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EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES ON COMBATING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

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Abstract

The present article aims to analyze the implications of educational practices that were identified at the level of the school organization to reduce students' school dropout. The objectives of the case study are the following: to identify the types of successful educational practices (OS1); to analyze the perspectives regarding the sustainability of school interventions in reducing early school leaving (OS2). In this regard, case studies were conducted on a number of ten school units that faced an increased dropout rate and implemented specific actions aimed at reducing the dropout rate among students. The school units exposed to this study are found in both urban areas (for two of them) and rural areas (for three of them). They are assessed as schools located in areas at risk of social exclusion. The case study was based on the analysis of quantitative indicators on the school participation rate of lower secondary school students in a range of 4 years, with ages between 11 and 14 years and participating in activities aimed at reducing the risk of dropping out of school. The conclusions of the study are as follows: there is a direct correlation between reducing the rate of early school leaving and the type of services implemented by the school. The sustainability of the activities that are meant to fight the school dropout by the actors of the educational policies and those of the local community represents the viable perspective of combating it.

Keywords: Educational policies, education, reducing school dropout, school dropout

1. Introduction

In the knowledge-based society, the concerns in education are mainly related to literacy, digitalization, and digital literacy, increasing the participation rate in compulsory education, increasing the quality of education and increasing access to educational services in the context of equal opportunities. We define the situation of "school dropout" the situation in which, at a certain moment, during a school year, a student/pupil enrolled for the completion of an educational cycle ceases to attend the courses. This event can be found at different times of the school / university year as follows: located either shortly after enrollment, during the semester, or before the end of the school year or school cycle. According to the Romanian legislation (Order no. 6000/2021 on the approval of the Early Warning Mechanism in Education (MATE) and the Methodology for Implementing and Using the MATE Computer Module to Prevent Early School Abandoning and Early School Leaving), school dropout is defined as an indicator calculated on the basis of official data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS) as the difference between the number of students enrolled at the beginning of a school year and the number of students at the end of the same school year, expressed as a percentage of the number of students enrolled at the beginning of the year. In the context of educational policies, there are concerns about interventions to prevent and combat not only school dropout but also the "early school leaving". We define "early school leaving" according to European meanings as "deliberate action objectified before graduation of the second level of education (ISCED) or vocational field certification". In the case of Romania, the National Strategy on Early School Leaving defines "early school leaving as the percentage of young people aged 18-24 who have completed at least the lower secondary level (the equivalent of the eighth grade) and which no longer follows any other form of schooling or vocational training" (The Government of Romania, no. 417/2015). The problem of dropping out of school is not only specific to certain societies with a certain level of the welfare state. As a social issue, early school abandoning / early school leaving has a different level of representativeness. European and global education policies also focus their efforts on increasing the school participation rate in the context of equal opportunities in education. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES / 70/1 at the UN Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2015, integrates the objectives of "Quality Education" into development strategies (objective 4) aimed at guaranteeing quality education by all signatory countries and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. In this context, increasing the school participation rate is becoming a priority for all countries that have agreed to this agreement. Increasing the school participation rate aims at a commitment of all social courts: from the individual, the family and the school in particular to society and the political courts in general. In accordance with the political commitments assumed as a country by 2030, according to the Ministry of Education, "Romania aims to reduce the early school leaving rate to a percentage similar to that provided by the European Union, namely: 9%." (2022) for the case of Romania, educational policies are concerned with implementing measures aimed at producing social change. According to the objectives set in the Europe 2020 program, it was expected that by 2020, the dropout rate in Romania would be 11.3% (assumed target). In fact, according to data provided by the Ministry of Education (www / edu.ro), the dropout rate in Romania is considerably higher, especially in underdeveloped rural and urban areas (26%). It should be noted that, for schools located in economically developed cities, the early school

leaving rate is below the European average and falls below the average of 11.3%. This supports the explanation for the increase in the dropout rate, namely: the low level of the welfare state influences the increase in the incidence rate on various social problems, including school dropout and early school leaving. Urban-rural inequalities, from the perspective of the school participation rate, contribute significantly to the appearance of social gaps both in terms of social development and in terms of social stability. It is well known that in poor societies, various social problems are identified that can lead to dropping out of school. Among them we mention: deviance, delinquency, labor migration, family dysfunctions, social segregation, cultural patterns, poverty etc.

