

# Measuring Teachers' Expectations towards Students with Migrant Parents

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**Abstract.** Teachers have formed expectations regarding the future academic performances of their students ever since the first days of school. These expectations shape a teacher's and students' behaviours and mark the level of acquisition of the students. A special situation generating firm and stable expectations is the migration of parents to a better paid job. In this context, the goal of this study was to investigate how teachers' expectations towards their students left behind differ. 281 teaching professionals from nine schools from Romania participated in this research. Five schools were situated in the rural environment and four in the urban environment. In all schools, there were a considerable number of children left behind by migrant parents. We designed an ambiguous scenario describing in short the story of a student who is preparing to be admitted to high school. For half of the teachers, the scenario did not contain any reference to the student's family and for the other half it was mentioned that student's parents left abroad to work. Starting from this scenario we evaluated teachers' expectations regarding the future school performances of the student, the risks of abandoning school, to skip classes the affective disposition and the risk to develop deviant behaviours. The results showed that teachers have lower expectations regarding the possible school performances of the student whose parents have temporarily emigrated for work; this student is perceived as having a higher risk to leave school, skip classes, develop deviant behaviours and to have a negative mood.

**Key words:** children left behind, academic performance, school dropout, migration

## I. Introduction

Almost all teaching professionals have expectations from the students they guide, and this is the natural course of events. They represent a strong pedagogic tool and play a vital role in the achievement of high quality education. The expectations of the teaching professionals are the inferences that teachers make about the behaviour and the future academic acquisitions of students (Cooper and Good, 1983). They are important since teachers plan and carry out their activities depending on expectations and the way in

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which they anticipate students' behaviour and their capacity to obtain school success (Cotton, 1989).

Research in this field (Brophy, 1983; Jussim, 1991; Jussim, Smith, Madon & Palumbo, 1998) has highlighted a strong positive correlation between teachers' expectations and students' performances; more precisely, when teachers' expectations are higher, students' grades are higher as well; when teachers' expectations are lower, students' grades are lower, too. Students are self-confident when teachers believe in them. But, when teachers distrust their students' capacity to obtain higher performances, students become prisoners of a negative perspective and school grades are affected (Lumsden, 1997). A strong positive correlation between teachers' expectations and students' performances does not yet involve a causal connection. The relation between expectations and performances may receive three alternative explanations as Jussim (1991) suggests in the "Reflection - Construction" model: teachers' expectations are confirmed because they give birth to self-fulfilling prophecies, or they cause perceptual biases and act as an interpretative filter altering the perception of reality or, since they are real, teachers may correctly predict the grades of a student without modifying the latter's behaviour.

Teaching professionals' expectations are formed through direct contact with the student (depending on how careful or motivated the student is, how big their contribution is to the class, how they work, etc.) based on some written information regarding the student (descriptors, grades, tests, characterizations from other teachers etc.) or based on the additional information related to the social-economic situation of the family. Willis (1972; *apud* Pires, 2006) has shown that following direct contact with students, teachers have stable and precise expectations a few days after the beginning of the school year. The appearance of expectations is normal, and it inevitably has positive and negative consequences. The most important aspect is, from the author's perspective, the flexibility and accuracy of expectations. Inexact expectations may hurt students unless teachers correct them and build their instructive-educational decisions on them.

In an article entitled "Expectations and Student Outcomes", Kathleen Cotton (1989) makes a synthesis of the studies performed on this topic by Brookover et al., (1982), Cooper (1984) and other researchers. She identifies a series of factors that determine the decrease of teaching professionals' expectations among which: students' gender, the low socio-economic status, the minority race/origin, the school where the student studies, their physical appearance, the disordered manner of studying, their desk position in the classroom, the halo effect and the negative comments of other teaching professionals.

Thus, we may notice that teachers have lower expectations from girls, mainly in the exact sciences and the technical subjects due to gender stereotypes. At the same time, Jussim and Eccles (1992) discovered that girls are given higher grades because teachers consider that they work harder. Elwood and Comber (1996) show that girls are perceived as being more thorough and motivated whereas boys are more trustful but careless.

K. Cotton (1989) shows that teachers evaluate their students' academic potential depending on the socio-economic status and the race/ethnic group to which the students belong. Thus, teaching professionals have lower expectations from the students coming from unfavored socio-economic environments. Students coming from ethnic or racial minorities are seen as being less capable of performing as compared to the students of the majority race/ethnic group. The expectations of the teachers from the United States are lower for Afro-Americans and for the students who have lower income as compared to the white students coming from families with average or high income (Diamond, Randolph and Spillane, 2004). Studies also show that teachers have lower expectations from the students who come from the rural environment, the disorderly students who work in a disorganized manner and from the students who sit in the back row of desks. (Cotton, 1989).

