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A Chance for Roma Children: „Children of Promise” Foundation

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyse by emphasizing the virtues of the appreciative methods, how certain behavioural models, routines and positive practices regarding child protection are structured. After 1990, Romania adopted the idea of intervention in order to optimize the social life of disadvantaged social categories, by promoting solidarity and cooperation in what regards civil society. Thus, various social foundations and NGOs supported by non-governmental organizations in Europe and the U.S. were set. One of these newly established institutions is the “Children of Promise” Foundation, whose main activity is to support Roma children in order to integrate them in schools, to avoid dropout and to integrate them in social and professional life. We used the appreciative inquiry research method that involves institution building on the positive aspects of the organization, taking into consideration the specificity of NGOs and the Christian dimension of the organization. The results indicate a strong correlation between the culture of the organization and the achievement of its objectives, in this case between the values promoted by the organization (tolerance, empathy, trust, motivation) and the chances of social integration of Roma children.

Keywords: institution; appreciative inquiry; socialization of Roma children; “Children of Promise” Foundation.

Introduction

The economic and social development of the united Europe, generated by the opening towards East and especially by the freedom of movement, made the problems facing the Roma ethnic groups more visible, which stimulated the

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research regarding this disadvantaged social category. Most studies have focused on the diagnosis of the realities faced by Roma, aiming to approach the thorny issue of this ethnicity, its integration into wider communities, in order to identify the main causes, conditionality, interdependences that can explain and base social policies supporting Roma: Ringold, Orenstein, Wilkens (2005); European Commission (2004); Open Society Institute (2006); Ivanov (2006); Barany, Z. (2002); O'Higgins, Ivanov (2006); Grover, Yanakieva, (2009); Surdu (2003); Heckman (2006) etc.

Following the paradigm of social constructionism and using the appreciative inquiry method, our study changes this perspective, starting from the positive characteristics of Roma and organizations that were involved in their problems, in order to build strategies and policies to improve their situation.

The motivation for choosing this theme for our study emerges from the results of various researches conducted in Romania after 1990, as well as from census data showing that the Roma ethnic group has grown both in number and as a share of total population. At the 2011 census, the Roma represented 3.2% of the Romanian population, compared to 2.5% in 2002 which places them second after the Hungarian population (6.5%) (INS, 2013:9).

Research has confirmed that the most serious problem facing Roma children is the risk of living in poverty (Stănculescu, Berevoiescu, ed., 2004), reflected in large families facing precarious living conditions (Zamfir & Preda, 2002; Ro-moșan, 2012), employment difficulties (Fleck & Rughiniș, 2008; Oșvat & Marc, 2013), high infractionality (Miheș, 2013). In most studies, education is identified as the strongest risk factor of poverty both at the individual and household or community level. At the same time, remains a vicious circle “poverty proves to be not only a product of a lack of education but, in turn, a factor for perpetuating and amplifying it” (Zamfir & Zamfir, 1993: 92-98; Georgevici, 2013: 275-279, Popp, 2013:467-478.). Research revealed also the *causes of the low educational level of Roma*, including: *Roma do not value education as a life strategy to ensure success* (Surdu, in Zamfir, Preda, ed., 2002: 111); *an increased dropout* along the educational route; *an accentuated process of impoverishment* of the Roma population in the context of a generalized decline of living standards for the entire population accompanied by the lack of employment opportunities; *low level of education of the Roma families*; surveys capture a process of *social polarization*, also within Roma population, along with a *massive impoverishment of Roma* within other ethnic communities and the formation of a Roma elite which, through individual strategies, was able to occupy successful positions in society; the underfunded, *inconsistent and insufficiently stimulating school policies* failed to achieve the expected objectives. Reported to the *role of traditional Roma culture and of education*, research has shown that “on medium and long term, the school is the only factor that gives Roma, in the current conditions, effective opportunities for personal success: tradition supported by cultural prejudices is just a facilitator of

the negative effect of the current school situation” (Zamfir, 2012: 96). The presented data are sufficient premises to base the actions undertaken by “Children of Promise” Foundation in Oradea in order to encourage children from Roma families to engage in durable educational actions, offering them educational opportunities similar to those of other children.