2. Problem Statement

The conceptual delimitation of school dropout can be achieved by referring to different frameworks of analysis such as: formal, functional, structural and systemic. The formal perspective of defining school dropout refers to the table of quantitative indicators such as: number of enrollments in the system (relative to education cycles) compared to the number of graduates who have an educational background and hold a certificate of certification of learning outcomes (corresponding the same cycles of education). The functional paradigm describes school dropout in the context of specific indicators: number of absences, actions of deliberate interruption of school attendance, school re-enrollment actions after a period of out-of-school parking, out-of-school parking, very poor school results and lack of consensus the person educated to actively participate in school success, early school leaving (Anghel et al., 2016).

The explanation from the systemic perspective regarding school dropout comes in the context of considering the theory of ecological systems - the theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Tudge et al., 2021; Xia et al., 2020). Considering the systemic perspective, the ecosystem is described at the following levels: microsystemic (school, family and peer group), mesosystemic (environment where different interactions between microsystem substructures take place), exosystemic (microsystems, mesosystem and membership group), macrosystemic (beliefs, values, ideologies belonging to the community to which the child's family belongs) and the chronosystemic level (events in the life of the child and his family). Any imbalance inside and outside the system causes changes in the child's attitudes and behaviors towards school and the need for training and professional development. The balance of the systems influences the harmonious development of the child from a biopsychosocial point of view. The theory of models of overlapping spheres of influence can explain the problem of school dropout in the context of analyzing the role of the partnership between family, school and community in child education and the role of decision makers in social and educational policies (Epstein & Boone, 2022).

The causes of school dropout are many. Specialized studies show that they belong to the following register: individual, social, family causes. In the category of individual factors we can find: dysfunctions of normal biological and psychological development, disorders of adaptation and school integration, deviance, delinquency. In the category of family cases we mention: low economic and financial status, low level of education of parents, deliberate suppression by parents of the need for formal education of the child, family dissolutions, problems within the family: violence, parental migration, parental addictions, educational models deviant parenting.

In the category of social factors we mention: the inability of the education system to provide integrated services to children at risk of school exclusion, underfunding of the education system in order to implement educational programs to keep students at risk of dropping out of school in the education system, poor representation of multidisciplinary teams to address in an integrated way the cases of students at risk of dropping out of school, lack of predictability of certain measures adopted in the context of educational policies, lack of sustainability of intervention programs to prevent and combat school dropout in local communities, deprofessionalization of the educational system. In the category of causes related to the role of school in children's development can be identified the following: teachers disinterested in the school progress of students, inconsistent pedagogical training, "unattractive school" from the perspective of how to implement the educational process.

We find other causes in the register of cultural factors such as: restrictive beliefs about the need for formal education, poor representation of the importance of formal education in life, segregationist patterns (boys should go to school girls do not). We find the highest dropout rate at the beginning and end of the school year, especially in rural areas.

For the case of Romania, in order to combat school dropout, the National Program for Reducing School Dropout (PNRAS), the Early Warning Mechanism in Education (MATE) financed by the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience of Romania (PNRR) within the Reform 3, was implemented. , Reforming the compulsory education system to prevent and reduce early school leaving "and Investment 4," Supporting schools with high and medium risk of dropping out of school, from Component C.15 (Government Decision no. 1309/2021).

The ultimate goal is to reduce early school leaving. Within this program, the educational units that were located in the areas with a high degree of social exclusion were eligible. The project aims that by 2026, a minimum of 2,300 schools will be able to benefit from additional funding to support actions aimed at combating school dropout. A 25% reduction in school dropout is expected within them.

Schools in the Romanian education system have implemented the Early Warning Mechanism in Education (MATE) which is based on collecting data designed to detect, identify, register early and monitor the progress of students at risk of dropping out and leaving school early (Ministerial Order 6000/2021). In the category of data collected we identify poor school results, history of repetition, absences, inappropriate school behavior.

