



Parental Views and Attitudes Concerning Child Work in a Rural Region of Romania

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ABSTRACT: This study examines parental perspectives on children's involvement in household and agricultural work in a rural region of north-western Romania. The research focuses on Someș Valley in Satu Mare County, where subsistence farming remains common and children often assist with family labour. Using qualitative data from interviews with parents and a focus group with teachers – complemented by survey findings – we analyse how rural parents view the role of their children's work in the household, its perceived benefits, and its impact on education. Parents generally consider children's help in chores and farming as a normal and even beneficial part of upbringing, teaching responsibility and practical skills while strengthening family bonds. They report assigning age-appropriate tasks and prioritizing schooling, with most insisting that education is not compromised by farm work. However, contrasting insights from local educators and supportive quantitative data reveal potential tensions: some children experience fatigue and occasional school absences linked to work demands. The findings highlight a nuanced reality in which moderate child work is culturally valued and can foster growth, but excessive labour poses risks to academic progress and child well-being. The article concludes with a discussion on balancing tradition with child rights and offers policy suggestions to support rural families in safeguarding children's education and welfare.

KEYWORDS: Child work, Parental attitudes, Rural families, School education, Romania

INTRODUCTION

Rural family economies in many parts of the world rely on the contributions of all members, including children. In Romania, almost half the population lives in rural areas, and many rural households practice small-scale agriculture primarily for subsistence. In these communities, children's involvement in household and farm tasks is often a customary part of family life. Such "child work" – as distinct from exploitative child labour – commonly includes caring for animals, gardening, and other chores that support the household.

National surveys indicate that this phenomenon is widespread: for example, 13% of Romanian rural children report working at least four hours a day at home, and one in four rural students say they often feel tired because of household work responsibilities (1). Worryingly, around 12% have missed school due to being required to work at home, and as many as one in three adolescents sometimes skip classes for this reason (2). These figures underscore the importance of understanding how child work intersects with education and well-being in the Romanian countryside.

Prior research suggests that children's labour in family farms is not always merely a response to poverty but can be embedded in cultural norms (3, 4). In traditional rural society, work is highly valued and seen as integral to children's socialization (5). Many rural parents view involving children in farm work as a way to impart life skills and work ethic, rather than as exploitation (6).

Indeed, evidence indicates that in subsistence-oriented villages, engaging children in household tasks is often considered a social norm and a form of practical education, not solely an economic necessity (7). Nevertheless, the boundary between beneficial participation and detrimental labour can be delicate. Excessive work demands may expose children to risks such as fatigue, academic underachievement, or even long-term disinterest in schooling (8, 9). Striking a balance between maintaining rural traditions and protecting children's rights is a challenge for policymakers and communities alike.

Despite the prevalence of child work in rural Romania, there have been relatively few sociological studies focusing on the perspectives of those directly involved – whether children or parents. This article addresses that gap by examining parental views and attitudes concerning child work in one rural region of north-western Romania. The study centres on the Someș Valley area of Satu Mare County, a geographically and culturally distinct zone situated between the cities of Satu Mare and Baia Mare. This is a

predominantly agrarian area where many families engage in farming and related activities to sustain themselves. By exploring how parents in this community perceive their children's work contributions, the value they assign to such activities, and how they manage the balance between work and education, we gain insight into the lived reality behind the statistics. Additionally, input from local teachers provides a complementary perspective on how children's work affects their schooling and daily life.

In the following sections, we first outline the methodology of the study. We then present the qualitative findings, focusing on the nature of children's tasks, parental attitudes toward these practices, and the interplay between children's work and their education. Where relevant, quantitative data from surveys are integrated to support and contextualize the qualitative insights. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings and offer a few recommendations aimed at informing policy and practice to improve child welfare in rural areas.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a mixed-methods design conducted in the Someș Valley region of Satu Mare County, Romania. In the initial phase, a survey was administered to gather quantitative data on children's involvement in household work and their school performance. The survey covered students in several rural schools and their parents, capturing demographic information and the extent of children's participation in various chores and farm activities.

Complementing the survey, an in-depth qualitative inquiry was carried out to capture nuanced perspectives. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of school-aged children in the target communities. The interviewed parents were selected to reflect diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds – from families struggling with subsistence farming to those relatively better-off, and from parents with only primary schooling to those with higher education. This diversity allowed for exploring a range of attitudes and experiences regarding child work.