Institutional development, constructionism, appreciative inquiry

Analysing the characteristics of postmodern society, most analysts indicate that transformations generated by “the new wave” in technology, profoundly affect social order, having repercussions on all spheres of human life, causing “large gaps” within value systems, in the type of interpersonal relationships, pushing the individualism to its extreme limits. Fukuyama considers that the restoration of the severely affected order will be possible, for example, just by reactivating informal structures, ways of cooperation within community groups established on moral norms based on trust and solidarity. One of the practical ways of restoring social order is by organizing civil society in various structures of NGOs, which have proliferated in the last decade in the U.S., but also in European countries (Fukuyama, 2002:15-20). Before 1990, Romania has not established the practice of non-governmental organizations, at least in what regards the mentioned idea. However, after 1990, under the influence of models and direct support of such institutions from abroad, various NGOs or foundations that were predominant in social activities, have appeared in our social space. Gradually, by repetition, behavioral patterns, rules and specific practices were fixed, tending to become new institutions following the definitions of these structures, formulated both by classical sociologists and neo-institutionalists.

Broadly speaking, the institution aims at a system of rules governing a social area - family, kinship system, political leadership system etc. It is a system of behaviors that are based on formal and informal norms and behaviors which, over time, through repetition have standardized becoming *routines, habits, behavioral patterns*. In general, in shaping institutions and society, specialized literature gives an important role to *symbolic systems* - “systems of beliefs and collective representations”, along with commonly accepted cognitive frameworks that, if not explicitly religious, still have a moral or spiritual character (Durkheim, 1995). According to Talcott Parsons’s conception, the success of an action largely depends on the manner in which the actors involved in an ongoing relationship, conduct their activities following a *common set of normative standards and models of value*. “When a normative system is internalized, states the sociologist, the submission to it is becoming a trend-obligation within the actors’s personality structure itself.” (Parsons, 1951: 37)

The neoinstitutional theory argues that institutions are based on three pillars, namely the *regulatory systems, legal systems and cultural-cognitive systems* (Scott, 2004:72-94), each of these components being identified by one of the institutions' theorists. According to Selznick, an institution is an organization that has developed from being an instrument to a significant community and Grieg states that "an institution is a system of rules, beliefs, norms and organizations that together generate regularity within social behavior" (cited in Morgan *et al.* 2001: 26).

Based on the theoretical data, we consider the development process of NGOs in post-communist Romania, as a process of institutionalizing a new area of activity, and through the analysis of the "Children of Promise" Foundation, we intend to decipher at least one part of the configuration mechanisms of specific "routines, motivations and behavioral structures". Based on social constructionism principles, appreciative inquiry method proposes the development of an organization/community by identifying and amplifying its positive elements (Cooperrider & Strivatsva 1987, Cojocaru, 2005). The method has been used in different areas such as management of quality (Cuyvers, 2010), the adaptability of organizations and communities (IT company, small scale local community, secondary school, medical-social centre for the elderly) to present and future challenges (Lustig & Ringland, 2010; More, 2011; Hirunwat, 2011), the development of organizational culture (Andrus, 2010) etc. In what regards social assistance, this method has proven its virtues compared to traditional methods which were focusing on problems, shortcomings and overcoming them (Cojocaru, 2005). As an exclusively strength-based approach, appreciative inquiry is first and foremost an approach to inquiry and anticipatory learning. „By involving a broad spectrum of stakeholders and inviting them to inquire into the-best-of-what-is-and-can-be, appreciative inquiry enables organizational learning and spurs inventiveness throughout the system" (Ludema & Fry, 2008: 294).

The Socialization of Roma Children within „Children of Promise” Foundation

“Children of Promise” Foundation, established on 1 June 1998, is a Christian organization whose goal is to support the integration of particularly Roma deinstitutionalized children and youth from Oradea and surrounding areas. The foundation develops educational activities (access to IT, music lessons, learning support), artistic activities (painting) and fun activities (football, table tennis etc.). Recently, the foundation has assumed a social service outsourced by DGASCP Bihor, aiming at increasing its quality and intending to assume such other services in the future.