Depending on the categories of factors, intervention strategies are designed to combat risk factors. The interventions are carried out by teachers or other school specialists (psychologist, psychoeducational, social workers, counselors) or representatives of various or local or regional organizations or institutions with choir in providing the resources needed for the intervention. In this context, we identify the role and importance of school-family-community partnerships in combating the various causes of school dropout. In fact, the involvement in combating school dropout issues in an interdisciplinary and multisectoral manner is considered.

Any identified cause involves a complex intervention. There are no important and less important factors that lead to dropping out of school.

Other causes of school dropout: lack of parental involvement in the child's education, negative effects of the community: aggression, violence, lack of education, lack of a school counselor, a school

psychologist and at least one support teacher, poor involvement of local authorities, the social assistance service being limited only to the office part (social assistance documents, complementary allowance).

3. Research Questions

i.   In the context of the need to increase the school participation rate and the decrease of school dropout, the following questions are asked: what are the most effective actions that a school included in the risk category of school dropout and school exclusion can carry out so that the level of school attendance increases and the risk of dropping out is visibly diminished?

ii. What are the factors that influence the component of the effectiveness of the actions taken by the school so that school dropout is eradicated? What are the prospects for the sustainability of the actions taken by schools to eliminate the causes of school dropout?

iii. To what extent does the integrated services development strategy support increasing the school participation rate and combating school dropout? What are the educational practices identified at the level of schools that combat early school leaving?

4. Purpose of the Study

i.   The research aims to analyze how schools in geographical areas considered "areas of social exclusion" are involved in combating early school leaving and what are the educational practices designed to help reduce school dropout.

ii. The objectives of the case study are the following: to identify the types of successful educational practices (OS1); analysis of the perspectives on the sustainability of school interventions in reducing early school leaving (OS2).

5. Research Methods

The research involved case studies conducted on a number of five school units that faced an increased dropout rate and implemented actions aimed at reducing the rate of early school leaving among students. Two of the school units of the present study belong to the urban environment and three of them are from rural environment.

All analysed schools are included in the category of schools located in areas at risk of social exclusion.

The selection of schools for the case study was made taking into account the following criteria: the graduation rate of secondary education (the ratio between the number of 8th grade graduates and the number of students enrolled in the 8th grade at the beginning of the school year (C1)); the ratio between the number of students repeating and dropping out of school and the total number of students in secondary education (C2); the participation rate of lower secondary school graduates in the 8th grade national examination was defined as the ratio between the number of lower secondary school graduates participating in the examination and the total number of lower secondary school graduates; the percentage of 8th grade graduates who scored below 6 on the National Assessment out of the total number of

participants in the assessment (C3); reducing the number of students with more than 20 unexcused absences (C4).

These criteria are also considered eligibility criteria for schools that can benefit funding for the national school dropout program. The fifth criterion is school dropout rate in secondary education (C5) (Ministry of Education, Romania, 2022).

The case study was based on the analysis of quantitative indicators on the school participation rate of lower secondary school students in a period of 4 years (2022-2024), aged between 11 and 14 years and who participated in activities aimed at reducing the risk of dropping out of school. The table of case study indicators is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicators and results of school dropout

Indicators (2022)	CS1	CS2	CS3	CS4	CS5	Results (2025)	CS1	CS2	CS3	CS4	CS5
Inferior secondary school dropout rate (%)	7	11,5	11,51	7,69	4	Number of students who have completed secondary education (%)	2	7	7,5	4	2
8th grade graduation rate	100	80,4	86,36	91,67	100	Number of students who participated in the National Assessment in the 8th grade	100	97	95,7	93,75	100
Participation rate in the National Assessment in the 8th grade (%)	75	85,71	94,73	66.67	26,9	Number of students who scored below 6 on the National Assessment in the 8th grade	100	95	93,3	100	50%
Percentage of students who are unjustifiably absent more than 20 absences per semester (%)	30	19,4	41,3	10,12	5	Number of educational intervention plans	5	15	35	6	1

The types of activities implemented by school, in the context of combating early school leaving and reducing the rate of early school leaving, were analyzed. The data collection was done through application sheets within a grant designed to fund activities to combat early school leaving. The analysis and interpretation of the data was based on a data correlation sheet at the level of variables: MATE type activities (early warning mechanisms in education), coaching activities, "school after school" activities, intervention activities, activities for teacher training, compensation activities. The construction of research variables was done in the context of operationalizing the causes of school dropout.

