

Waste dump instead of school

For the Antoci brothers school is a thing of the past. Natalia, Ion, and Alexandru have not stepped into a school for ages, in spite of being of school age. Poverty estranged them from what we call 'primary education'.

Natalia is the eldest. She is 16 and for the past five years she didn't go to school. She was expelled because of her many absences. She didn't go to school because she had to help her mother with work in the fields. Their father walked out on them when they were little and the responsibilities of the family were left to the unemployed mother. 'There were winters when we had no warm clothes or shoes. We were sick most of the time, so we could not go to school,' Natalia told us. This year her former colleagues sat for entrance exams in schools. Natalia, however, cannot attend vocational training or even be employed as a maid because she did not complete her gymnasium education. She cannot recuperate the lost five years.

Ion is 12 and for the past three years he has not attended school. The boy acquired his primary education and then his mother had him transferred to a boarding school in the same location. Ion studied for a month but then was expelled from the boarding school because according to the legislation only one child per family is allowed to attend this type of institution. 'I want very much to go to school, but my mother says she has no money for schoolbooks. I was the poorest in my form. I was laughed at most of the time for having shoes that were too big or trousers that were too short,' Ion said. The young boy tells us that his teacher neglected him, in the final month of school she did not ask him anything and sometimes she would call him stupid in front of the class. 'She would point her finger at me and I would hide in fear under my desk. It is true that sometimes I didn't do my homework, but there was no time for that. I had colleagues who had food on the table at home and time to study. My mommy sometimes did not even have bread to give us. That is why when I got home I would drop my school bag and wander on the streets hoping to find something to eat for me and my family,' Ion confesses.

Alexandru, the youngest, is 9 and attends boarding school. His colleagues are orphans, some without a parent, and most from poor families. Sandu (short for Alexandru) says he feels comfortable and gets along well with his mates. He claims the teachers are good and do not give too much homework. There is no need for expensive clothes as all his schoolmates have cheap clothes. He sees his mother and brothers at the end of the week. Now he is on holiday so he's at home with his family. 'Even if it's no ordinary school, I like it. It's a pity that my brothers can't join me. I know they would like it,' says Alexandru.

The day we went to see the Antoci in the village of Zagarancea in the Ungheni district, all three brothers and the grandmother left the house. The children went to Ungheni to look for food. They walk 10 kilometers to Ungheni where they go through the dump hoping to find some food to eat. 'I have nothing to feed them on and this is the only way to get something to eat. I feel so sorry for them. They walk all this way and then get covered in waste, but what can we do? Even when they went to school they never asked for books but for food. That is the most important thing for anyone,' says Mrs. Antoci. Her only income is from working the land of the villagers. Per day she is paid 25 lei, that is, less than \$2.

'When I was told that Natalia was sent off from school, I never insisted they take her back. I felt all the teachers hated me because I had no money to give for school repairs or for Teacher's day. But I did ask to withdraw Ion. I wanted him to go to the boarding school with Sandu. They are fed and taught for free there. They have a roof over their head there. The boy was enrolled only for a month then I was told only one could attend the boarding school. I let the younger stay there,' says the mother of the children. Asked what the elders will do, the woman says 'Natalia can find a good husband, and Ion told me he is waiting to receive his passport so he can go to find work in Russia.'

The Antoci family is not the only family where children can't go to school because there is no money for school books. According to the Ministry of Education, this year 2,000 children were not enrolled in school. Dumitru Ivanov, the teachers' trade union leader, claims that at least 20,000 school age children are not enrolled. Eighty percent of children dropping out of school are of the gymnasium-age and the other 20% are primary-school age. The employees of the Ministry of Education claim that children abandon school because of poverty or lack of success. Some of the children who drop out of school beg or go abroad searching for work. Others are exposed to crime, alcohol and drug abuse. Giovanna Barberis, UNICEF Representative in Moldova, believes that the social-economic crisis in Moldova is at the basis of the education crisis that affects first of all the poor families. 'Unfortunately, in most of these families, children are left out of school or sent to boarding schools where the quality of education is poor,' claims Giovanna Barberis.

International studies reveal that between 1996-2000 investments in the education sector decreased dramatically, the state budget for education covered only 40% of the necessities. The National Strategy 'Education for All' adopted in March by the Government in Chisinau and elaborated by the UN in cooperation with UNICEF, UNESCO and UNDP aims to improve the education system. The strategy, currently in the implementation stage, aims to ensure access to primary education for all children, especially disabled children. This programme represents a stage in the accomplishment of the Millennium Development Goals. Until 2015 any child in Moldova, regardless of family wealth can be enrolled in primary school.

Ina Prisacaru, 'Timpul'