A special situation that might possibly generate beliefs and expectations is parents' migration to a better paid job. The children left behind face a multitude of problems, and some of these may affect their school performances. Studies which have investigated the opinions of the Romanian teaching professionals (Gavriliuc, Platon and Aftenie, 2006; Luca and Gulei, 2006; Toth, Toth, Voicu & Ștefănescu, 2007; Cheianu-Andrei, 2011) underline that children left behind by their migrant parents lose interest in school, cannot concentrate during classes, skip classes repeatedly, have poorer grades and have lower conduct grades. The explanations given by the teachers for the decrease of school performance of the students left behind refer to the diminution of motivation after their parent's leaving, the lack of supervision or the overabundance of chores.

In the mother's absence, they become overburdened with chores, and they neglect school to take care of the house and their little brothers or sisters. There is the physical fatigue accompanied by a lack of motivation and indifference towards what is happening around them, a lack of energy and will to achieve their school tasks (Luca and Gulei, 2006). Failure to achieve school tasks is also considered an effect of a lack of supervision by the parents, children being previously accustomed to being permanently stimulated and monitored. At the same time, the persons taking care of the children left behind are not capable of totally following their school performances (Gavriliuc, Platon and Aftenie, 2006).

Teaching professionals also affirm that the students are unhappier, more pensive, they miss their parents and are more aggressive and influenced by their peers (Luca and Gulei, 2006; Toth et al, 2007).

The goal of this study is to analyse the expectations that teachers have towards the students whose parents have left abroad to work. We have tried to answer the question “Can teachers’ expectations be modified in the case of children left behind by their migrant parents? In the research mentioned above, teachers have clear and firm opinions; from their descriptions we may see a pessimistic perception of some children for whom education is of no importance any longer. In this context, this present study relies on the hypothesis according to which teachers have lower expectations from the students left behind by their migrant parents.

## **II. Method**

### ***Participants***

281 teaching professionals from 9 schools in Romania took part in this research. Out of the total number of participants investigated 17 are pre-school teachers, 56 are primary school teachers and 208 are secondary school and high school teachers. The age of the participants ranges between 22 and 63 years old ( $M=38.76$ ;  $SD=9.24$ ); 219 of the teaching professionals are females and 62 are males.

Furthermore, 135 of the teachers are currently working in a school from the rural environment, and 146 are working in a school from the urban environment. This study relied on the participants who were entry-level teachers and well as teachers who have quite a bit of seniority in teaching. Thus the teaching experience of the teaching professionals varied from 1 to 45 years ( $M = 13.72$ ;  $SD = 9.36$ ).

### ***Instruments***

Teachers’ Expectations Questionnaire (TEQ) was conceived to evaluate teachers’ expectations towards their students’ school evolution. The instrument is made up of an ambiguous scenario – a short story with general data about an 8<sup>th</sup> grader who is preparing to be admitted to high school.

*“Andrew lives in Iași; he is 14 and is a boy just like any other. He is an 8<sup>th</sup> grader at a secondary school nearby his house. He is going to have to take an exam in order to be admitted to high school and is a little worried. Last school year was quite difficult. He is wondering how the high school will be ... Anyway, he is looking forward to the holidays! In his free time, Andrew likes to play on his computer, watch TV and go out with his friends. He has a couple of close friends, but he gets along well with all his classmates.”*

To evaluate teaching professionals' expectations related to students left behind by their migrant parents, in half of the distributed questionnaires we introduced in the middle of the story the sentence "His parents left abroad to work". For the other half, the story did not contain any reference to student's family or parents.

The participants in the survey were asked to read the story and say what the risks are for Andrew if he abandons school on a 5-point Likert scale, ("From the scarce information you have, specify what the risks are for Andrew if he abandons school"), what is Andrew's final grade at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade ("What was Andrew's final average at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade?"), how many days was Andrew absent from school (on a 5-point Likert scale), what were Andrew's moods in relation with three pairs of antonyms describing affective states: merry-sad; happy-unhappy; alone-supported by others, what are the risks for Andrew to have the following deviant behaviours: smoking, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, beginning his sexual life, to have attempted to commit suicide (on a 5-point Likert scale).

The instrument measures five categories of expectations of the teaching professionals: the risk for the student to abandon school, his academic performance (given by the graduation average), a poor school attendance rate, mood and student's deviant behaviour.

At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to give several socio-demographic data such as their age, gender, experience in education and specialization.