6. Findings

In accordance with the first objective of the case study (identification of the types of successful educational practices - OS1), the following categories of educational practices were identified:

A. Activities *in the MATE category* (early warning mechanisms in education). This is a computer module that can be found in all schools in Romania that have secondary education and that collects data that describe the risk of leaving school early, specific needs. Information metering will allow early identification of risks associated with early school leaving or school dropout. All schools in the case study adopt this practice. In fact, we find it as a measure provided in the context of educational policies designed to combat school dropout.

    i. *The MATE Observation Sheet* is a tool applied by class masters to identify students at risk based on data related to attendance, grades, repetition and behavior.

    ii. Identifying children at risk and entering their data in the School Observatory ". This is a tool that makes a list of students at risk of dropping out or leaving school early, a list validated by the school principal together with the teachers.

    iii. Applying the tool for evaluating school success developed within the RESL.eu project to reduce early school leaving. . It allows students to measure their opinion on: parental, emotional and school support, teacher support, sense of belonging to the school, the classroom environment, school behavior and the aspirations and future plans of the students.

B. *Activities to reduce absenteeism in the classroom*. This category includes the following examples of educational practices designed to help combat early school leaving, as follows:

    i. activities to increase students' learning motivation, personal development activities, regular meetings with the school counselor both individually and in groups; in these meetings students will be supported in identifying their own needs, guidance and support in choosing the best solutions to solve their problems and to clarify the issues related to the effects of lack of personal education;

    ii. other activities are aiming to develop socio-emotional skills (recognition and expression of emotions, emotional self-regulation, problem solving) which will take place weekly, in groups and individually.

    iii. development of socio-emotional skills through extracurricular activities (thematic excursions, sports and educational competitions);

    iv. sports activities meant to develop a love for sports, a strong winning character, fair play in a competition and in life;

C. *Coaching activities (for teachers)* - these activities are meant to contribute to the learning of teachers for creating a favorable school climate, a friendly school space, for the adequacy of teaching methods, the attractiveness of teaching activities;

School-by-school activities aimed at:

    i. providing specialized informal or non-formal educational services that contribute to the improvement of school adaptation processes;

    ii. increasing the accessibility of the families from vulnerable groups who want better alternatives for childcare;

Intervention activities

i.   actions to raise awareness of the local community to support those in a situation of school dropout; emphasis is placed on the role of the social worker in the community;

Training activities for teachers - courses to develop attractive didactic design skills.

Compensation activities - training activities for teachers to develop professional skills in the area of "mediation";

D.   *Prevention activities* – "Parents' school "- prevention strategy, focused on developing in parents the skills to interact and empathize with their own children and to provide them with physical and emotional security; remedial activities; actions to combat violence, anti-bullying actions, measures to prevent drug use and reduce the risks associated with drug use, measures to combat school segregation.

E.   In line with the second objective of the research, "the analysis of the perspectives on the sustainability of school interventions in reducing early school leaving (OS2)", the case study reveals that this action is explained in the following conditions: social responsibility, family, community, intervention from social work services, the provision of specialized services, the professionalization of the system, equal access to integrated social services for all families identified with children at risk of school dropout. The schools have partnered with local communities, with various non-governmental organizations that can support specific activities. Continuous monitoring and early intervention on the causes is the effective strategy to combat school dropout.

7.   Conclusions

The case study reveals that the success of school and social inclusion is closely linked to the quality of social and educational services. School dropout can be reduced in the following conditions: the design of coherent measures of educational policy, apolitical and financial sustainability of all planned activities, the existence of national programs to facilitate the access of all at risck students to special activities designed to stimulate the rate of school participation and school success. The complexity of the roles played by the members who are part of the school institution requires a careful and detailed knowledge of the tasks and responsibilities within the school. They will successfully help prevent and combat early school leaving.

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