



BOOK REVIEW

PREOTESI M. (COORD.) (2015). ACTIVATING COMMUNITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS: STAKEHOLDERS, MECHANISMS, FACTORS, PRO-UNIVERSITARIA PUBLISHING HOUSE. 140 P.¹

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The paper *Activating Community from the Perspective of the Educational Process: Stakeholders, Mechanisms, Factors* constitutes a report over a research-action project in the educational field developed within five rural localities in the Republic of Moldova, in 2015.

The paper intends to contribute to activating communities as relevant stakeholders of the educational process. In order to achieve the aimed goal, the project team – local experts and coordinators – have performed sociological research as regards mechanisms and factors of social participation based on some socio-educational activation scenarios accomplished in five pilot-communities within the country.” (p. 7)

The specific objectives of the project were:

- Identifying the favouring and hindering factors of school inclusion, of collaboration models of educational stakeholders at community level, and the mechanisms of cooperation at local level;
- Initiating some participatory processes of stakeholders’ consultation and involvement, from the perspective of educational reforms;

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- Harnessing within the public space the successful experiences as cooperation models for creating positive representations and favourable conditions for educational reforms at the level of public opinion; (p. 9-10)

Chapter 1. Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical perspective of the paper is framed within the social development paradigm, as this is approached both from the perspective of modernisation theories, and from the one of dependency theories. The authors underpin the fact that *“a decisive role in disconnecting towards modernity pertains, however, to education that weakens the resistance against changing the old structures”* (p. 14). From the perspective of dependency theories, the role of external factors is highlighted – the unbalanced relationships between states, a factor leading finally to major gaps, e.g. developed states (societies), and underdeveloped states (societies).

At the same time, the transition theories has an important role in designing the theoretical model of the research, within the project. From this viewpoint, the authors of the study relate to the social development strategy for the European countries in transition as promoted by the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. According to this strategy, the role of the state diminishes in reducing social gaps and the one of the local communities and of the NGOs increases. This objective of transferring the community development initiative was pursued also in the framework of the project *“Activating community from the perspective of the educational process: stakeholders, mechanisms, factors”* by putting into motion some local development mechanisms assumed by the community.

In view of measuring the local/community development level for the five localities included in the research-action, the authors begin with the model suggested by Dumitru Sandu (1999): *“the community development level correlates positively with the one of collective consumption of tangible and cultural goods. Two types of structural factors are identified as regards community development: human capital (the stock of education at community level, the number of employees at local level, the weight of employed population in agriculture) and, respectively the infrastructure at community level (the distance to the closest town of at least above the average size (over 30,000 inhabitants). Additionally, are taken into account the weight of the population aged 60 and over, the nearby location of an European road, the historical and cultural context in which the community developed”* (p. 16). Concepts such as *local social issues* or *latent, manifest, and core social issues* complete the theoretical framework of the research.

Chapter II. Methodology of research

The project contains a specific methodology for the applicative dimension of intervention, and a specific methodology to the scientific dimension, both methodologies correlating depending on the objective of the project: activating community from the perspective of the educational process.

The selection of the five communities included in the research was achieved by interspersing some economic, social, and cultural-historical factors. The sociological research included two stages. In the first stage, a socio-economic diagnosis about the community was done, which included also the identification of the main issues encountered by each community, and the stakeholders at local level intending to be involved in activating the community. The second stage is represented by the process of monitoring the implementation of each intervention/activation scenario of the community.

During the first stage of the research, the socio-economic diagnosis for each community was achieved, along with developing intervention scenarios for improving a specific issue identified by the local community. Moreover, statistical data were collected, including qualitative data by structured observation at community level, semi-structured interviews with the main institutional stakeholders, and in-depth interviews with the tutors of school-aged children. The second stage of the research overlaps with the monitoring process, for which specific tools were developed.

As result of analysing the data gathered during the first and second wave, five case studies were developed, one for each community, and a guide of good practices regarding ways for activating the community at socio-educational level.

Chapter III. Activating the community from the perspective of the educational system

The educational system is defined by the authors as the assembly of influences received by the individual from the formal education system (school), the informal one (family, group of friends, community), and from the non-formal system (learning models or instances developed outside school, in dance assemblies, sports clubs, etc.). From this perspective, the learning system is regarded as a sub-system of the educational system.

