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Student Volunteering, a Modern Education Opportunities for Children from Disadvantaged Families

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Abstract: Due to the economic changes in Romania over the last two decades, many parents have gone to work abroad, preferring to send money home. Their children remained in the country, with grandparents or relatives. Unfortunately, there has been an increase in school dropouts over time. To help reduce it, Social Homes were built in underserved areas where children could eat, learn, and participate in extracurricular activities. The paper describes one such educational model, a project in Bucharest in which students from two universities participate actively over one academic year. To begin, some issues that arose during the activities are discussed, as well as how they were resolved. The mutual benefits for both students and children are emphasized. The advantages for each party involved in this project are also examined separately. Children are drawn to direct communication and approaches to topics other than school activities. They further their understanding of new concepts or participate in extracurricular activities. The projects completed as part of the program were successful. The paper ends with some conclusions and discussions about the educational program's benefits and the possibility of extending it to homes with refugee children from Ukraine or orphans, as well as other areas.

Keywords: *Adaptive learning; Career development; Curriculum development; Educational programs; Student experiments.*

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1. Introduction, literature review

Since Romania acceded to the EU in 2007, there has been a steady migration of workers aged 19 to 45 to Western European countries (Son & Noja, 2012). Unfortunately, Romania ranks first among Eastern European countries in this chapter. Romanians primarily emigrated to Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, and, in recent years, the Netherlands and Norway. If the majority of those who left in the first years were from the urban environment, (Vasile & Zaman, 2005) with secondary or higher education, (Tudorache, 2008) or without training (in construction), recently there have been massive departures from the rural environment, in agriculture (Dobos, 2008). Men generally left the country between 2007 and 2010 to send money home to their families (Menz & Cavides, 2010). Statistics show that more women have left the workforce in the last decade, particularly in agriculture and social services (Theodossiou & Zangelidis, 2009).

According to the EU report (Eurostat, 2019), there are over 86,000 families in Romania where both parents are working abroad, with children abandoned in the country in the care of relatives, and another 242,000 families where only one parent is working away. In May 2017, the European Commission launched an initiative to assist refugees and other migrants in integrating into the labor market, as they can contribute to improving the functioning and performance of the labor market in the respective countries and supporting fiscal sustainability, (Dorn & Zweimuller, 2021). Currently, one in every four Romanians, or approximately 6.6 million people, lives outside the country.

Based on the Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights (ANPDCA, 2019), approximately 60,000 children are abandoned in the country, with more than 37,000 of these children placed in a social protection system, foster care, with relatives, in other families, or even with neighbors. Children from both rural and urban areas are included in this situation and are referred to as "Strawberry children" in the statistics. In many cases, there was a concerning increase in school dropouts, particularly in rural areas, or a decrease in interest in school and performance in urban areas, under these new conditions, (Scafidi et al., 1998). According to Eurostat data from 2021, 9.7% of young people aged between 18 and 24 in the EU have completed at least lower secondary education without continuing their studies. In the EU in 2021, 11.4% of men and 7.9% of women will have dropped out of school. They ranged from 2.4% in Croatia

to 15.3% in Romania. Unfortunately, Romania has the EU's highest school dropout rate.

To reduce this percentage in the urban environment, abandoned children's training and orientation centers, orphaned children's social shelters, and, in recent months, refugee children from Ukraine have been established (Bekkers, 2007). In the last four years, 20 centers have opened on a national scale where children can participate in fun activities after school. In Bucharest alone, approximately 500 children are institutionalized in 5 centers located in the city's poorest neighborhoods, including Chitila, Ferentari, Giulesti, and Colentina, (Beyerlein & Sikkink 2008). Regrettably, even these are insufficient. Each center has about 120-150 children, with few supervisors and almost no mentors. A child in a center requires more than just food and clothing, (Chinman et al., 2005). After the age of 18, many institutionalized children join non-governmental organizations to help other children in such educational facilities, (Clary et al., 1998). Some of them continued their education and returned to give these children a second chance.