Methodology

Objectives and Hypothesis

In order to analyse the evolution of this organization, we applied the appreciative inquiry method aiming at highlighting the positive aspects that can help the organization to develop to its full potential. Research objectives aimed at: (1) Establishing the determinants of the organization's success; (2) Determination of an institutional building model in what regards the integration of Roma children at risk of social exclusion

Research hypothesis

1. The main factors that ensure the success of an organization involved in providing services for Roma children, are on one hand the potential of these children, and on the other hand, the organization, its values, organizational culture, the quality of staff and of the used methods.

2. Integration of Roma children depends, to a considerable extent, by the way in which this social issue is approached; an approach which is based on positive elements that can support a coherent intervention, has great chances of success.

Methods and techniques

To achieve these objectives we appealed to the virtues of interview based survey, applying the focus group technique. We conducted two focus groups where we have included both employees and volunteers (senior executives), managers and partners (conception staff). These focus groups were structured in order to go through the four stages of appreciative inquiry (*What is best? - discovery/assessment; What should be? - dream /vision; What could be? - design / construction; What must be done? – destiny / support*). Therefore, the interview guides included questions regarding: positive aspects / strengths of the organization compared to other religious or "secular" organizations; positive elements of the provided services; positive aspects / strengths of the used methods; vision regarding the development of the organization in the next 5 years; planning the development of the organization; expected results; sustainability. We chose focus group method because we considered that is able to produce the most relevant data in relation to the purpose of the proposed research: involves people who have similar characteristics, who are in a group interaction; the purpose of the focus group is to gather quality information as a result of a directed discussion; the focus group interview is a qualitative approach in what regards the accumulation of both inductive and realistic information (Krueger & Casey, 2005). The process of focus group interviews has respected methodological requirements: the development of a semi-structured interview guide; providing an appropriate structure

of the group; motivating the participation; creating suitable frameworks for an ideal conduct of the interviews; gaining the confidence regarding the moderator etc. Focus groups were planned and developed based on interrogative guides that lasted maximum 2 hours and contained an average of 10 items structured in introductory, transition and closing questions. We tracked the consistency of three meetings interrogative plans so that the obtained data can be qualitatively compared and aggregated.

We also used the *panel technique*, interviewing after six months the same participants, in order to identify changes within the way of working, the satisfaction degree and self-esteem of the staff and within organization's projects. The categories of participants in the focus groups were: (1) - A focus group was made up of *senior executives* within the foundation, consisting of five employees specialized in music, psychology, musical pedagogy, sociology and theology; (2) A focus group consisting of *management personnel*, respectively the two directors of the foundation and three members of the Board of Directors. Each of the focus groups was interviewed three times at an interval of about six months: September 2011, May 2012 and February 2013, the interview guide being linked each time to previous questions and discussions were channelled to express satisfaction in relation with scheduled activities. We also requested the participants to imagine metaphors that can best characterize the organization and to formulate future daring projects, starting from the achievements and positive elements identified by subjects in their work.

Results of the Appreciative Inquiry

Focus groups interviews were structured on four factors that, in our opinion, provide the success of the organization: development potential of children, the value of the organizational staff, organizational capital and teaching methods used in activities involving children. In the table below, the arguments by which focus groups participants support each of the four aspects are listed.

Within the focus groups emerged the idea that early intervention on Roma children is more effective if the organizational environment, in competition with the family, has a stronger impact on children still in development. Subjects' opinion is that best results are recorded when children are free of parents' influence (parents who are living abroad or imprisoned), avoiding in this way the negative influence of the unfavourable family environment and of primary 'habitus'. The artistic inclinations of Roma children (real ones or merely alleged by staff) represented another starting point for the educational intervention, being involved personnel trained in music and arts in order to organize activities that can help children to express their inner feelings and offer them attractive activities that can develop the childrens native potential.