Special emphasis is laid on the past role of the village community (ethnically and culturally homogeneous) as shaping, and social control factor of the community members' behaviours. Currently, its educational role is severely diminished, the communities assisting to the *diversification of educational factors* from among which mass-media takes the leading position.

In this context, the relationship family – school – community, as educational factors is regarded in the framework of the study as the main pillar in view of the positive activation of the community. Community activation is put into relationship on one hand with the issues encountered by families in the rural area in the Moldova Republic (disintegrated and socially disadvantaged families) and, on the other hand, with the issues of the formal education system failing to meet the needs of the children, as regards ensuring minimal standards for an education of quality.

In this chapter, special emphasis is laid on “*the relationship between the social origin and the ‘great moments of the school career’*” (p. 27). Social origin is an important determinant of the school career, and the solution for those within disadvantaged communities for exceeding their condition remains education as propelling force to leave behind the environment of origin. In the second half of the chapter, the changes occurred in the

educational field from the Moldova Republic are presented, as it shifted from a pre-industrial communist society to a post-industrial democratic society. The *educational models* are described (1. Elderly as raw models for the young; 2. Elderly as models for elderly, and young as models for the young; and 3. Young as models for elderly) and, *influence styles* (permissive or authoritarian-directive).

The authors underpin the importance of the migration phenomenon in the framework of the educational process, a phenomenon that subverts the community and its socio-cultural configuration. Also, the pressure exercised by a totalitarian state and the individuals mistaking the community for the state contributed to the decrease in the educational role of the community.

Chapter IV Effects' of parents' migration. The temporary disintegrated family and socially orphan children

The authors considered as necessary to approach this topic in a separate chapter. The entire paper presents this topic as a true disaster, affecting completely rural communities in the Moldova Republic. Depression, anxiety, the decreasing educational outcomes of children and teens represent the main negative effects of parents' migration. The positive effects are translated mainly at material level; however, they fail to compensate the negative ones as the losses suffered by the children on long-term. Under these conditions, the activation process of the community from the educational perspective becomes even more difficult.

Chapter V Post-communist changes in rural Moldova

Currently, 58% of the Moldovan population lives in the rural area. The post-communist changes show that the level for the quality of life is very low in the rural area. Water does not meet the drinkable water standards, and the sewer system is non-existent, and only 2% of the rural roads were in a good state in 2006. Even if the state implemented a series of strategies, or national programmes of developing the rural area, the outcomes are still not obvious.

In the framework of this chapter is presented a brief history regarding the five rural localities included in the research-action: the village Parlita and the hamlets Filipeni, Cazangic, Lupa-Recea, and Racovat.

Chapter VI Community activation – from scenarios to actual activities developed within five rural communities. Chapter VII. Case studies

These two chapters describe the stages of the activation process, the proposed scenarios, and the way in which they were transposed in practice by the local action groups. An important aspect consisted in training the local stakeholders involved in defining specifically one *local issue* (the issue of some children's malnourishment –

Racovat, school abandon – Cazangic, garbage in the community – Pirlita). The challenge for the project team consisted in making the community aware (by means of the triplet educational expert – local coordinator – local group of initiative) about the fact that the issues of the community are also the issues of its inhabitants, and not only the issues of the local institutions (school, mayoral office, etc.). The case studies show that without the involvement of the individuals holding responsibilities within local institutions (professors, social workers, medical nurses, and district police officer), the activation of the community is almost impossible. Their involvement leads to the activation of some other local stakeholders as well, such as various entrepreneurs or heads of local households.

The case studies represent the actual transposition, or the plan for implementing the various solutions for improving the social issues identified by the members of the community. Examples: arranging a playground for children in view of solving the issue of unsupervised children (as the parents are abroad for work in Russia, or in the West – “the rural exodus”) after finishing school program (Cazangic). Moreover, providing free meals at the school canteen for 20 students from 5 to 9 grades (Racovat) in the view of solving the issue of malnourishment; setting up the *Parents’ School* in the view of changing the attitude towards children with CES and benefit from the principles of inclusive education (Filipeni).

