

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON THE EDUCATIONAL MARKETING ENVIRONMENT IN RURAL ROMANIA DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC 19

M.C. Grigoriu, C. Țurcanu

Transilvania University of Braşov (ROMANIA)

Abstract

During the period marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, the educational marketing environment in the Romanian countryside has undergone a process of reconfiguration on all components of the marketing environment. In order to capture the implications of this reconfiguration process, an ethnographic research was conducted in 6 rural localities in Romania. The aim of this research was to analyse the components of the external marketing environment: the demographic, economic, social-cultural, natural, technological and political-legal environment, as the assessment of external influences on the organisation of the education system is considered an important step in the process of strategic planning or strategic educational marketing. The results of the study show that the external marketing environment cannot be controlled by the schools in the territory. The macro-environment factors are not subject to the influence of population groups, power structures or the businesses located in the territory. In order to have a competitive school, it is necessary that it is always linked to the environment, the educational market and the beneficiaries. Strategic development implies a continuous and systematic flow of information regarding the school's internal and external environment, a dynamic relationship with the outside world.

Keywords: External educational marketing environment, Covid-19 pandemic, ethnographic research, rural education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Educational organisations operate in a specific climate, influenced by many internal and external forces [1] specific to the marketing environment. In order for organisations to face possible market threats and capitalise on opportunities, it is necessary for them to analyse their marketing environment, [2] ensuring an optimal relationship with the organisation [3].

Over time, the rural environment has been subject to a permanent process of reconfiguration that has led to fundamental changes in both the economic and social component and demographic coordinates, and to widening gaps between various communities. The current Romanian rural environment "presents a heterogeneous framework, given by divergent characteristics and perspectives" [4].

The operationalisation of marketing at the level of educational institutions must be closely linked to the principal factors that influence the marketing climate and the process of positioning in the development of specific educational services [5]. Educational organisations work in an environment of increasing uncertainty, the macro forces moving in an increasingly fast, more complex and risky way [6]. The evolution of technology, [7] the instability of change ([8], [9]) and the complexity of the environment generate increased competitiveness among educational institutions and are associated with the uncertainty of the determining factors [10]. Explicit analysis of the environment in which the organization operates is an important step in the process of strategic planning or strategic marketing [11]. The macro-environment consists of six components: the demographic, the economic, the social-cultural, the natural, the technological and the political-legal environment ([12], [13]). Resources such as the geometry of the place and the power, the socio-economic and cultural interactions, and the financial resources strongly influence the educational aspirations of rural students and the trajectory of rural youth towards secondary and higher education [14]. Providing high-quality school education in rural schools is an essential part of the socio-economic national infrastructure [15].

The Covid-19 pandemic and the measures imposed as a result have caused substantial disruption to educational activities [16] for all those involved in the process. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the level of access to technology increased, the gap between different social groups, access to various services such as education, became more difficult for some communities such as the rural and the Roma communities [17]. The same condition of rurality changes in different environments and

therefore political-geographical considerations are insufficient to understand the fundamental aspects of rural culture. Rurality calls for contextualised investigations that allow us to break out of the traditional (rural-urban) dichotomy and understand the nuances that emerge in the field of education.

2 METHODOLOGY

In order to capture the implications of the of the Covid-19 pandemic in process of reconfiguration of the educational marketing environment in rural areas, ethnographic research was conducted in 7 rural localities in Romania (Voila, Viștișoara, Dridif, Voivodeni, Cincșor, Lisa, Sâmbăta de Jos). The researchers spent 56 days in the communities under research, carrying out working visits to schools, interacting with local people in various contexts, observing their behaviour, concerns, educational habits, visiting the homes of community members, measuring the distances children have to travel to school, getting to know both children and their parents closely, talking to local government representatives who are also responsible for social welfare issues, managers of educational institutions, teachers and other professionals working with rural pupils. All the components of the external marketing environment were analysed: the demographic, economic, social-cultural, natural, technological and political-legal environment, as this analysis is considered an important step in the process of strategic planning or strategic educational marketing.

Investigating the organisational environment, forecasting and identifying opportunities is a part of the process of analysis and strategic planning in education that can allow to achieve the organisational objectives in an efficient way and, if necessary, to make the desired improvements to the impact of the analysed factors. This process includes both the assessment of external influences on the organization of the Romanian rural education system, together with the assessment of internal resources and their use, as determinants that could affect the quality of educational services offered in rural areas.