Table 1. *Arguments invoked by subjects for the four factors that ensure the success of the organization*

No.crt.	Determinants of the success of the organization	Background elements
1.	Children's development potential	The early age of the children facilitate educational activities Children's artistic inclinations are a support for the educational intervention
2.	Value of the organizational staff	Professional training of the staff: social studies (psychology, sociology, social work), studies in art (music, plastic arts), theological studies Personal characteristics: empathy, openness, sensitivity Transversal skills: communication, teamwork Values derived from religious affiliation: tolerance, compassion, love, solidarity
3.	Social capital of the organization	Collaboration with organizations from abroad Professional formation abroad Relations with the religious neo-protestant community Sources of funding from abroad
4.	Teaching methods used in activities with children (ways of relating with children)	Artistic education in order to develop the child's ability to self-express The lack of constraint regarding participation in organized activities Educational contents aiming at preparation for life

Moreover, great importance was given to staff recruitment based on compatibility with specific activities in the organization: specialists in sociology, psychology, social work, art education, theology. Besides the professional training of the staff we can mention personal skills, characteristics and values some of them derived from the membership in the neo-protestant worship (assuming a social mission, empathy and concern for the oppressed ...). Very important is proving to be the capital accumulated over time and materialized in training opportunities for personnel abroad, in collaboration with similar organizations in the country and abroad, in relations with the religious community and in financial support from the partners and sponsors, organizations in and outside the country.

The way in which staff is relating with children is also an asset of the organization, being an alternative to formal education and referring mostly to pragmatic contents that aim at training children for life in a non-binding framework and using methods that can totally attract and involve children in activities. According to subjects, even if each factor contributes significantly to the goals of the organization, only their convergence ensures the consistency and success of the educational endeavour.

Table 2. The distribution of responses based on the four stages of appreciative inquiry

Stages of appreciative inquiry (the 4 D)	Responses <i>Focus groups</i> (September 2011)	Responses <i>Focus groups</i> (May 2012)	Responses <i>Focus groups</i> (January 2013)
<i>Organization strengths Appreciating (Discovery)</i>	FG1. - Early age of children - Professional training of the staff - Collaboration with organizations from abroad - Arts education aiming at developing the child's ability to self-express	FG1 - Children's artistic inclinations are a support for the educational intervention - Characteristics of the staff: empathy, openness, sensitivity, tolerance, trust	FG1 - Educational contents aiming at preparation for life - Motivation for work is predominantly intrinsic, belief in God and the value of work well done, dedicated to peers
	FG2. - The organization is involved in shaping the unpervert minds of children - Values derived from the religious beliefs of the organization members: love, solidarity - Professional training abroad	FG2 - Relations with the neo-protestant religious community - Sources of funding from abroad	fg2 - transversal skills: communication, teamwork - Lack of constraint regarding the participation in organized activities
<i>Development perspectives Envisioning Results (Dream)</i>	FG1 - increasing the number of beneficiaries	FG1 - increasing the efficiency of undertaken activities	FG1 - enhancing activities, promoting good practice - increasing the degree of children' socialization for a better socio-professional integration
	FG2 - developing the social capital of the organization	FG2 - activity diversification	FG2 - extending the activity area of the organization
<i>Implementation Solutions Co-constructing (Design)</i>	FG1 - access to interesting and enjoyable activities and materials	FG1 - personal development activities for children	FG1 - „adopting” every child within the foundation by the families from the evangelical community
	FG2 - relationships with local authorities in order to obtain the necessary space, adequate endowment and fund-raising	FG2 - taking the outsourced service by DGASPC Bihor	FG2 - taking some outsourced services by DGASPC Bihor from bordering counties

<i>Results Sustaining (Destiny)</i>	FG1 Constant participation in activities	FG1 - increasing children's level of education, reducing school dropout	FG1 - further study at higher levels, in vocational schools, colleges and even in higher education
	FG2 - an area not sufficiently large but endowed with necessary materials and equipment for a proper activity	FG2 - implementation of quality services for the new beneficiaries	FG2 - organizational development, improving the image of the company within society

Results

The analysis of responses according to the four levels of appreciative inquiry reveals various aspects specific to a vivid organization, which can be framed within the constructionist paradigm where the goals of the organization are constantly changing (“goal displacement”, Merton, 1957). The “Children of Promise” foundation is a social construct adaptable to the pressing needs of society, but faithful to its members’ beliefs and values, in search of new challenges that can meet both social needs and the potential of the organization.

