

School canteens and the reduction of school dropout in Romania at the end of the 19th century

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Abstract-The modernization of education in Romania was provided for in the Public Instruction Law of 1864, as well as in other laws that complemented it. Starting in 1864, elementary education in Romania became free and compulsory to increase the literacy rate among the population.

However, it was found that the population was refractory to education, and material and human difficulties prevented the materialization of the two aforementioned principles. As such, it is not surprising that many school-age children did not attend classes at all, or if they did, they attended them occasionally. It is also not surprising that the dropout rate was high, especially in the first two years of study.

Therefore, measures have been experimented with to reduce school dropout and improve children's enrollment and attendance at school.

Among these was the establishment in the last decade of the 19th century of school canteens. These allowed students to have lunch at school, without having to return home for this purpose. The article analyzes the context, necessity, and organization of school canteens. At the same time, the problems that arose in the functioning of the canteens and the extent to which they achieved their objective will be highlighted.

School canteens were a suitable measure, even if they did not produce the expected results. The necessity and opportunity of the measure remained, as confirmed by the introduction in 2002 of the corn and milk program for primary and secondary school students.

Keywords: School Canteens, Primary Or Elementary Education, Romania, School Dropout, Absenteeism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Through the Public Instruction Law of 1864, Romanian education was reorganized based on modern principles such as ensuring access to education regardless of gender or social origin, free and compulsory primary education, and the division of school responsibilities between the Ministry of Religions and Public Instruction and local authorities. The main objectives of the law were to form literate citizens, aware of their rights and obligations, economically independent, able to inform themselves, and make decisions on their own.

Primary education enjoyed special attention, compared to secondary and university education, not because it was the most complex in terms of the information transmitted to students, but because it addressed the largest

number of inhabitants. Being the only compulsory one, all children between the ages of 8-12 were expected to attend the classes and learn to read, write, and do simple calculations. However, problems emerged from the first year of the law's implementation. These problems resulted from the fact that there were not enough school buildings and teachers, the population, especially in rural communes, did not view education as a necessity, school facilities were insufficient, etc.

As such, solutions were found to change this situation, including: modifying the school calendar so that children in rural communes could help their parents with household chores and agricultural work; introducing manual labor hours and equipping schools with land for experimenting with different crops; providing scholarships and aid in clothes and textbooks for poor students; increasing the number of schools and improving school buildings and facilities; diversifying teaching methods; organizing campaigns to make the population more responsible concerning education.

At the end of the 19th century, a new solution was experimented with, namely the establishment of school canteens, which we will discuss in this material.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In our investigation, we applied qualitative and quantitative research principles.

Qualitative research collects and analyzes data from various sources to create a comprehensive picture of the subject under study.

More specifically, the analysis of school canteens opened in Romania at the end of the 19th century was based on information gathered from the archive of the Ministry of Religious Affair and Public Instruction, from the press of the time (for example, *General Journal of Education*, *Union of Romanian Women*), as well as from the reports of doctors and school inspectors. The regulations regarding school canteens were not omitted either. In addition, we found it interesting to consult the opinions of the time regarding the necessity of school canteens, issued by feminists, politicians, and hygienists.

For the quantitative analysis, statistical data were also taken into account, which allowed us to see the evolution of school canteens.

We particularly used the following research methods:

- **Contextualizing the subject.** In this sense, we presented the general situation of Romanian education, with an emphasis on elementary education. As such, the problems that primary education has faced, as well as the methods that have been introduced over time, were briefly presented.
- **Content analysis** involved systematically coding and categorizing the content of the official documents and statistical data to identify the evolution of school canteens and the effectiveness of this measure.
- **Close reading and textual analysis** involved a detailed and careful analysis of the information regarding the school canteens.
- **Comparative analysis** of the information allowed us to reconstruct the evolution of the school canteens.
- **Triangulation**, which involves confirming findings through different sources or methods, ensured that interpretations were well-founded and not solely reliant on a single source.

Research question 1: Was it necessary to establish school canteens?

Hypothesis 1: It was certainly a method that, along with other solutions tried in the second half of the 19th century, aimed to improve student attendance and stimulate children's enrollment in school.

Research question 2: Were there sufficient material and human resources for school canteens to achieve their objective?