Almost 70% of the Romanians polled believe that "love" is the most important thing institutionalized children lack, followed by "quality school" for 17%. The children in the Homes do not have physical disabilities, but they come from an underprivileged background. Many want to better themselves, want to go to college and need better guidance and training, as well as better access to information.

The paper describes a volunteering program in which Students from the Politehnica University of Bucharest and the University of Bucharest participated in two such Social Homes. They held classes in Romanian, English, mathematics, and computer courses, but they also created different educational programs to attract children to reading and individual study.

2. Methodology, problems to be solved working with children

Working with children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have many problems at home is difficult. To achieve good results in various activities, certain rules must be followed, which can often be critical for both children and students:

1. When communicating with adults, children must concentrate on what they say. Communication involves two parties, the speaker and the listener. The student must understand what has been communicated.

2. To be able to listen. Listening entails not only hearing the words but also comprehending their meaning and the information conveyed. There is a significant difference between hearing and understanding. In many cases

intonation, word stress, and facial expressions aid in understanding the information conveyed. If the children understand the information, student-child communication fosters a strong bond between them.

3. A distinction must be made between information communication in mathematics, physics, computer use, and information communication in the Romanian language or foreign languages. They cannot be taught in the same way. Mathematical concepts and computer usage must be communicated clearly and concisely. At most, some ironic and stimulating remarks are permissible.

4. During the lessons, both the adult and children must be quiet. Otherwise, a state of inattention develops gradually followed by stress and discomfort.

5. When interacting with children, maintaining a steady and even tone is not always beneficial. Eye contact, spontaneous communication, relaxed body language, and dialogue are often more effective during activities. It is preferable to freely teach a lesson through direct and spontaneous speech rather than reading. It takes time and effort to be able to freely teach and speak.

6. Students must be able to listen carefully when children speak. They come from disadvantaged backgrounds, have family issues, and have often not had the opportunity to talk to adults. Every child has a story to tell. Students must be able to listen to carry out the proposed activities effectively.

7. When you address children directly, they frequently become emotional. Many of them are not used to speaking freely in front of coworkers or large groups of people. Students must learn and become accustomed to this situation to attract children to various educational programs. Children respond most simply to questions like: What do you think? Is it satisfactory? Is this the only option? Children are more open to discussion when they respond in this manner.

8. Students must always pay close attention to children. They can not interact with them properly if they're constantly checking their phone or thinking about something else. If he answers the phone, the conversation must be brief. To frequently receive nonverbal cues, such as joy, interest, boredom, or fatigue, the student must remain focused on the lesson or activity with the children.

9. Medical research has shown that pointing the right ear toward children is more effective. As strange as it may appear, the right ear aids in the detection of nuances in children's speech. Higher frequencies are responsible for conveying emotion.

10. Students should be interested in what children are saying. They must be acknowledged regularly, with small verbal comments such as "Yes", "Right," "What do you mean when you say..." or "That's what you mean?" They will only see positive results if they maintain an open and welcoming attitude.

11. Students must be aware of the children's nonverbal cues, both from those on the bench and from the ones speaking. Children's reactions are sometimes more obvious than words. If there are children who are yawning, stretching, or otherwise distracted, students should interrupt the lesson to re-engage their attention with a joke, story, or, finally, a direct warning. As a result, the students demonstrate that they are paying attention to what is going on in the classroom rather than just the subject being taught.

12. Success or positive outcomes must always be encouraged. These children raised by grandparents or from single-parent families with multiple children face additional challenges. Nobody in their community has the time or opportunity to encourage them. Other children can be trained to become better at what they do by giving compliments and encouraging them about their results. Students should not be afraid of words like Bravo! Congratulations! Super! That is correct! The impact is both immediate and long-lasting.

