthusiastic teachers make a difference. All of the 50 children participating in the case study, even the ones with the most modest results showed a positive attitude towards school as shown by the BASC-2 questionnaires SPR-C and SPR-I. The only pupil who was referred to therapy because of her school anxiety also loved school and the true reason she wanted to stay home and miss school was related to her being jealous of her baby brother.
8. Not burdening children of 6-10 with homework makes school very attractive. All children in the study case clearly stated that they do not feel their life is getting harder because of school, nor that they have no time to play because of homework and other school related chores. All 50 children stated that they were unhappy to miss school no matter why and there is no reason to doubt their honesty since they were interviewed separately one by one and guaranteed the confidentiality of their answers.
9. All 50 children regularly attend all classes and would only miss school if their health does not allow them. Children's enthusiasm for school reflects in their answers to the BASC-2 questionnaire and is confirmed by their teachers and parents.

The presence or the absence of parents is not a key factor in school performance and academic results of children aged 6-11 but rather the quality of their rearing and their caregivers' positive and encouraging attitude towards school and learning. Another key element of primary school children's good results in school is the teacher itself – it is important that children perceive their teachers as just, correct, understanding and firm. It is also important that children aged 6-11 are not overloaded with school tasks and homework. As long as learning is fun and interesting and they have enough time to play and relax, primary school children will love school.

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