The total scores of the students' deviant behaviour and mood were calculated. Student's *t* tests were used to examine the differences in teachers' expectations between the two experimental groups: the groups of teachers who received the description of a student whose parents had left abroad and the group of teachers who assessed a student without having any information related to the latter's family. A Bivariate correlation analysis was used to assess the relation between all variables. All of the analyses were performed with SPSS 16.0 for Windows. The threshold of statistical significance was set at  $P < 0.05$ .

### ***Procedure***

We sent invitations for participation in the survey to several schools from Romania. We wished to include in this study teachers who have taught at high school, secondary school, primary school and kindergarten. We received positive answers from four urban schools and five rural schools. All teachers who expressed their consent to participate in the research were included in the group of participants.

Questionnaires were left with the school principals to be given at the end of a teachers' meeting. The school principals were subsequently

trained how to apply the instruments, but they had not been informed about the hypohese of the study or of the existence of two experimental groups. The instruments were administered collectively in the school where the teachers worked. They were given unlimited time, but 15 minutes was sufficient to fill in the questionnaire. Materials were collected immediately after teachers had finished filling in their questionnaires.

After having collected the instruments, debriefing meetings with the school principals and the teachers who participated in the study took place where they were told about the real objectives and hypotheses lying at the bottom of the research. All school directors asked to know the final results of the research.

### III. Results

The correlations existing among the study variables are presented in Table 1. Results show the presence of some significant correlations between the categories of expectations measured. Thus, teachers' expectations related to students' school performance are negatively correlated with the risk for school dropout, the risk of developing deviant behaviours, a poor school attendance rate and a negative mood. Teachers expect that students having higher performances have a lower risk of school dropout, a positive mood, a low number of absences and few deviant behaviours, such as consumption of addictive substances, violence and attempts at suicide.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1.SA	1										
2.SP	-0.43**										
3.Sm	0.49**	-0.34**									
4.A	0.48**	-0.37**	0.79**								
5.D	0.53**	-0.37**	0.61**	0.75**							
6.V	0.42**	-0.30**	0.58**	0.65**	0.61**						
7.S	0.32**	-0.23**	0.44**	0.46**	0.54**	0.53**					
8.Sd	0.44**	-0.28**	0.38**	0.42**	0.39**	0.36**	0.38**				
9.Uh	0.42**	-0.32**	0.35**	0.41**	0.42**	0.36**	0.33**	0.65**			
10.Al	0.27**	-0.16	0.33**	0.30**	0.33**	0.33**	0.29**	0.42**	0.43**		
11.Ag	-0.01	-0.07	-0.05	-0.03	0.03	-0.09	-0.13**	-0.03	0.02	-0.02	
12.E	-0.06	0.03	-0.07	-0.05	-0.04	-0.16**	-0.13**	-0.05	0.01	-0.03	0.86**

Table 1. Bivariate Correlation Coefficients of Teacher Expectations; Age and Experience (N = 281). SA: School Abandon; SP: School performance; Sm: Smoking; A- Alcohol; D: Drugs; V: Violence; S: Suicide; Sd: Sad; Uh: Unhappy; Al: Alone; Ag: Age; E: Experience; Note: \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

The expectations related to school dropout positively correlate with a poor school attendance rate, negative moods and deviant behaviour. Teachers consider that the students having a higher risk to abandon school

skip school more often, are sad, unhappier, lonelier and more exposed to deviant behaviours.

The experiences of the teaching professionals negatively correlate with the risk of suicide ( $r = -0.16, p < 0.01$ ) and violent behaviour of all students ( $r = -0.13, p < 0.01$ ). Thus, the more teachers have a longer experience in teaching, the more they estimate that the risk of suicide or the risk to develop violent behaviour is lower.

To analyse the hypothesis of this study – namely the fact that parents' migration influences teachers' expectations – we compared the results reported by the two groups of participants: the groups of teachers who received the description of a student whose parents left abroad and the group of teachers who assessed a student without having any information related to the latter's family. The averages, the standard deviations, and the t test results for independent samples for all categories of expectations are given in Table 2.