13. Individual differences must be recognized by students. Even if they came from the same family, each child has their own personality. It is essential to consider the emotional state and cultural background of the child, who may have different religions, family customs, or come from different backgrounds. Students must develop trust before they can work effectively with children.

14. Finally, students must understand how to manage stress, especially when children ask uncomfortable questions. They must understand how to manage a potential conflict situation between children by using clear words and firm positions when addressing to calm them. They must be able to say "No" when necessary, but without becoming hostile, aggressive, or overbearing. Otherwise, children respond even more aggressively, accustomed to it in their social environments. Making jokes in this situation assures the conflict situation much easier to overcome. When used correctly, humor is an excellent stress reliever.

The children in these centers come from homes where physical force, rather than reason, rules. Some children attempt to impose themselves in front of others in the same way, frequently substituting themselves for the student or mentor. Students must approach these children and attempt to

correct this behavior, while also supporting the physically weak or those in difficult situations. As a result, even the most violent children gradually feel useful and more easily fit into the community. They require more tact and understanding.

Working with children is difficult, but with patience and desire, the students gained confidence in them. Moving away from the social environment from which they come, children gradually respond more easily to the good, encouraging, and relaxed atmosphere. Many of them want to continue their studies, escape the "burden" of their social environment, learn new skills, and "ready to know more."

3. Advantages of this project

3.1. Benefits for both involved parties

School dropout is a problem for abandoned children. Those aged 18 to 24 who have completed at least lower education are leaving the early education system in Europe. Many children in Romania, both rural and urban, drop out of school between the ages of 10 and 14. Unfortunately, Romania ranks first in the EU in terms of abandonment, which is why we aimed for a 9% reduction by 2030.

One method used is the establishment of educational centers and Homes for abandoned children. According to a 2019 survey, over 88% of Romanians polled believe these children are "normal, but without a family home," while the rest believe they are "children with various physical or mental health problems." Almost 60% of those polled believe that the most serious risk for these children is "social maladjustment and inability to relate." The national establishment of these Social Homes provided a solution to these problems, (Harper, et al., 2007). However, a few factors must be considered first:

- What are the benefits of such a program?
- Are the accredited commissions truly interested in creating such long-term programs?
- Are the benefits of volunteerism commensurate with the expectations?
- What are the benefits for these children? But what about the volunteers?

Because some organizations are only partially funded by the governments, they are unable to pay team members. Only by volunteering do these centers remain open. It has been observed that people assisted by volunteers, whether elderly or children, become more open and interact

more easily with their peers over time. On the other hand, the volunteers' time and compassion for those in need have an impact on more than just their future careers.

Volunteering improves interpersonal interactions among team members, allows them to meet new people, and helps to develop social and communication skills. Environmental activities, such as planting trees and flowers and cleaning up garbage in parks protect the environment while also providing benefits. When a person participates in a volunteer program, he devotes his time to the organization, learns how to work in a team, and communicates openly with all colleagues. Above all, he must assist in the resolution of problems that have arisen and contribute to the project throughout its duration, while also remaining available to participate in other projects that are already in progress, to effectively manage the tasks assumed. All these skills will help the young volunteers in the future to work more easily in groups and, in some cases, to find jobs more easily.

However, activities involving children are unique and increase volunteers' chances of making friends with people who share similar values and interests. Children can talk more freely with students about things they do not understand at school or about their problems, and young people learn to work in groups and develop a clear and appropriate language of expression.

Some projects that investigate the relationship between the expertise of young people involved in these activities and the development of children's ability to communicate and relate with adults are detailed and analyzed. Bilateral benefits encourage the development of new projects of this type. The topic addressed greatly improves knowledge on this subject.