Hypothesis 2: In the 19th century, Romania went through a massive modernization process that led to the transformation of all areas of interest and involved significant investments. As such, none of the areas,

including education, had sufficient resources, which caused school canteens to produce results below those expected. In this context, we note the help that the state received from the private sector (represented by individuals, private schools, and associations) in opening school canteens.

III. RESULTS

School canteens have joined the measures that have been adopted to improve the attendance of primary school students. The importance of school canteens resulted from the need to reduce the school dropout rate and change residents' perceptions of education. Although it is impossible to calculate in percentages the contribution of canteens to achieving the two objectives, given the simultaneous application of several solutions for this purpose, it is certain that they have boosted children's enrollment in school and increased their access to education.

IV. DISCUSSION

The first canteens appeared in December 1898 in Bucharest on the initiative of Spiru Haret, Minister of Religious Affairs and Public Instruction at the time.

School canteens, although they figure among the achievements of Spiru Haret's ministry, were not an innovation of the end of the century; various authors mention them several centuries earlier.

For example, Johannes Sommerus in his work *Vita Iacobi Despotae Moldavorum reguli*, published in 1587, showed that in the school that operated in Cotnari and that had been founded by Despot Vodă, the Moldavian children received food; also, Vasile Alexandrescu Urechia (in his work entitled *History of schools between 1800-1864*) or Nicolae Iorga (in *History of Romanian literature in the 18th century*) mention that in 1736, in the Greek and Slavonic schools in Iassy, the students were fed, although the respective schools did not function as boarding schools. Another example dates back to 1747 when the ruler Grigore Ghica III asked the metropolitan to feed the poor students in Iassy.

In Wallachia, canteens are attested since 1767, when the ruler Alexandru Ghica ordered the abbots to provide meals for the children enrolled in the school opened at the monastery of St. Sava, while, in 1815, the ruler Ioan Caragea asked the great monasteries in Bucharest to feed 3-4 students each [1].

The examples mentioned illustrate that over time, aid was provided to students in difficulty, but what makes the difference is that such aid was isolated, while at the end of the 19th century, the provision of food aid became a national program.

Before referring to the actual organization of the canteens, we considered it necessary to present some of the views formulated at the time regarding the need for their establishment.

As previously mentioned, hygienists spoke out, among them Iacob Felix, who stood out, who considered that: "Hungry children do not learn well, poorly nourished brains cannot work normally, and the schoolchild who works with his body or head without being adequately nourished, lags in physical development and becomes incapable of performing the same intellectual or physical work and with the same agility and strength as well-nourished children" [2, p. 16]. Another point of view belongs to Eleonora Stratilescu, a leader of the feminist movement in Romania, who stated that: "We are a hungry people, there is no doubt about it, and hence all the lack of energy, all the apathy, which everyone complains about and whose cause no one seeks to eradicate. And so our race withers, and so the nation perishes" [3, p. 41].

It could be understood that only the health of the students attracted attention, but it would be wrong to believe that. Equally, by improving the nutrition of the students, the aim was to improve school performance and reduce absenteeism and school dropout.

In connection with this, we would like to point out that the highest dropout rate was recorded during the first year of study, so that in the second grade the number of students was halved. The closer we get to the end of the primary cycle, the smaller the number of students, so that between 6-15% of children still reach the last

year of elementary school throughout the second half of the 19th century [4]. These percentages refer to cities, because in rural communes the school dropout rate is higher.