In this ethnographic research, observation and interview were used simultaneously as the main techniques to obtain the necessary information, given the dynamics of the study. This method allowed us to obtain valuable information about the studied group through experience and direct exploration. Ethical principles were respected in the data collection process and no information about intimate aspects of personal and family life and confidentiality were requested, and participants' personal data were not exposed.

Data were collected through observation sheets and the use of specific equipment, which formed the basis of a detailed research report. The results of the research were correlated with the results and conclusions of other studies.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

During the period marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, the educational marketing environment in the Romanian countryside has undergone a process of reconfiguration on all components of the marketing environment.

The educational system in rural areas is primarily influenced by the demographic environment. The decrease in the number of students, a consequence of the falling birth rate [18] and the phenomenon of migration to urban areas [19] or to other European countries, which in some regions has led to the depopulation of entire rural areas, leaving behind mainly socially disadvantaged families is currently the main challenge when it comes to the demographic environment of the Romanian rural areas. This phenomenon is reflected in the depopulation of rural schools and their institutional isolation, with their reduced attractiveness for both pupils and teachers and, consequently, their lack of funding.

The natural environment, through problems generated by the abundance or scarcity of natural resources and the way they are managed, environmental pollution, energy costs, influences education in rural areas. However, at the same time, educational programmes carried out in the natural environment have a significant influence on students' attitudes, knowledge and environmental behaviour [20] and increase their awareness of environmentally responsible behaviour. This conclusion was reached as a result of the results obtained in the schools participating in the research following specific activities to raise awareness of the role and importance of the environment, such as activities carried out with students in nature, activities to observe the natural environment and clean up rubbish, waste sorting, projects made from recyclable materials, observation and care of animals.

The social environment is one of the most important predictors of students' educational outcomes consequently affecting their educational pathways, associated with other life achievements that affect

an individual's long-term well-being [21]. The low levels of education in rural areas lead to serious socio-economic and cultural implications [22]. Children's desire to pursue an educational path as long as possible may be reduced by the impact of the social environment. From interactions with local people, it was found that in shaping children's attitudes towards school and learning, the lack of family support plays a key role. The fact that many children come from disorganised families, with parents living abroad, and are left in the care of grandparents or relatives, or have had their education interrupted for long periods of time, means that the rural areas studied have a high rate of school drop-out and, by extension, illiteracy. It is therefore necessary to ensure access to quality education in these areas, as other research has concluded [23].

It has also been found that parents' level of education and social class have a major influence on children's school success. The higher a child's parents' level of education, the more likely they are to become more qualified. For children from non-educated families, it is hard to reach a performance level similar to that of children from higher educated families, even if these children have a comparable level of ability, which is confirmed by similar research [24]. Thus, for the majority of disadvantaged children in the rural areas analysed there is no prospect of enrolment in higher education.

The economic development environment of the area in which educational institutions are located influences the education system through purchasing power, income, the structure of consumer spending, the standard of living of families, savings and debts of the population. The incomes of a significant number of families in the rural localities surveyed are low, coming from subsistence farms, known for the extremely low value of the production obtained [25], which also affects the investment made in children's education. It was also found that the underfunding of the education system in rural Romania leads to low teacher motivation and poor equipment, with negative implications for the quality of educational services in these areas. On the other hand, the economic environment in rural areas is also influenced by the educational structures in the area and there is a direct correlation between rural education and rural community development, which confirms the results obtained in other research [26]. For example, the lack of pre-school education facilities or poor educational conditions leads the inhabitants of these areas to move to more favorable conditions [27], the departure of the young, active population impoverishing the region even more.

Core cultural values exert considerable impact on the education system in rural areas. The Romanian education system, harmonised with the trends of European cultural values, emphasises the accumulation of knowledge, placing the acquisition of practical and analytical skills on a secondary level. Socio-cultural factors, residential segregation and institutional factors can lead to the emergence of socio-economic segregation among schools [28], which also confirms the results obtained in this research.

The research findings showed that in the case of schools in rural areas analyzed, parents with a higher social status, for social reasons, try to distance themselves from local socio-economic groups, which they consider risky, making them give up existing public schools in the locality where they reside, and target schools in the urban vicinity, even if this option involves traveling significant distances and involves additional efforts of time and adjacent expenses. Thus, education decisions are influenced by socio-cultural segregation.