In addition to the parent interviews, a focus group discussion was held with local educators to obtain the community's institutional viewpoint. Six teachers from a village middle school (gymnasium) in Păulești – one of the communes in the Someș Valley area – participated in a facilitated focus group session. Lasting about an hour, this discussion covered observations on students' home lives, the perceived impact of farm work on their education, and broader challenges facing rural families. The focus group was especially valuable in comparing and contrasting teachers' observations with parents' self-reported views.

All interviews and the focus group were conducted in Romanian, the participants' native language, and later transcribed and analysed by the researcher. Anonymity was assured to encourage open sharing; parents and teachers are referenced in the findings by number or generic role rather than by name. The qualitative data were coded thematically, focusing on key topics such as types of work children do, parental rationales and attitudes, effects on schooling, and any noted benefits or risks. Meanwhile, the quantitative survey data were analysed for patterns that could either corroborate or challenge the qualitative findings – for example, correlations between the time a child spends on chores and their school performance or attendance.

By integrating multiple sources, this methodology provides a comprehensive view of the issue. The quantitative component offers scope – indicating how common certain behaviours or outcomes are – while the qualitative interviews and focus group provide depth, explaining why and how these phenomena occur from the stakeholders' perspectives. The geographical focus on a specific rural region (Someș Valley) means the findings are context-bound; however, they likely reflect broader trends in rural Romania, as the selected communities share many characteristics with other traditional farming areas.

RESULTS

Children's Work in the Rural Household

The families in our study reported that it is customary for children to contribute to household and agricultural tasks. According to the survey results (n = 164) children are involved in various household and family work: 90.2% (n = 148) of children perform one or more activities, only a percentage of 9.8% (n = 16) is not involved in such work at all. The most frequently encountered jobs are cleaning (75%, n = 123), animal care (64.6%, n = 106), gardening (54.9%, n = 90), but also field work (29.9 %, n = 49), in addition to other activities (25%, n = 41).

Parents described a range of chores that their children (generally aged around 10–14, corresponding to upper primary and lower secondary school years) perform as part of daily life. These tasks are typically aligned with the child's physical abilities and maturity level. Common duties include feeding and watering livestock (such as pigs, chickens, or cows), tending to vegetable gardens,

cleaning animal stalls, and doing light housework (sweeping, washing dishes, etc.). For example, one parent mentioned having her young daughter help occasionally by bringing water to the animals and accompanying the parents to the family's plot of land, while also doing simple house chores like vacuuming or wiping floors. Another family had older children assist mainly during school holidays with tasks like gardening and feeding animals, always under adult supervision to ensure safety. In general, heavy labour (such as operating machinery or lifting very heavy loads) is avoided or left to adults, whereas children's work is presented as "helping out" in manageable ways.

Based on the valid answers of the children participating in the research (n = 163) 64% (n = 105) of the children help their parents in these jobs for 1-2 hours a day, 11% (n = 18) give this type of activity 3-4 hours, and only 3.1% (n = 5) work 5 hours or more. The percentage of those who do not consider home activities to be work time amounts to 21.5% (n = 35), specifying that from the data presented above it appears that only 9.8% of children are not involved in either some kind of activity. The work performed by children to help households can affect their well-being in approximately a quarter of cases: 22.8% (n = 36) sometimes feel tired, while the state of exhaustion is always present in 7 % (n = 11) of cases.

Parents emphasized that these contributions, while helpful, are not strictly required for the household's survival in most cases, but they are appreciated as a form of involvement. In a few households facing economic hardship, children's help was described as more crucial – essentially a necessity for the family's subsistence. In such cases, parents acknowledge relying on their children, especially older ones, during peak agricultural seasons. One mother from a low-income farming family explained that during summer vacation her teenagers might "help all day long, especially in summer, whereas during spring or autumn they help only as much as time allows, since school takes priority".

The time children spend on work often has a seasonal rhythm: more hours during intensive periods like planting or harvest, and fewer when academic obligations are high. Even so, parents try to limit the duration of work. Several respondents estimated that on school days their children's labour amounted to no more than an hour or two of light chores, while on weekends or in summer it could extend to a few hours, with breaks in between.

Safety and supervision emerged as important considerations in how parents involve children in work. Nearly all interviewed parents stressed that they oversee their children's activities and tailor tasks to avoid accidents or over-exertion. For instance, children are often asked to wear gloves when handling certain tools or farm produce, and are kept away from any dangerous farm equipment. As a result, serious injuries were reportedly rare or non-existent in these families' experience.