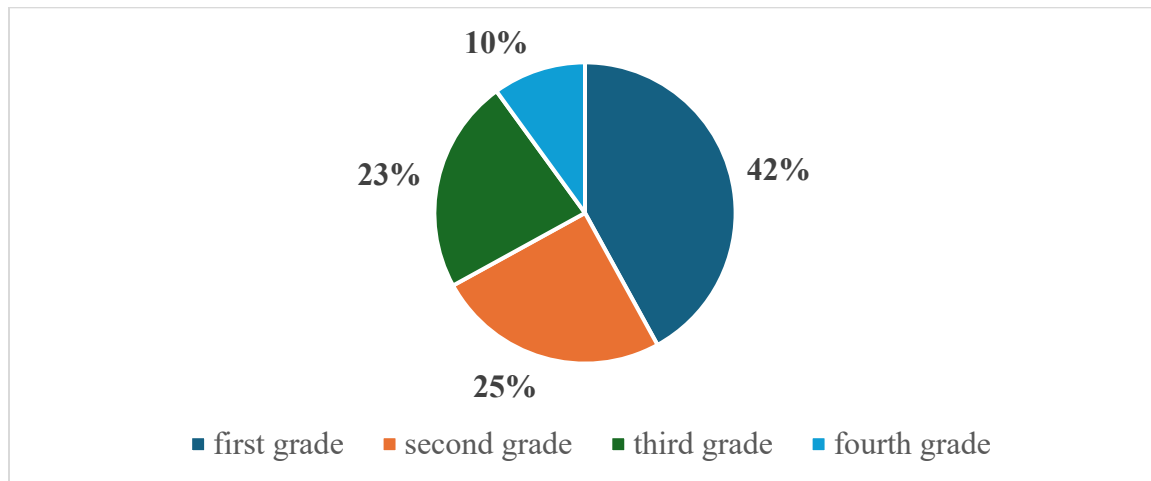


Fig. 1. Distribution of students by year of study. Average percentage values calculated in cities in the second half of the 19th century

Regarding attendance throughout the year, there is better attendance at the beginning of the school year and a decrease in the number of students with the decrease in temperatures and the worsening of the road conditions. Another cause of school absenteeism was the involvement of students in household chores, to which, in rural communes, agricultural work was added. We also note that the level of attendance is lower for students in the first two years of study, while students in the third and fourth grades were more interested in education and completing the elementary cycle.

Although there is little information that would allow us to reconstruct the situation of course attendance throughout an entire school year at a school, we illustrate with a school in Bucharest from 1874-1875.

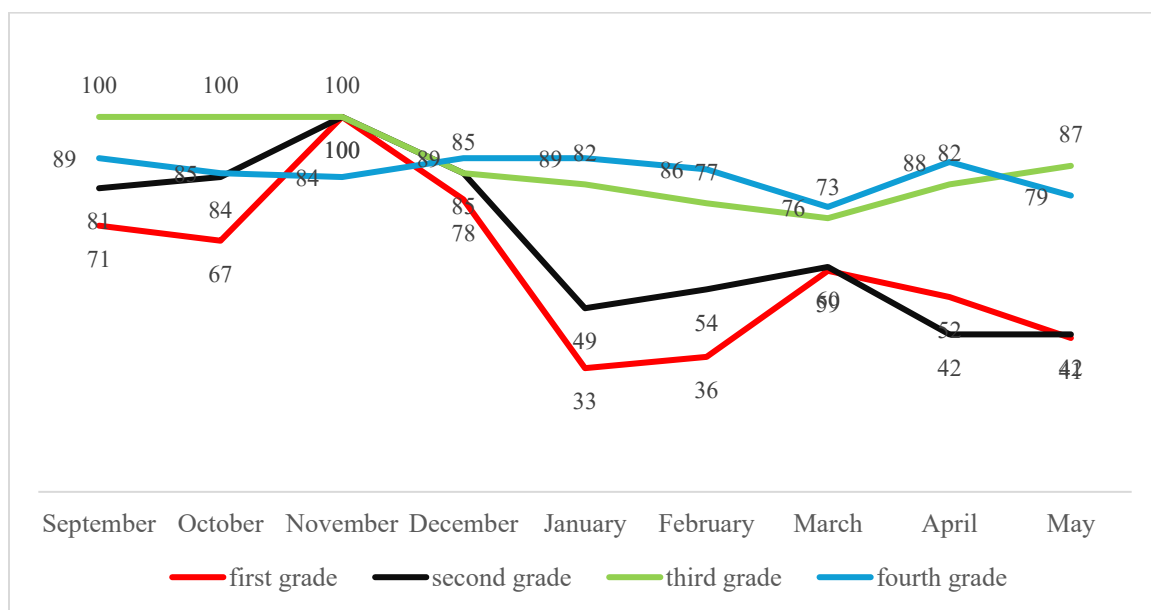


Fig. 2. Student attendance throughout a school year by grade. Percentage situation.

What can be observed is a more constant frequency of students in the third and fourth grades. We considered the previous graphs necessary to demonstrate the need for measures to improve course attendance and combat school dropout.