“The visible hand” (Chandler, 1977) of the manager directs the organization towards noble goals and methods of maximizing the results. The responses registered for the management staff group (FG2) are relevant to the skills of conception, holistic view over the organization and its development potential. Manager's conviction regarding the chances of success of the educational approach is a support for the undertaken activities:

“I realized that behind the assisted individuals are people similar to me, and then, for me, they ... are like some blocks of marble, some not fully completed but splendid and others in an early stage but promising the same genial and absolute creation. More incipient they are, more my investment in them, money, time, affection ... has a much greater effect” (S.M., manager).

The orientation towards Roma children was explained through the organizational leader’s option (as community facilitator) for this target group, after a reflective personal experience of searching explanations for the behavior and marginal situation of certain categories of children, which he came in contact with, first as a religious journalist. Being involved in helping street children, deinstitutionalized youngsters, homeless individuals, single mothers, he soon concluded that most disadvantaged people whom he has been connected to are Roma people. Assuming the phenomenon and its resolution by eradicating the “roots”, the facilitator tried to directly know the social and cultural environment

in which Roma live and answer the question on the particularity of Roma culture compared to others. His conclusion can be summarized into two ideas: 1. Roma children are just as capable, talented and educable as all the other children; 2. what sets them apart is family environment and culture (way of being, acting, understanding and explaining social reality).

Aware of the “distance between Roma primary habitus and the official one, the idea of creating an favourable environment for educating Roma children, who despite is a group with high risk of social exclusion, are not yet marginalized” (M.S., manager).

Organization management staff values the human resources, but also manifests a high requirement in what regards recruitment process of the personnel that has to be not only well trained, but also compatible with the goals and values of the organization. It is aware, also of the strengths of the organization that bases its entire development. Managerial skills of the leading staff come out from the medium and long term strategies: perspectives, solutions and results. Thus, from developing the social capital of the organization by networking with local authorities and community in order to obtain the necessary area, its adequate endowment, fund-raising, to moving then to diversified activity by acquiring the outsourced service by DGASPC Bihor and increasing the quality of services in this area, the managerial team of the foundation “dreams” to expand the coverage of the organization in neighbouring counties in order to implement the good practices resulted from the experience.

The executive staff agrees with the manager in what regards the objectives of the organization and is open to changes. Meanwhile, members of the organization perform roles in accordance with their training and specialization, but convergent with the goals of the organization:

“My goal is to help children to express their feelings” (I.E, professor of music).

They address the issue of the organization in terms of concrete tasks that they are responsible of, detailing the general directions designed by the management:

“here we speak with them, make vocalizations, we laugh, we remember childhood and thus we can shape them as a plasticine, as a soft clay and they enter into the modelling process in a positive way ...” (A. D, piano teacher).

For them, the strengths of the organization are mainly seen in what regards beneficiaries, methods, content used and own abilities. Empathy is one of them:

“Small children are excited, but the big ones are ashamed that they are Gypsies, because they perhaps perceive that their group is socially stigmatized and marginalized” (piano teacher).

Although they know that the environment plays an essential role in the development of children’s personality, the realism and objectivity that conditions offered by the organization are perceived with, are beneficial for educating children who cannot be deceived by exaggerated standards, difficult to achieve in everyday life:

“Those who have entered into this type of community, do not stop, they come together, play together and here, I think they find the main meal of the day, the main entertainment of the day, here are all the cool things. You see, they can do sports, run on the jogging machine if they want, play tennis, play to the computers, network play, pool outside - small pool; the space designed for activities is quite small, and the activities are carried out under noise and stress. They need to learn that life does not always offers conditions and you have to handle even in harsh conditions” (I.M., sociologist)

In what regards organization’s development perspectives, solutions and results, the executive staff pleads for qualitative aspects: effectiveness, good practices, personal development, services’ sustainability, in other words, areas in which it is directly involved. Thus, a strong motivation for continuing the work represents its positive effects, materialized in an increased number of Roma children who have not dropped out of primary classes. The given example was that of children from Oșorhei community who were assisted by the foundation, being transported daily to school in Oradea and helped with their homework.

