SCHOOL DROPOUT IN ROMANIAN RURAL ENVIRONMENT

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DOI:10.51865/JETC.1.02

Abstract

School dropout is nowadays one of the biggest problems faced by the Romanian education system. School dropout entails prematurely leaving the education system before the compulsory educational stage is over and prior to getting a qualification or professional training. School dropout is triggered by both internal and external factors. Contemporary society no longer considers school important in our personal development as human beings. But how would this society look like if all of us would stop regarding education and culture as fundamental values? Taking into account that education is free, it must be understood as anyone's right to appropriate abilities, skills, and knowledge needed to find a job and integrate in a group.

Keywords: school dropout; rural environment; family environment; individual factors; economic factor; school factors

Introduction

School dropout is nowadays one of the biggest problems faced by the Romanian education system. This entails abandoning the education system at an early stage. School dropout phenomenon is wide spread in Romania, and the number of pupils abandoning school increases every year.

School dropout rate is higher in the rural than in the urban environment because income is lower, parents decide to leave and work abroad or they display lack of interest in their children's future. We also notice that many children have problems adapting to school educational activities. This inability to adapt leads over time to the pupils' school failure. School failure is a dangerous phenomenon because it has undesirable psychological effects on pupils and may result in lower self-esteem and self-confidence, ultimately leading to fear of failure both socially and educationally. Due to these continuous failures, pupils may feel marginalised, which leads to dropping out of school.

The effects of school dropout can be serious because the pupils resorting to this cannot get any professional qualification, cannot integrate in society, and will face criticism from other citizens. Keeping in mind that the economic situation is not very favourable,

we can state that we live in fear because children are the most likely to be affected by problems. Due to financial problems, parents stop giving proper attention to education and this results in an increased number of dropout cases. Pupils that drop out from school often have serious behaviour issues, have been repeatedly rebuked, and have a large number of unattended classes. Proper education begins within the family and it is further developed throughout day-care and school. Education is mainly passed on through the example provided by close family members and then by others. Pupils tend to imitate the behaviour seen within their family or in their environment, namely of those people that they regard as a model. If family has a disinterested attitude towards school, children and their education will follow the same path.

1. School Dropout Concept

Education entails "a psychological and natural necessity of human personality constantly engaged in a training-development process designed and implemented based on globally established results that determine a set of actions built on a subject-object relation, aimed at self-education."[1] Taking into account that education is free, it must be understood as anyone's right to appropriate abilities, skills, and knowledge needed to find a job and integrate in a group. Education is the only possibility given to both parents and children (who are otherwise marginalised due to lack of economic and social means) to adapt to the community they live in and escape poverty.

School dropout is a never ending issue of the Romanian education system. Whereas before 1989 school dropout rate was rather low, immediately after the revolution and with the move towards democracy it was noticed that more and more pupils tend to abandon school. We can say that they were driven by the parents' attitude who did not consider education a priority, but also by the lack of certainty in getting a job. Furthermore, their parent's leaving abroad for work has a more and more powerful impact on children, who either follow their parents, or are left behind to be cared for by relatives or close acquaintances. The carers only superficially follow children's school performance.

School dropout entails prematurely leaving the education system before the compulsory educational stage is over and prior to getting a qualification or professional training. School dropout is triggered by both internal and external factors. Specialised literature defines school dropout as abandoning school studies due to various reasons, the most important being financial, but there are also cases where the abandon is caused by an inability to adapt and cope with the educational curriculum.

School dropout is an interesting phenomenon in itself, but so are the serious consequences thereof. Lacking a qualification, degree, and social skills, most of the dropouts are liable to join the rolls of unemployment and delinquency; they end up taking part in non-legit activities, things that will impact family, personal and community life. School dropout is a dangerous phenomenon because it has negative effects both at psychologic, individual level, including a deterioration of pupils' self-esteem, and at social level because it leads to social marginalisation with increased accents of criminal and deviant behaviour. School dropout is an indicator showing

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[1] Sorin Cristea, *Dicţionar de pedagogie*, Editura Litera International, Bucureşti, 2000, p. 120.

difficulties incurred by both school and society. Therefore, the higher the school dropout rate the more inefficient the education system proves to be.