Some parents did mention minor issues like a child catching a cold after working outside in poor weather or the occasional small scrape, but nothing beyond "what could happen to any of us". One parent noted that if a task is too difficult or risky (for example, chopping wood or using motorized tools), "we, the parents, handle the difficult activities and make sure the child isn't doing something not suited for her age". This approach reflects a protective attitude: parents want their children to learn the value of work but without being harmed or pushed too hard physically.

Notably, a few older children even accompany their parents for seasonal agricultural labour outside the home (such as fruit picking), especially when families face urgent financial needs. These cases are relatively rare, but illustrate that in certain circumstances, children's work may extend beyond routine chores into more intensive labour. Overall, helping with household and farm work is a normal part of childhood in the studied villages. As one parent succinctly put it, "we could manage without the children's help, but involving them is important for their development". This sentiment captures the dual perception of child work: it is both a contribution to the family and an investment in the child's upbringing. In the next section, we delve deeper into how parents rationalize and value this involvement.

Parental Values and Attitudes Regarding Child Work

Parental attitudes toward their children's work were overwhelmingly positive in our interviews. Mothers and fathers alike often framed the chores not as burdens on the child, but as opportunities for learning and character-building. A recurrent theme was that engaging in household and farm duties teaches children "the value of work" and fosters responsibility, discipline, and self-reliance. One parent pointed out that by participating in farm activities, children learn to appreciate the labour that goes into producing food and to respect the work of others, such as farmers. Many parents believe these lessons will serve their children well in adulthood, regardless of what career path they eventually choose.

Another commonly cited benefit was the development of practical life skills. Parents noted that their sons and daughters become handy and capable – whether it is how to tend animals, use basic tools, or manage household tasks – which they considered an

essential part of education outside the classroom. For instance, a mother of two explained that even though her family could afford to hire extra help, they involve the children in farm work because “it’s to the child’s advantage to learn life’s responsibilities; work builds physical endurance and they will manage more easily in life”. This reflects a view of work as a formative experience. Similarly, a father commented that doing chores together “is part of their education... responsibilities help the child in their development”.

Parents also frequently invoked tradition and their own upbringing as justification for involving children in work. In these rural communities, it is customary that everyone contributes to the household from a young age. “That’s how we grew up – contributing in the household. Everyone present in all activities, because that’s good for everyone,” one parent reminisced. Several parents described how their children started coming along to the fields or the barn “from when they were little, just to keep them supervised, and gradually they got used to these activities, first through play and then out of pleasure. They were never forced to do anything, but little by little, on their own initiative, they began to take part in all the activities”. This indicates that in well-functioning families, a child’s work contribution is embedded in a context of affection and shared endeavour, rather than coercion.

Moreover, working together is seen as enhancing family cohesion. Parents appreciated that farm chores often become family time, where parents and children work side by side, talk, and strengthen their relationships. One mother noted that her children “enjoy their work because while working they are together with family – they chat and joke around”. Another parent mentioned using small rewards and family routines to keep children motivated: after finishing a big task, the family might relax together, have a treat like ice cream, and socialize, which the children look forward to. These practices reinforce the idea that doing work is a shared family responsibility and can even be fun or rewarding. They also help children associate hard work with positive outcomes (both tangible and emotional), which parents believe instils a healthy work ethic.

Underpinning these attitudes is a moral dimension: many rural parents feel that participating in work keeps children “out of trouble” and builds character. Some contrasted working outdoors or doing chores with spending too much time on computers or phones. “It’s not good for the girl to spend all her time in front of the laptop or phone; she should experience time in the fresh air,” one interviewee insisted. Helping with farm work is thus seen as a wholesome, character-building alternative to idle leisure or screen time, a view that resonates with traditional notions of rural virtue.

In summary, parents in Someş Valley generally regard their children’s labour contributions in a favourable light. They perceive these activities as multi-faceted learning experiences that provide practical skills, reinforce values like responsibility and teamwork, and strengthen family and community bonds. *Munca* – the Romanian word for work – is endowed with positive meaning and is considered an integral part of raising “good” children in this setting. However, this positive outlook is tempered by an important caveat: parents almost uniformly stated that school remains the top priority. They maintain that as long as work does not interfere with education, it is beneficial – a balance examined in the next section.

Balancing Work and Education

One of the critical questions in the context of child work is how it affects schooling. According to the answers provided by children and their parents, because of work, 91.8% (n = 146) of the children never missed school, but there were isolated cases in the proportion of 8.2% (n = 13) when this sometimes happened. School assignments are solved in an interval of 1-2 hours in the vast majority of cases (71.6%, n = 116), but there are also students who spend more than 2 hours a day reading (25.3%, n = 41). Only 5 children representing 3.1% of respondents do not allocate time at all for homework.