3.2. Advantages of Student Volunteering

Students are eager to assist others in need, and the opportunity to work with children is unique. Volunteering provides satisfaction to those involved as well as numerous moral and social benefits. Volunteering is a common practice in almost all EU countries, the United States, Australia, and other countries, (Brown et al., 2013). It provides some benefits for those involved, (Haski-Leventhal, 2009):

- It helps to maintain positive physical and mental health, and over time, increases self-confidence;
- Helping children gives a sense of accomplishment;
- Connects with other people, providing opportunities for positive social interactions, and building interpersonal skills;

- Volunteering is also an opportunity to interact with the local community, get involved in different issues, and promote as many positive messages as possible;

- Volunteers who were shy and introverted at the start become more communicative, open, and sociable as a result of contact with children and involvement in projects with them;

- Gives those who want new directions to follow a chance by improving communication skills with adults in current activities;

- Students have new opportunities if they want to apply for a scholarship abroad; one of the requirements is their involvement in volunteering or social acts. This is a plus for his candidacy because it adds experience to his CV;

- Allows students to explore a new career as a teacher or perform administrative, management, or marketing tasks;

- Students are kept up to date on labor market changes, and it allows them to gain work experience to help them prepare for a career or even change careers.

- The processes and responsibilities of those involved in volunteering provide an additional benefit and experience in organizing, leading, and evaluating a team;

- However, **communication** with others is the most important gain for students.

Students in this program taught Romanian, English, physics, mathematics, and computer concepts. The goal was to raise the educational level of the center's children, attract them to school and educational programs, and prevent school dropouts. Many children had access to tablets and computers during the pandemic, but many did not know how to use them efficiently. The students who participated in this volunteer program benefited the most from **learning to communicate** with the children in all aspects:

- *Direct communication,* of the communication-teaching type, either unilaterally through direct teaching or bilaterally through dialogue, with questions addressed to the children, (Lancaster, 2022). The second option proved to be more effective, especially in the case of younger children or those with significant knowledge gaps, because it better maintained the children's attention. They can ask questions to help them understand the concepts being taught;

- Mediated communication, using posters and various presentations, while appealing because they are colorful, is less effective in children for a long time. They lose interest quickly and become inattentive.

- As a result, students quickly returned to direct communication. Words account for only 7-10% of verbal communication, nonverbal communication via tone and speech accounts for 30-40%, and visual communication via gestures, and facial expression accounts for the reminder, (Mallory, 2022). All of these must be used to effectively communicate with children, as shown in Figure 1, (Communication skills, 2018).



Figure 1 – Complex, effective direct communication

Some observations are required:

1. For students, effective communication does not imply conveying the message in as clear, timely, and concise a manner as possible. For children, concise expressions are not always clear. Effective communication is made easier when the knowledge being taught is understood, preferably using all types of communication, not just the educational one. A joking tone with references to events or gestures, information about various writings, and even persuasive language can often be more effective;

2. To instill confidence in children, it is preferable to communicate knowledge in an assertive, direct, and respectful manner. Children must believe that they are active participants in the communication process. In other words, not only what the students say matter, but also does how they say it;

3. Assertive communication is distinguished by the seven Cs: Clear, Concise, Concrete, Correct, Coherent, Consistent, and Courteous which account for its effectiveness;

4. Children frequently prefer auditory communication through sounds to attract their attention, in addition to direct visual communication through signs and facial expressions, with different intonations of the information conveyed. Students can sometimes attract attention by raising their voices. Any method used by students to convey as much information as possible in as little time as possible is encouraged. However, it does not have to be vulgar, monotonous, or simply informal language, nor must it be in force. Communication does not achieve its intended goals under these conditions.

5. Other benefits of communication include:

- Increasing self-confidence in both students and children, giving both parties a sense of accomplishment;
- Allowing better detection and understanding of the speaker's feelings during teaching; a shy or introverted person involuntarily changes his behavior when communicating with children;
- Creating a win-win context; students learn to establish relationships with other students and children, and children learn to establish relationships with other students and children;
- As a result, students gain an appreciation for their work in these centers as well as for their prospects at work;
- Honest connections are formed with the people around the students, not only with the children but also with others from the center or the outside world (managing supplies, establishing places for excursions and educational programs).