Each school dropout case has its own history and manifests itself differently depending on the psychological development of the individual involved. It is the product of several pedagogical, psychological, and social factors that have both short and long term consequences. It can be said that school dropout is a consequence of inadaptability in school.

The dropout rate is defined as the ratio between the number of pupils enrolled and the number of graduates. School dropout generates social integration failure, meaning that it severely reduces the self-accomplishment chances in legit activity areas. This phenomenon is widely spread in rural areas, in Roma communities, where most of the children are used as source of income or individuals that have household responsibilities.[2]

A series of projects and programmes to combat school dropout were launched over time. Schools established special purpose commissions, parent meetings under specialists' supervision were organised, social investigations were carried out at the homes of children with school dropout risk. In order to efficiently implement projects and programmes one needs to consider the needs and particularities of the target group. The measures deployed by schools target the improvement of school environment. A good way to prevent school dropout is the intervention of the teachers themselves through educational activities performed during class. Teachers can motivate pupils using various means to attract and bring children on the right track.

Among the European countries, Romania has the highest premature school dropout rate. Nowadays teenagers are attracted by the Western world and by financial gains that are higher than the ones they could receive if they stayed in school and continued their studies at the highest level available. Thus, the dropout rate increases day by day.

2. Factors that Lead to School Dropout and the Effects Thereof

2.1. Family Environment

Family is the most valuable thing for people. Family represents "the children's natural environment, having an essential influence on their development."[3] The most important role family has is to prepare children for life. It is here that the child gets the main skills and abilities needed to integrate in the education environment.

E. Bonchiş states that "family environment does not reduce its role and involvement during this development stage of the child. An important factor influencing development is parenting style. From this perspective, the care and control parents

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[2] Otilia Apostu, Magdalena Balica, Ciprian Fartuşnic, Bogdan Florian, Irina Horga, Lucian Voinea, *Copiii care nu merg la şcoală*, Editura Alpha MDN, Buzău, 2012, p. 89.
[3] Elena Bonchiş, *Familia şi rolul ei în educarea copilului*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2011, p. 17.

exercise lead to the development or inhibition of certain important dimensions: the degree of openness towards children's opinions, overbearing discipline techniques."[4]

Nowadays, most of the school inadaptability cases show that both family and other social institutions do not always manage to reach their educational goals. Parents are close to children and support them in whatever they do in many families, but there are also cases where quarrels, lack of affection, acts of violence, vices are present, all these generating an improper environment for children's development. There are also situations that cannot be helped, such as death, divorce, severe fights, things that determine parents to oppose a child becoming independent.

We notice that, as far as children's school situation is concerned, parents fall into one of the following categories: very exigent and disinterested. Very exigent parents, meaning parents that want their children to be the best in class, risk causing school failure through the pressure they exert on the children who in turn may stop learning out of pleasure. Disinterested parents are superficial and do not pay too much attention to education. In this case the child sees that parents do not place much value on school and will fail to become motivated and interested in making any progress. Family is more an emotional rather than a pedagogical environment. Parents have the duty to protect their children regardless of their IQ. There are cases when parents offend and discourage children precisely when they need support.

Family is the main factor that determines children to drop out, the reasons being parents themselves, but also the environment they come from and family problems. A lower family education level also has negative impact on pupils' school performance. The number of pupils that continues their studies is lowest in rural environment.

Many parents in rural environment have lower secondary education or lack education altogether. This is why they consider that school is not a necessity for their children, their future, and for finding a job. Parents would rather keep them at home to help with the household chores or around the community. Thus, children do not attend classes and accumulate gaps in their education. All these put together slowly lead to school dropout. The lack of interest in school manifested by parents is passed on to the children. Parents often force children to work very early in life instead of studying and pursue a career that could lead to a better life than the present one.