Chapter VIII. Conclusions. Synthesis of the field research outcomes

In this chapter the main issues identified at the level of the five communities are synthesised, pertaining to the lack of jobs, parents’ migration abroad (the promiscuity of mothers who often change their life partners), temporary child abandon, increasing social inequalities among the members of the same community, and the weakening of the community spirit. The activation of the community “*requires reconnecting the broken and unravelled threads of the social fabric*” (p.118).

Final considerations

The most important remark about the performed research regards the obvious role played in designing the theoretical framework and the research methodology by the Romanian researchers Sorin Cace and Mihnea Preotesi, the coordinator of the volume. The experience studying the Romanian society in transition was transferred and applied amidst a researchers’ team from Moldova Republic, a country sharing a series of similar issues with the one of the Romanian societies at the time of transition.

The paper represents a model for all social stakeholders intending to be involved in developing a community. The case studies bring to the fore the main issues that will be encountered in the field when they will aim to coagulate a local group of initiative, as *social idleness* is one of the main such issues.

From the perspective of approached social issues (Preotesi, 2016), I believe that special consideration should be paid in the framework of the paper to *Chapter IV. Effects of parents’ migration. Temporary disintegrated family and socially orphan children.*

The content of the chapter by detailing the effects that migration of one, or both parents might have on the children may constitute the background for school advisors who work in schools where this phenomenon is encountered, and for vocational guidance advisors. These advisors, next to their main activity could increase the awareness of parents seeking jobs abroad, about the negative effects of such a decision on their families.

As regards the increasing individualism, and the decrease of the social control of the community over the individual, once exercised especially from the perspective of its cohesion, I consider that a parallel could be made with the current situation in some traditional poor Roma communities., Asking about tradition preservation, especially about the institution of the *Gypsy King* in an interview with a Roma survivor of Holocaust, the answer was memorable: “*Now, each one who has what to eat at home, with children and wife, is a King in his own house*”.

The answer provided by the Roma is similar to the situation presented in the report about Lupa Recea “*where the interviewed inhabitants consider that in their community the people have turned colder, envious, individualistic, and less perceptive to the issues of those around them*”, as “*each retreats behind his own fences*” (p. 118).

By analysing the presented case studies, it is very difficult not to continue the series of comparisons between the situation of the rural communities from Moldova, where we encounter the ‘*rural exodus*’ to the West or Russia, and the Roma communities from Romania characterised by an intense migration phenomenon.

In 2018, in the framework of the National Centre of Roma Culture Research, we performed research in the sphere of intercultural education: *Effects, perceptions and representations over intercultural interaction in school and family* (the outcomes are not yet published). One of the communities where we developed field research was the Roma community from the town Giurgiu. The methodology provided for realising some group interviews with the parents of Roma pupils. The main encountered issue was that during the interviews mainly grandparents were involved, as the parents had left for abroad. From the discussions with the grandparents, it clearly results that they are not knowledgeable over the school issues of the grandchildren left in their care, and that the most pressing concern is to ensure food and physical safety.

For the parents, the main concern was to build a bigger house endowed with more amenities and utilities than the one of the *neighbours*, the investment in the education of children being seen as a road leading to nowhere. Often, these houses remain uninhabited as they are not finished, while the parents migrate again for “*collecting more money for the house*”, and the children follow the parents abroad (France, England, Spain), where they are enrolled with the local schools up to the time of returning in the community of origin. In this way, the educational path of a child within the traditional Roma community is much deviated from what we would call an ‘*usual*’ path, which finally leads to the individual’s inclusion in the labour market. This behaviour of the parents is influenced by a series of *cultural* perceptions as well, as the position one holds within the community being influenced as well by the house one owns.

Taking account of these issues, I believe that taking over and adapting the good practices guide realised in the framework of the project *Community Activation from the Viewpoint of the Educational Process: Stakeholders, Mechanisms, Factors* might be an efficient tool also in mobilisation of the Roma communities as regards education.

Moreover, I believe that a parallel could be made between the communities from Moldova included in the research, where one out of two houses have a family member who left abroad, with a series of Roma communities where we find the same situation. In both cases, community activation in view of social development presupposes investment in education and strengthening *School – Local Public Authority – Community* partnership.

References

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