It should be noted that the time spent preparing and solving school homework is not significantly correlated with the time allocated for household or extra-household work ($r_s = -.03$, $p = .63$), so based on these data it is not may claim that the work performed by the child would be detrimental to school preparation. The time spent preparing and solving homework seems to be sufficient considering the relatively high averages of children between grades 9 - 10 (58.3%, n = 81), and between grades 8 - 9 (20.9%, n = 29).

The parents in our study were keen to affirm that their children’s education comes first, before any farm duties. When asked directly about balancing school and work, respondents consistently said they prioritize their child’s schooling and would not allow chores to take precedence over study. For example, a parent of an eighth-grade girl proudly noted that her daughter “never missed school because of work; school is always in the first place, and only then come the other responsibilities”. Another parent similarly explained that in their household, homework must be finished before the child does any chores, and that they have never pulled their children out of classes for farm needs. Such statements were typical across the interviews. Parents generally viewed education as the path to a better future and saw the role of farm work as supportive, not competitive, with schooling.



Indeed, several parents argued that doing some work actually benefits the child's education by teaching time management and providing a break from academics. One interviewee mentioned that light chores offer a "welcome pause from studying" and can even refresh the mind, preventing burnout from continuous schoolwork. None of the parents interviewed admitted to any instance where their child's grades suffered due to farm work demands (though this may partly reflect a reluctance to acknowledge such issues openly). Many highlighted that their children were doing well or "very well" in school despite the chores.

The survey data supports the claim that moderate work involvement is compatible with good academic performance: children who put more effort into school and spend less time on chores tend to achieve higher grade averages, while those heavily involved in labour are at some risk of lower performance. The quantitative analysis demonstrated that extensive involvement in household labour could negatively impact school outcomes, especially for older children, suggesting that excessive work is a risk factor for education. Parents, however, believe they are managing this balance by keeping work to reasonable levels.

To probe this issue further, the focus group with teachers provided an external perspective. The teachers generally agreed that most rural parents value education in principle, but they observed that in practice, not all families maintain the ideal balance that parents claimed. When the teachers were asked whether school or work usually has priority in the rural families they know, the majority answered that unfortunately "school does not always have priority" for many families.

One teacher noted that during certain seasons, like the autumn harvest (for example, picking mushrooms or apples), some parents readily pull children into work, even if it overlaps with school hours or homework time. Another teacher remarked that in her experience, some children – even as young as primary school – are "very overworked" by family tasks, to the point of coming to school exhausted. The motive, she suggested, is often financial need; families struggling economically might see no choice but to involve the children fully. These insights hint that there may be a subset of families for whom the parent interviews (which tended to emphasize the positive) might not have captured the whole truth – possibly because those more struggling families were less represented among the interviewees or less willing to speak openly.

The teachers could all recall students coming to class unprepared and giving the reason that they "didn't have time to study or do homework because of work at home". Some teachers were sceptical, suspecting that at least in some cases this is a convenient excuse for the pupil's lack of preparation. As one put it, the claim of "no time due to chores" is a plausible excuse that children might use "thinking it will get them off the hook".

However, the fact that such excuses are common indicates that juggling school responsibilities with work duties is a real challenge for many. In the survey conducted as part of this research, roughly a quarter of students themselves acknowledged coming to school tired because of having worked at home, although the focus group teachers tended to downplay this, suggesting these could be overstatements by children. Still, national-level data echo this issue: as noted earlier, 25% of rural children in one study said they were often tired from household labour, and 12% had even missed school for work.

Finally, the focus group noted that most rural students receive little academic help at home, as many parents lack either the education or the inclination to assist with schoolwork. This means that children's learning depends largely on their own effort and the school, which further reinforces the importance of keeping education a priority even amid work demands.

In summary, the balance between child work and education in this region is delicately maintained and depends greatly on the family's circumstances and priorities. Many parents manage to ensure that chores do not infringe on schooling – aided by their own attitudes that school is paramount and by a community ethic that generally supports children's education at least through compulsory levels. However, economic pressures, cultural habits, and sometimes a lack of parental engagement in schooling can tilt the balance unfavourably in certain cases. The qualitative data, supported by survey findings, underscore that while moderate work has little detrimental effect, heavy or ill-timed child labour can lead to fatigue and conflict with school responsibilities. The next section will consider the broader context and implications of these findings, before we move to conclusion and recommendations.