3.3. Benefits for Children

This educational program in which they participated primarily aims to provide access to more comprehensive education to prevent school dropout in children from disadvantaged groups. Some advantages for the children were observed by involving the students and being closer to the children:

- Children who learn with students communicate more easily, and establish more direct relationships with a person who is not their teacher in the school or the center;
- Children are more understanding and attentive to what a student teaches;
- They want to be more focused; they stop thinking about their problems at home or on their phone;
- They are more active, more present at jokes and dialogue, answer questions more easily, and are more involved in the center's activities;
- Listening does not necessarily mean understanding. They must be accustomed to the fact that if they do not understand, it will not take long for them to request clarification. If they concentrate too much on what they want to ask, they lose track of what they hear;
- Children frequently need to learn to understand the information directly transmitted by teachers first. That is why it is sometimes necessary for them to repeat what they have heard in their minds, but it is easier for them to ask questions or receive repeated information;
- Over time, they become accustomed to avoiding interruptions and staying focused on a subject for longer periods.

- Because of the students, children can be persuaded to talk about their problems without feeling shy or sad;

- Children gradually learn to express personal ideas and opinions, particularly in extracurricular activities. They do not have to accept everything unless it is clear to them what it is about;

- Children learn what feedback means. As a result, they are taught to express themselves in ways such as "If I said it, it would be like this…," "What I understand is that ..." In this way children improve their spoken language and learn to express themselves;

- They are taught to ask questions about anything unclear to them; only by interacting openly with students they will gain confidence;

- Learn to appreciate how they look, what they listen to, how they move, and how they react. Children are taught how to enter a room, what to say when entering, and how to interact with those present, such as using hands, sitting on the edge of the chair, and making prolonged eye contact;

- Children learn what nonverbal communication or body language, facial expressions, head movements, gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice mean from their peers;

Both parties are involved in the development of this language from bonds with their coworkers, students from the center or university, and children with those from the center or school. This language should support, not contradict, the words spoken;

- Children develop their skills through presentations of projects, assignments, and events, culminating in direct discussions with adults.

Both students and children must come out on top.

4. Results obtained within the program

This project was carried out in two Bucharest centers: one for children from disadvantaged families, with one parent and several children, or from without-income families, and the other one for abandoned children. Both centers serve children in grades I through VIII. This volunteer project had 12 students involved. Five were from the University of Bucharest-UB for teaching Romanian language, English, mathematics, and computer use, while seven were from the University Politehnica of Bucharest-UPB for teaching mathematics, physics, informatics, and computer use.

The students, who were enrolled in this volunteer program, registered on their accord based on the completion of worksheets in which they expressed their desire to volunteer in children's centers. Their goal was to become accustomed to speaking freely in public, improve their

communication skills, and control their emotions and stress while speaking. The project was completed in one academic year.

On the other hand, the goal of this program was to help children better understand the subjects taught in schools in a more open and free manner, as well as to increase their participation in extracurricular activities. It should be noted that the children significantly improved their school situation during the project's duration, with some of them even becoming interested in some of these subjects. The students were taught the respective subjects openly, in constant dialogue with the children, with questions and answers, by the school programs for each class in which children were enrolled in the program.

Children were initially particularly drawn to the use of computers, English, and physics. Almost everyone wanted to learn as much as they could about computers. They learned to take pictures and create texts as they progressed, in addition to writing increasingly complex texts. In English, they hoped to learn as many words as possible through computer games. They discovered that they could understand words from the movies over time. It became a competition between them to see who could understand the words and sentences the best. Physics students performed some simple experiments for the children, to better understand some theoretical concepts. The children became increasingly drawn to this discipline over time.