“Over 80% of Roma children in Oșorhei continued their education after their involvement in our activities, compared to about 30% - children who continued school before” (sociologist).

Other subjects mentioned that the environment that they created has been exploited by some children by further studies at superior levels, vocational schools, colleges and even in higher education:

“we have the satisfaction to find that some of those who attended our foundation are now in high school and even university students”.

Respondents see the complementarity of community action in relation to the activity undertaken by the foundation as a solution to strengthen the appropriate behavior and improve social and personal development of children:

“Every child will be entrusted to a Christian family in the community, that will take the child home every weekend, including him or her in family as a member, along with other children of the family and the child will be accompanied and watched cautiously during the week by the family members in which the child has the most confidence” (sociologist).

Discussions

In both focus groups, the responses recorded at intervals of approximately 6 months have evolved from relating to the initial state of fact, to medium and long term perspectives. Regarding the non-verbal and paraverbal language, emotions, attitudes, expressions of optimism, increased interest and even enthusiasm generated by the appreciative inquiry, were quite obvious. The interview guide stimulated them, especially in the second and third period, to imagine possibilities, solutions based on the organization's evoked potential and on results from the previous meeting. Thus, regarding the *strengths of the organization*, the operational staff (FG1) added to the initial responses (Early age of children, Training of personnel, Relations with organizations abroad, Arts education in order to develop the child's ability to self-express) elements that value and harmonise qualities of beneficiaries and staff, as well as elements of content and motivation. The management group (FG2) initially values the organization as a whole and then adds to elements of networking and funding, and finally dwells on the positive elements of the organization.

Regarding the *organization's development perspectives*, FG1 switches from quantitative aspects (increasing the number of beneficiaries) to qualitative efficiency elements and in the end combines elements of extension (size) with those of intensity (content). FG2 focuses on the same issues, but in a different order, consistent with managerial rationality: social capital development, activity diversification, expanding the coverage of the organization. *Implementation solutions* are seen by FG1 in their own activity, doubled by the community support, while management staff identifies solutions in what regards relating with local authorities and taking over outsourcing services in Bihor and later in neighbouring counties. At the first meeting, *results* are valued by both groups as concrete and immediate outcomes (for FG2 - area, endowment, equipment, and constant participation of children in activities, for FG1), as medium-term results at the second meeting (reducing dropout for FG1, and quality activities for the new services purchased) and as general and long-term results, at the third meeting (for the executive staff - further study at superior levels in vocational schools, colleges and even in higher education, and for management staff - the development of the organization and improvement of its image).

Conclusions

“Children of promise” foundation offers Roma children a chance by taking the task of creating for them a “habitus” as Bourdieu states, as capital, “what has been won, but which became incarnate in a sustainable way into the body as permanent provisions”, “the constitutive principles of habitus being inextricably logical and axiological, theoretical and practical” (Bourdieu, 1980: 135). The determinants of organization’s success proved to be: the development potential of children, the organization’s staff, the social capital of the organization, and teaching methods used in activities with children. Organizational culture, values internalized and promoted by the organization is a solid pillar on which to base the intervention on improving the situation of Roma children, with long-term benefits, namely their social and professional integration.

The Appreciative Inquiry used as a way of approaching organizational development and as a research method, has proved once again its valences (Chipea, *et al.* 2011: 10) by intensifying management and executive staff’s concerns in what regards organization’s potential and perspectives, and medium and long term solutions and results. As with other Christian foundations, the organization investigated in the present paper seems to lean with more interest on ensuring equal opportunities for all children, conducting quality specialized interventions that enable children and youth to internalize socially accepted norms and values, and finally, to acquire optimal chance for social integration. Our research supports the idea that neo-protestant Christian organizations report positive towards Roma communities „as souls ought to be saved, as children of God, as equal members” (Cace *et al.*, 2012:169).

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