DISCUSSION

Parental perspectives in the rural Someş Valley region of Romania reveal a predominantly positive view of child work within the household: it is seen as an educational and character-building practice that complements formal schooling rather than competes with it. Parents involve children in farming and domestic chores to nurture responsibility, work ethic, and practical skills, all under the umbrella of family solidarity and cultural tradition. Most importantly, they strive to do so without sacrificing their children's

education, asserting that academic duties remain the top priority. The community's traditional ethos holds that a modest amount of work is beneficial for children, a belief largely validated by the lived experience reported in our interviews.

At the same time, our research highlights that this balance can be precarious. When child work becomes excessive or when families face acute economic hardship, the risk emerges that children's schooling and well-being will be undermined. Evidence from teachers and quantitative data points to warning signs: a portion of rural children experience significant fatigue, occasional absenteeism, or insufficient study time due to domestic work obligations. These cases, even if not the majority, merit serious attention because they can lead to cumulative disadvantages, including lower educational attainment and the perpetuation of rural poverty.

The case of Someş Valley demonstrates that child work in a traditional rural context has both positive dimensions and potential risks. On one hand, as parents attest, age-appropriate work can serve a functional role in children's upbringing – teaching skills and values – and is not necessarily harmful in moderation. On the other hand, if work becomes excessive, it can conflict with schooling and well-being, effectively turning into detrimental child labour. Even if outright hazardous labour was not reported here, the cumulative effect of long hours can still erode the time and energy children have for learning and rest.

Economic hardship and cultural norms both influence how much children work. Families with very low incomes or many dependents – or those where parents suffer ill health or other difficulties – are more likely to rely on child labour. Additionally, parental absence due to labour migration can thrust greater responsibility on children: when one or both parents work abroad, older children often must take on adult roles at home, which can jeopardize their schooling and emotional well-being.

This tension – between valuing child work as part of life and ensuring it does not impede schooling – reflects a broader development challenge. Blanket prohibitions of child labour may be out of touch with rural realities and can even prove counterproductive if they stigmatize culturally important practices. Instead, a balanced approach is needed: one that acknowledges the merits of age-appropriate work but firmly guards against exploitation and educational neglect.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings call for a nuanced appreciation of child work in rural settings. Rather than categorically condemning all work done by children, policies should differentiate between acceptable involvement in family tasks and exploitative labour. A few policy recommendations emerge from this study. First, there is a need to support rural families economically so that children are not compelled to work out of sheer necessity. Strengthening social protection for low-income rural households – for instance through targeted child allowances or food security programs – could alleviate the pressure that sometimes forces children into extensive labour. If families are less financially stressed, they are less likely to depend on their children as workers and more likely to keep them focused on school.

Second, educational interventions are crucial. Schools in rural areas should be resourced and empowered to accommodate the realities of their students. This could include providing after-school programs or homework assistance, which would help children who lack support at home and ensure they don't fall behind academically due to farm chores. Introducing more practical, vocation-oriented content in the curriculum might also bridge the gap between home and school, validating the skills children learn through work and keeping them engaged. As some parents suggested, the school program should place greater emphasis on relevant practical subjects instead of being overwhelmingly theoretical.

Third, community awareness and parental education programs can reinforce the importance of not overburdening children. Local authorities, schools, and NGOs might collaborate to sensitize parents about the long-term benefits of education and the potential harms of excessive child labour, even when it happens at home. Emphasis should be placed on the idea that while chores are beneficial in moderation, children also need time for study, rest, and play to develop holistically. Highlighting success stories of rural students who excelled academically without giving up their home responsibilities could provide positive role models and counter the narrative that formal education is secondary.

Finally, addressing broader structural issues – such as rural infrastructure, access to technology, and opportunities for youth – can create an environment where families do not feel they must choose between their children helping at home and succeeding in school. Investment in rural development (better transport, internet access, youth centres) and public-private partnerships to create local jobs could gradually reduce reliance on subsistence agriculture and, by extension, on children's labour. When parents see a viable future for their children beyond the farm, they are likely to more strongly prioritize education.



In conclusion, child work in this Romanian rural context is a double-edged sword: it is part of the socialization process and carries undeniable benefits as described by parents, but it must be carefully managed to avoid impinging on children's rights and opportunities. Stakeholders – from families and schools to policymakers – should aim to preserve the positive aspects of children's participation in family work (such as skill development and family bonding) while minimizing the negatives. By doing so, rural communities like those in Someș Valley can ensure that their children grow up both industrious and educated, well-equipped to navigate the challenges of adulthood.

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