The parents' lack of support in their children's education is caused by their own low education level on the one hand, and by the fact that they need to work all day to put food on the table on the other hand. Taking care of younger siblings and working in agriculture are amongst the most common activities children get involved in. When a family has many children, the older often need to take care of the younger. This is a typical scenario where girls drop out of school. With all these responsibilities, they cannot attend classes or do their homework and prepare for the following school day. Some families that strongly uphold tradition may cause children to prematurely drop out of school.

According to their tradition, Roma children must start a family as early as 12-14 years old, which implies that school no longer represents a priority for the parents. The family's role in having a good school performance is vital, which means that its attitude

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[4] Idem, pp.127-128.

needs to be actively oriented towards getting an education. In order to do this, parents need to realise the risks they expose their children to when they do not allow them to start school for whatever reasons, but also the benefits of getting an education. A way to help parents can be parental training sessions aimed at reinforcing awareness with respect to family's role and involvement in the children's education.

2.2. The Economic Factor

Romania's economic condition is difficult especially in the rural areas. Family's financial situation is a very important cause of school dropout. This represents a big disadvantage because it directly influences the quality of life and education given to children. Thus, the child will be deprived of the means and materials needed to study, but also of other benefits. Ball and Davitz stated that "pupils coming from disadvantaged communities have lower school results, they tend to prematurely abandon school, and face the impossibility to get proper symbolic skills and aptitudes needed to solve problems and establish the needed economic independence."[5]

Education is free in Romania up to 10th grade. Even though parents are exempted from school fees there are additional costs that some families with modest income cannot afford, such as footwear, clothing, ancillaries, writing materials, etc.

There are many schools in nowadays Romania that are isolated and lack needed facilities, mostly located in disadvantaged areas where poverty restricts parents' possibilities to provide proper education conditions for children. Access to education in the case of children coming from poor families is both an educational, and a socio-economical issue. Schools in disadvantaged areas are characterised by isolation, poverty, and lack of socio-professional prospects for the graduates.

Andrei Cosmovici shows that there is a significant relationship between socioeconomic status and education performance. The author considers that "all children coming from less economically advantaged areas have inferior school results, they get lower grades in almost all subjects and continue to high school or university in a lower proportion. They finish studies quicker and the dropout rate in their case is higher. If they get inferior results, they lose interest in school activities, get bored, become more aggressive, and become more prone to truancy."[6] Family income influences fundamentally their attendance in school and pushes children towards the labour market. Lack of proper countermeasures can lead to a long-term poverty propagation. Children coming from poor families have limited access to education and proper professional training due to material shortcomings and lack of proper social support. Lack of education and professional training reduces their chances on the labour market and increases the social exclusion risk. This education and training deficit can lead to long-term poverty propagation from one generation to the next.

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[5]Joel R. Davitz, Samuel Ball, *Psihologia procesului educaţional*, Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică, Bucureşti, 1978, p. 257.
[6] Andrei Cosmovici, Luminiţa Iacob (coord.), *Psihologie şcolară*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 1999, p. 250.

2.3.Individual Factors

The most common individual factors are related to the pupils' particularities. Here we can list health condition, reduced motivation to study, learning difficulties, tiredness, low self-confidence, environment, etc. Children presenting a dropout risk usually display most of these factors, not just one.

Many pupils face decreased motivation with respect to school activities at individual level. The source of this reduced motivation may be the family, but can also come from teachers that are not yet able to work with children coming from disadvantaged areas or presenting a dropout risk. Learning difficulties can be caused by knowledge gaps accumulated due to reduced class attendance. Pupils' tiredness also influences their school accomplishments.