Expectations	Migrating parents		No reference to parents		Differences		
	M	SD	M	SD	t	Df	Sig.
RAS	3.04	0.92	2.37	0.85	6.25	279	<0.01
AP	7.01	0.89	7.29	0.84	-2.66	279	<0.01
SAR	2.90	0.80	2.21	0.74	2.57	279	0.01
Deviant behaviour	19.40	4.87	15.16	4.65	7.38	279	<0.01
Smoking	3.84	0.83	2.96	1.08	-7.48	279	<0.01
Drinking	3.55	0.90	2.80	2.01	-6.57	279	<0.01
Drug abuse	3.26	1.03	2.48	1.08	-6.15	279	<0.01
Active sexual life	2.89	1.12	2.32	1.01	-5.12	279	<0.01
Violence	3.41	1.03	2.61	1.15	-6.13	279	<0.01
The risc to suicide	2.33	1.09	1.97	0.96	-2.91	279	0.01
Merry – Sad	6.95	1.43	6.15	1.49	4.45	279	<0.01
Happy – Unhappy	6.86	1.51	6.30	1.67	3.08	279	<0.01
Supported by others – Alone	7.49	1.39	6.88	1.49	3.47	279	<0.01

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of teacher expectations for students with migrating parents and students with no reference to their parents. RAS: The risk to abandon school; AP: Academic performance; SAR: School attendance rate; Note: \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Teachers have lower expectations in the condition “student whose parents left abroad to work” for all the aspects under investigation. Teachers consider that the student left behind has a higher risk of school dropout, has a lower school performance, skips school more often, has a higher risk to develop deviant behaviours, is sadder, unhappier and lonelier as compared to the student about whom they do not have any information regarding parents.

The results of this study show that teachers' expectations regarding students' academic performances also depend on gender and the teacher's specialization. Thus, male teachers have lower expectations regarding students' school performances, ( 7.20 vs. 6.91,  $t = 2.23$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) as compared to female teachers in both cases – when student's parents left abroad and when there is no information available on the family. At the same time, primary school teachers (1<sup>st</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> grades) give the lowest assessments of students' potential performances as compared to pre-school, secondary school (5<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> grades) and high school teachers (9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grades),  $F(2, 278) = 5.62$ ;  $p < 0.01$ .

The school where teachers work (rural or urban environment) also influences expectations regarding students' violent behaviour. To analyse the combined effect of the environment where the school belongs and the experimental manipulation of expectations regarding children's violent behavior we used ANOVA Univariate by bootstrap technique. The results show the fact that the teachers who work in an urban environment expect a higher level of student violence as compared to the teachers working in a rural environment,  $F(1, 225) = 22.23$ ;  $p < 0.01$ . This effect appears in case of teachers who do not have information about the family of the assessed student; when teachers know that a student's parents have left abroad, the difference between the rural and urban environment disappears.

#### **IV. Discussions**

The general stereotypes circulating in our society reflect on the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of the teaching professionals (Tartar & Emanuel, 2001). This fact is not at all surprising knowing that teachers are not immune to the beliefs and attitudes which exist in the society beyond the school gates. Thus, teachers have come to gather a negative image related to the potential of the students left behind by their migrant parents. The results of the study show that teachers have lower expectations regarding school performances of the student left behind; they consider that he/she is more exposed to the risk of school dropout, poor school attendance, negative emotions, violent behaviours and suicide attempt.

The surveys that investigated the opinions of the teaching professionals from the Moldavian area (Gavriliuc, Platon & Aftenie, 2006; Luca & Gulei, 2006; Toth et al., 2007; Cheianu-Andrei, 2011) have come to similar conclusions: teachers consider that students have poorer grades, they skip classes more frequently, they are not attentive in classes, and they have a higher risk of abandoning school. The explanations given by the teachers for the decrease of school performances of the students left behind refer to the decrease in motivation after their parents leave, a lack of surveillance or overabundance of chores. Teaching professionals also affirm that the



students are unhappier, more pensive, they miss their parents, are more aggressive and influenced by their peers.

The surveys mentioned above analyse teaching professionals' opinions and beliefs, and they do not take into consideration objective indicators, such as students' averages, the number of absences or the number of students left behind who dropped out of school. That is why we may not know precisely to what extent teaching professionals' expectations and beliefs are accurate or are generalizations they make starting from isolated cases.

However, there are studies that did not find significant decreases of school performance in the children left behind (Toth, Munteanu & Bleahu, 2008). On the contrary, children seem more motivated to study well and please their parents who "are sacrificing for them". In a study carried out on the Romanian population, N. Popa (2012) shows that one or both parents living abroad represents a weak predictor for students' grades. The school performances are better predicted by the perception of the school environment and children's gender. Hatoş (2010) came to almost similar results in research which focused on the school performances of the students left behind from the Western part of the country; the author underlines the fact that parents' emigration does not represent a risk factor for the decrease of students' school performances. At the same time migration becomes a source of income which, in most cases, provides children with all the supplies necessary for school and increases the possibility to continue their studies to higher levels of education (Cheianu-Andrei, 2011). Yang (2008) considers that material benefits have a strong positive effect on the investments that Chinese parents and children make in education: children study for many years, the sums of money allocated to education increase and the financial contribution of the children decreases. Only a mother's leaving determines a slight decrease in students' grades (Scalabrini, 2004). The impact of a mother's presence on their child's school performances has been shown ever since the first studies on children affected by migration (Battistella & Conaco, 1996).