In addition to the above-mentioned aspects, there are also cultural elements of some Roma communities, communities which face exclusion and discrimination within the educational systems. The way in which the family relates to education and to the institutional context in which the schooling process takes place, also makes a significant contribution to the persistence of inequalities in educational opportunities for children from socio-economically disadvantaged families. Along with other children belonging to vulnerable groups, Roma children, especially girls, still have a poor educational status and high early school leaving rates, confirming the results obtained in other research ([29], [30], [31], [32]). The role of education in changing these behaviours is crucial, with the results of several studies showing the correlation between children's and parents' decisions [33].

At the same time, the problems of segregation in education need attention in the psycho-social context in which disadvantaged children learn [17], as they are marginalized. Related to this, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have halted the timid steps made by humanity to improve the socio-economic situation of Roma populations, and ethnic prejudice and hatred seem to be even stronger.

As other research points out [34] education can often be another site of inequality, an inhibitor rather than a facilitator of opportunities and outcomes.

Education systems are one of the most debated topics for policy intervention. The influence of the political environment on the rural education system is particularly felt through the allocation of budgetary resources and decisions related to periodic organisational changes. There are experts who argue that

in a developing economy, a benevolent government, not suffering from political blindness, would intuitively devote the majority of investments to schools [35]. This decision is essential and a significant contribution to the return on investment in education and economic growth. Education policy is one of the most contested, bringing together many stakeholders, interests and ideologies, with implications from local to global levels [36]. Especially for developing countries education policy is placed among the most important social policies [37] with the potential to reduce existing inequalities [38]. In terms of education policy, at the regional level, research results reveal a market-oriented approach that highlights the trend away from a constraint-oriented policy towards an opportunity-expanding approach, an orientation also highlighted by other researchers [39].

The research findings are in line with other research that emphasises the importance of establishing national strategic frameworks for education in order to align with European norms [40] and international educational development strategies [41], current trends converging towards legislative changes that involve the adoption of social inclusion principles as key policy commitments [42].

Since the Treaty on European Union, the main directions that education should develop in the near future have been highlighted, such as: developing the European dimension in education, promoting cooperation between educational institutions, transferring best practices regarding similar situations faced by Member States in education, thus encouraging educational development [43].

Trends in technology are increasingly influencing the rural education system through access to new technologies that facilitate the teaching process. The integration of instructional technology into the teaching system has the power to lead to modern education in even the most resource-deprived regions. However, technology is not uniformly accessible in all schools, with similar results found in other research [44]. Differences in access and connectivity between urban and rural areas amplify disparities. Teachers who were interacted with, during the research report that their access to technology for educational instruction continues to be limited. This is similarly reflected in other studies [45]. Budgetary constraints have not allowed many schools in Romania to be equipped with technology. Optimising learning and learning environments [46] through digital technology facilities [47], would bring opportunities that are hard to reach to rural areas closer.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Research has revealed that there are differences between rural communities, which are influenced differently by the educational marketing environment and, as other studies have shown, by national education policies [48]. Schools and teachers are under the influence of the vibration of rural places [49].

Research results reveal that rural students have relatively lower socio-economic status, lower family incomes and higher poverty rates than urban students. Parental education levels show that rural parents have relatively lower levels of education than parents of urban children. These indicators reveal a disadvantaged rural environment in economic terms, but also in terms of family cultural capital with a strong influence on the educational path of pupils.

The socio-economic development conditions of rural communities such as: poorly developed infrastructure; the relatively long distance between children's homes and schools (problematic given the amalgamation of many small rural schools); poor school infrastructure and material facilities; the relatively low interest of qualified teachers to commute and teach in more remote rural areas are often factors that limit participation in education.

Although the external marketing environment cannot be controlled by local schools, analysing and explaining rural-urban differences in expectations about children's educational pathways is essential for the sustainability and development of rural communities.

The desire for equity in education in the early part of the 20th century led to a rural school that was close to the urban school in terms of size and curriculum, but, due to globalisation's immediate impact on educational requirements, is not adapted to the new conditions and needs [50].

The concept of rurality in education and rural education policy has visible effects on perceptions and behaviour in local communities regarding schools and educational experience [51]. The idea of centralization of the education system has greatly affected rural schools [14] which require a decentralized approach to curriculum and school management. School network planning is of critical significance for small rural schools [52].

The results acquired in this research correlate with the views of several specialists according to which not the state but the municipal authorities should be primarily responsible for the operation of rural schools [53]. This should be primarily aimed to create a proper learning environment for pupils [54]. In this regard, a dynamic relationship with the external marketing environment ensures a continuous and systematic flow of information that enables a strategic development of rural schools.

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