Howard Gardner[7] considers that these issues can be also caused by difficulties in understanding. The author considers that teachers have an important role here because uninterested teachers mostly use text-test activities, evaluating pupils based on a given content without challenging them to use information in new ways. Tired pupils are slower, they would rather keep to themselves and do not take part in class activities. Many pupils have low self-confidence nowadays. This means they will refrain from participating in class because they are afraid they might provide a wrong answer or get "attacked" by their classmates. This low self-confidence can be also reinforced by school environment, meaning pupils can display reservations when it comes to socialising with classmates or even teachers.Most of the teachers consider that reduced attendance influences the majority of pupils, ultimately leading to dropout. Absenteeism is more prominent in boys than in girls.

Another important individual factor that leads to school dropout is entourage. Each pupil is part of a group consisting of either disciplined members, or individuals that do not obey rules and have undesirable behaviour. Pupils belonging to the latter have a higher dropout risk.

Usually pupils choose their friends based on common habits, desires, prejudices, and principles. This way the pupil integrates easier and is liked by all group members. Pupils that are rejected by certain classmates react by wanting to abandon school. There are many cases when pupils are influenced by their group members, causing them to break rules, have more and more reduced attendance, all these leading to school dropout. Most of the children develop phobias at a young age. These phobias dissipate or disappear with time in normal conditions. Children with overbearing parents however can be left with long-term traumas evolving into anxieties.

2.4. School Factors

School dropout risk is associated with factors that involve the pupils, teachers, and school particularities. The most common school factor in school dropout is inferior study results. Due to reduced class attendance and lack of support from parents, pupils' results fail to meet the school's expectations. These inferior results usually signal the child's inability to adapt to the educational environment.[8] Thus, pupils cannot reach

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[7] Howard Gardner, *Minte disciplinată*, Editura Sigma, București, 2005, p. 54.
[8] Regalena Melrose, *Elevii-problemă.Traumă și eșec școlar*, București, Editura Trei, 2013, p. 67.

high performance levels. Reduced involvement in school and after-school activities is another factor, meaning that the more pupils get involved in various activities, the lower the school dropout rate is.

When children abandon school, people usually tend to place most of the blame on teachers. Teachers assume the professional responsibility and the role implied by their job, but also function as educators and guides. From an educational point of view, teachers are engaged in forming and developing pupils. We can add to these the teaching quality, school size, material resources, school environment and teachers' involvement, all playing an important role in school dropout. School size is important because the bigger the school, the colder and distant the relationships, whereas in smaller schools relationships are tighter and more harmonious. Smaller schools foster communication and storytelling, leading to a more pleasant atmosphere. When asked if they like school, most of the children answer definitely no. This answer is based on several factors, such as classroom aspect, cold atmosphere, teachers being distant in relation to children.

Race and religion discrimination among children is more and more mentioned nowadays. R.Y. Bourhis and J-P. Leyens defines discrimination as "negative behaviour towards individuals."[9] Social identity theory claims that "discrimination is not the only strategy that allows a positive comparison with the outgroup."[10]

We deal first of all with discrimination in the classroom when Roma pupils are placed in the last row of desks. There are cases when pupils are discriminated based on health problems, financial status, and behaviour issues. As far as education is concerned, school focuses on formal rather than non-formal education. This is why pupils get bored and lack interest in the subjects taught. Teachers do not focus on non-formal education, on practical activities, and some children only come to school when they have practical courses.

School curriculum is heavy and does not take pupils' needs into account. It is difficult for some to keep pace with the high information volume they are supposed to accumulate. Most times parents refrain from communicating with teachers. Parents that are not interested in their children's school performance or avoid contact with teachers fail to understand the importance of staying in school and the consequences and implications of dropping out. This is why they will fail to acknowledge the gravity of their children's school situation until it is too late.

3. Advice for Parents and Teachers

Family considers that teachers are the main reason children drop out of school, while teachers consider the family being responsible for this phenomenon due to their lack of interest with respect to the education development of their children.