After two months from the project's start, the students and children were also involved in some extracurricular educational projects:

1. UB students persuaded the children from these centers to perform a theater show and a dance show. UPB students helped the children in making the costumes and sets. Both actions drew children in and kept them engaged in learning the roles and dance steps. In these two centers, there was a sense of joy, happiness, and fulfillment.

2. Another project initiated by UB students was the creation of a magazine. Every month, a number was created. The first number had only a few pages. However, it was impressive how the children from these disadvantaged backgrounds, working under the supervision of the students, began to carefully write the articles and make drawings along the way. At this point, the children realized the importance of knowing how to write correctly in Romanian. Each number included events from some of their lives, stories about dreams and desires, "new reports," and even poems written by them. Each magazine has 20 pages from number three. As the magazine grew in number, new sections such as "Medical Advice," "Today's Fashion," "Reading Tips", and "Miscellaneous" section began to appear.

Children assisted by UPB students created the images that accompanied their texts, graphics, and illustrations. The UPB students organized to print magazines at the UPB Printing House, one for each child and student involved in the program, plus another ten for the centers to keep for program promotion.

3. Even though the children were of different ages, the boys formed a soccer team and the girls a volleyball team in March. They "trained" at the UPB Sports Base twice a week. Training entails more than just hitting the ball with the foot or hand. The main goal was to learn what it meant to work as a team with children of varying abilities and methods of socialization or controlling aggressive behavior. The "gallery" was provided by those who were not on the respective teams.

This volunteering program was a success. The authorities should want such projects to be permanent. A request was also made to the ministry for similar projects to be developed in other cities or poor areas of the country.

5. Conclusions

This volunteering project benefited both the students involved in the program and the children from these two Social Homes. If the children were initially hesitant, were not attentive, and did not retain the information presented by the students, the atmosphere quickly changed. The children were soon motivated, and an atmosphere of joy and cheerfulness was created as the students gained confidence and began projects that were not directly related to the school.

Students learned the significance and value of speaking in front of an audience, even if they were children. They heard many stories about the children's lives and the problems they face. They learned to value the children's viewpoints. Even shy students learned to control the class by mastering their body language, setting respectable limits, learning to say No, and asserting themselves. Even under stressful conditions, all students learned new communication skills and self-control, but most of them developed empathy and sensitivity, often becoming more involved than was required by the volunteer program.

The children, however, were the biggest winners. They learned self-respect, how to listen and respect the opinions of others, and how to be heard with the help of the students. They learned to concentrate to better retain the information more easily. They developed new communication techniques, self-control, and control of spoken and body language. Many children used to sway when speaking, repeat words, or stutter. Many did not

speak Romanian correctly and had a limited vocabulary. They became eager to read and learn new things over time, thanks to reading and theater performances in which they acted or witnessed and for which they had to learn roles. They have grown accustomed to respecting the word NO, within limits that do not interfere with their freedom of choice. When they understood words from movies or computer games, they had flashes of joy in English. They developed states of empathy and sensitivity among themselves as they worked on "their magazine" and wrote articles, as they learned about the lives of others. The fact that each of them has a copy of the magazine and could display it in their schools increased their trust in them. Over time, the desire for greater involvement in the project they were working on took precedence over force. However, the use of computers had the greatest impact on children. They learned how to use a computer to write, calculate, and draw. It was spectacular when they managed to "edit" the magazine themselves. "Oh, that's also possible!" and "I had no idea it was possible!" could be heard numerous times. They discovered that they could read books, poems, and other materials on the Internet in addition to Facebook and TikTok.

As a result, new areas of curiosity emerged, along with more questions, and as a result, higher school grades. Many children wanted to learn more and continue their studies after the program ended.

The project's goal was to persuade the children and their families to continue attending school. The idea of dropping out of school vanished with the help of students and these children, at least in their families and groups. The project was a success because of desire and involvement. With the support of the authorities, it is hoped that similar volunteering projects can be developed in other cities in the future.

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