In contradiction to these results, Wang (2012) shows that a father's absence has stronger repercussions on the school performances of Chinese children, especially for boys. However, Hu, in recent research (2013), comes to a different conclusion: parents' living abroad for a better paid job negatively affects girls' school performances, though girls are the ones who benefit the most on an educational level from the supplementary material gains.

In the specialized literature there is numerous proof of the fact that teaching professionals' expectations influence children's behaviour in the classroom. These expectations and beliefs are communicated indirectly to

students and have significant consequences when it comes to learning. For example, Brophy and Good (2000) show that teachers treat the students from whom they have higher expectations more differently than the students from whom they have lower expectations. The students from whom teachers have higher expectations benefit from more productive interactions and have more opportunities to make acquisitions. There appears to be a vicious circle where the high level of students' acquisitions serves achieving the initial prophecy.

According to Jussim and Harber (2005), this phenomenon is more obvious in primary school. In the first years of school, the student spends more time with the same teacher and if the teacher constantly manifests lower expectations, these may accumulate and distort the self-image and student's school performance. In secondary and high school, teachers and students meet more rarely, and it is less likely that an effect of accumulation of lower expectations will appear. This phenomenon is important for this research since primary school teachers are the ones manifesting the lowest expectations regarding the performances of the students left behind. The students with migrant parents are disadvantaged exactly where it matters most.

The teachers who participated in this research have different expectations regarding the students' violent behaviour depending on the school where they work. The teachers from the urban environment expect to a higher extent that students have violent behaviour as compared to the teachers from the rural environment. The results coincide with those of another large study carried out by UNICEF in Romania where teachers from the urban environment declared that in their school acts of violence are more numerous (Jigău, Liiceanu & Preoteasa, 2005).

The results of research also highlight the way in which teachers' expectations are correlated; a high rate of academic performance associates with a low risk of school dropout, a low rate of poor school attendance, a few deviant behaviours and a positive mood. At the same time, school dropout positively correlates with poor school attendance and deviant behaviour. The results are predictable to a certain extent as long as the research in this field abounds in studies that certify the connection between these behaviours. For example, The Center for Mental Health in School (2007) classifies the factors determining the appearance of the school dropout rate into four categories: individual factors (such as poor school attendance or a negative attitude towards school), familial factors (such as poverty or a lack of parental implication), school factors (such as teaching professionals' lower expectations or a negative school climate) and factors related to the community (such as a lack of community support for school, the high level of criminality etc). Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew (2007)

show that the school dropout rate correlates with disengagement from school, grade retention, poor academic performance, poor school attendance and high levels of poverty. The the school dropout rate

Poor school attendance is considered a first alarm signal announcing failure, school dropout and delinquent activity (Huizinga, Loeber, Thornberry & Cothern, 2000). The lack of involvement in school activities represents a risk factor for the consumption of substances, delinquency, school dropout or teenage pregnancy (Blum, Beuhring & Rinehart, 2000).

This research draws attention to the appearance of some unrealistic expectations that may cast a shadow on the students whose parents have left abroad. So, teachers start with lower expectations towards the students affected by migration. In default of any studies that might clearly show the manner in which parents' migration determines the decrease of students' school performance we may not know how big the influence of such negative expectations is. What is certain is that research all over the world recognize the existence of a connection between teaching professionals' expectations and students' grades. That is why negative expectations, compassion and excessive centering on the problems generated by parents' leaving may act to the detriment of those children. Future research must go deeper into the mechanisms of action when it comes to teaching professionals' expectations in natural designs, in the classroom.

### *Conclusions*

Migration is a phenomenon with multiple repercussions at a social and familial level. The most affected category is the children left behind. They suffer losses at several levels and often neglect school (Luca & Gulei, 2006). In Romania, the phenomenon has a high frequency and the consequences of parents' migration are intensely debated by the mass-media and public opinion. It is not surprising that teachers have gathered a negative image about the students whose parents are working abroad. As results from this research, the students whose parents have temporarily emigrated are seen as less capable of performance and more inclined towards deviance and dropping out of school.

However, this research proposes teachers to assess some hypothetical students and does not measure their expectations towards real students from their classrooms. In the future, the investigational approach must focus exactly on these real students and establish the effect that negative expectations have on the students' concrete performances.

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