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[9]Richard Y. Bourhis, Jacques-Philippe Leyens, *Stereotipuri, discriminare şi relaţii intergrupuri*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 1997, p. 127.
[10]Idem, p. 136.

Therefore, a common effort and proper collaboration between school and family are needed to reduce the number of dropout cases. Based on survey results, the following actions are recommended in order to meet this objective:

- weekly counselling meetings with parents;

- involving family in children's school life;

- involving parents in school partnerships;

- improving the relationship between children and parents;

- placing more importance on the time spent with children;

- teachers' identifying and using interactive methods and strategies to increase the children's interest in education;

- teachers' using a more democratic approach with respect to their relation with the children;

- setting up certain activities involving teachers, pupils, and parents to improve the relationship between school and family;

  teachers' initiating interesting extracurricular activities for children;

- involving teachers in counselling activities aimed at parents with children with premature dropout risk.

Nonetheless, direct cooperation between school and family on the one hand, and between local authorities, such as Police, City Hall, Child Protection, on the other hand is needed in order to significantly reduce the dropout rate at national level.

Conclusions

A child dropping out of school is still a child with emotions, feelings, age-specific ingenuity, aiming at becoming somebody. Abandoning school is a phenomenon that negatively impacts their human evolution.

Contemporary society no longer considers school important in our personal development as human beings. But how would this society look like if all of us would stop regarding education and culture as fundamental values?

Specialised research showed that the main school dropout factors are: family, poverty, parents' reduced education level, their lack of interest in children's school situation, children failing to adapt to school requirements, school failure and lack of accomplishments, misalignment between teachers and children's capacity for understanding.

The role of the teachers, family, community members is to find as many solutions possible to prevent school dropout. It is not enough if teachers only struggle to attract pupils and determine them to continue their studies; proper cooperation between family, school, and community is the only real method to counteract premature school dropout.

Family, being the first environment where children appropriate fundamental skills and abilities needed to integrate into school life, needs to actively participate in children's educational activities. Children that are not encouraged to get good results will not be

motivated to finish their studies, to gather the general knowledge needed to integrate socially and professionally. Parents are largely aware that school success and failure depends mostly on them, but few are those that get involved and look for solutions to motivate teenagers to continue their studies. Most of the times, parents place all responsibility related to their children's education and intellectual development on teachers and school.

On the other hand, teachers themselves are responsible for making school an interesting place for children, conveying information in an accessible manner, using a wide range of didactic methods and techniques in sync with pupils' age and understanding capacities. Proper intervention from teachers throughout the educational process they engage children in is an efficient way to prevent school dropout.

Education is a socially vital function and school is the institution through which human society continues to exist. Society would stop evolving without schools and people that lack minimum knowledge and all-round education.

It is therefore a problem that has so many negative social consequences which cannot be ignored. Family, teachers, principals, the entire community need to develop and use solutions to prevent school dropout because, in Ion Heliade Rădulescu's words, "Without proper schools, no one should expect good parents, good children, and therefore a state that is properly organised, managed, and led."

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Abandonul școlar în mediul rural din România

Rezumat

În zilele noastre, abandonul școlar reprezintă una dintre cele mai mari probleme ale sistemului de învățământ românesc. Abandonul școlar presupune părăsirea timpurie a școlii, a sistemului educativ înainte de terminarea ciclului de studiu obligatoriu, de obținerea unei calificări sau pregătiri profesionale. Abandonul școlar se declanșează din cauza unor factori interni și externi. Societatea contemporană nu mai consideră școala definitorie în formarea noastră ca persoane, ca oameni. Totuși daca toți am renunța să mai vedem școala și cultura ca valori fundamentale, ca pioni principali ai umanității oare cum ar arăta această societate? Educația trebuie înțeleasă ca fiind dreptul fiecărui individ de a-și însuși abilitățile, deprinderile și cunoștințele necesare pentru găsirea unui job și integrarea în colectivul acestuia ținând cont că educația este gratuită.