Returning to school canteens, we specify that they were under the control of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Instruction, but also under the patronage of Prince Ferdinand and an institution called the House of School Canteens. This institution was founded by the "Society of Teachers" [5].

The first canteens were to be established in elementary schools located in rural communes or on the outskirts of cities.

In this regard, the *Regulation for the operation of school canteens* was approved, from which we recall some provisions, namely: their financing by local and central authorities, without excluding private contributions; effective control over the canteens was exercised by the canteen committees that existed in each commune. The canteen committees were made up of 6 people each (a school inspector, a cashier, and a secretary, plus three members elected from among teachers, priests, and philanthropists) [6]. Regarding the donations made to ensure the success of school canteens, we recall that King Carol I himself, cataloging them as "a work of social utility and national education" ([7], p. 525), mentioned in his 1899 will the amount of 300,000 lei for them.

The period in which the canteens were open did not coincide with the duration of the school year. Therefore, students could receive lunch from autumn to spring, so that with the arrival of summer, they would close. The operating schedule was therefore conditioned by the temperature outside, knowing that high temperatures favored food spoilage and the appearance of food poisoning, which they tried to avoid.

The lunch provided by school canteens consisted of a quarter of a loaf of bread and a side dish, for which students paid different prices depending on their parents' economic situation, with the poor also having the opportunity to receive free food.

The first canteens appeared in the schools for boys in Bucharest. At first, there were 4 canteens that began their activity in January 1899, and within a year, their number reached 10 [8].

Considered by Spiru Haret as the "largest charitable institution" [9] he had worked for, the school canteens offered 3,600 free meals and 47,400 paid meals in Bucharest alone in 1901-1902. In Bucharest, 2,900 students benefited from these meals. At the same time, in the rest of the country, 8,475 children were fed in school canteens in 1901-1902. Progress in opening school canteens was made not only in Bucharest, but also in the country. Thus, in 1900, 50 school canteens were opened in the country, while in 1903 the number of school canteens increased to 241[10].

Ideally, canteens should have operated in spaces that would only serve lunch and be equipped with special furniture. According to the regulations, canteens had to be provided with not only dining rooms, but also a room for preparing food and another for storing ingredients. In reality, due to the lack of space in school buildings, but also because the money needed to buy appropriate furniture was not found, most children had lunch in the classrooms, at the desks where they studied. As such, it is not surprising that in 1900, only 20 of the 50 canteens in Romania served hot food, with the remaining 30 not having a room for preparing food.

As expected, there were also problems in the functioning of school canteens. We recall them, although they were rather isolated or accidental cases. These problems included: serving food of questionable quality; serving smaller portions than those established; appropriating by the staff responsible for the functioning of the canteens a part of the food that was supposed to reach the students. These cases did not go unpunished, with the perpetrators being fined or dismissed.

Despite the irregularities found, the opening of school canteens was a success in the modern era, demonstrating the authorities' concern for children and for improving their schooling.

V. CONCLUSION

The opening of school canteens was among the measures that were supposed to respond to several problems. As such, school canteens were expected to contribute to improving student attendance and, at the same time, the percentage of primary school graduates.

In other words, the possibility of receiving lunch at school at a reasonable price or even free of charge (in the case of children from families lacking economic means) should represent an additional reason for students to feel motivated to attend classes.

In other words, school canteens reduced school dropout rates. At the same time, they improved children's academic performance, given that at the time, the impact of food on intellectual effort was recognized.

Although they could not be organized in such a way as to comply with all the conditions set out in the *Regulation for the operation of school canteens*, the canteens produced positive effects and demonstrated a concern to improve the lives of children. This concern refers to another mission of the canteens, namely that of contributing to improving the health of children, as they were a segment of the population prone to illness and among whom the death rate was high. In addition, it was known that the very vitality of future adults depended on the health of children.

The motivation for opening canteens has remained the same over time, as demonstrated by the reintroduction, starting in 2002, of a national program that offers students a snack consisting of milk or an apple and a croissant or biscuits.

The basic idea has remained, although it has been implemented differently today, so that instead of lunch, children receive a snack. However, the opportunity of the program has been confirmed by its expansion from elementary school students (as it was in the modern era) to children in kindergartens, primary schools, and gymnasiums (as it is today).

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