

ICPESK 2017

International Congress of Physical Education, Sport and Kinetotherapy

SCHOOL ABANDONMENT AT PRIMARY AND SECONDARY LEVELS IN THE RURAL VRANCEA COUNTY

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Abstract

Starting from the fact that participation in education is a right and an obligation of the child, we consider that school dropout is an extremely important and current issue for Romania, in general, and for the rural environment, in particular. The education system must find the means to be fair to all those involved and to act where the social and economic conditions are deficient. Today, the phenomenon of school dropout is validated as a serious social problem that has increased in our country in the last few years, especially in rural areas. The present work is part of the series of those that try to identify the factors and the determinant cause for the issues presented. Starting from interrogative assertions, the application of research methods and the obtained results have highlighted that some factors may favour dropout even at the middle school level. The results allow grouping both in school-related factors, as well as in the education system, family and student. Extracurricular activities nominated by students are a tool in the educational process and deserve to be encouraged by all stakeholders (community, school, family and children themselves). Considering the beneficial effects of physical activities on the practitioners, we believe that sports activities lead to the motivation of students to go to school. The obtained results lead us to various conclusions, including integration into group extracurricular sports activities as a means of influencing the continuation of participation in the courses organized by the school.

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Keywords: School dropout, education, countryside.



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1. Introduction

The educational system has a special place in every civilised society, being the starting point of sustainability, of the global economy (Brown, 2001). Generally, people are ranked according to their training, the studies they have. This seems to us to be natural, the work on acquiring knowledge and competence training has to be appreciated, but it is not always so.

Many times, people who have succeeded without having completed this gradual cycle of studies step up and their followers are misled. In this context, the school is meant to help students, regardless of their level of study, to develop their own scale of values correlated with those of the community and the society in which they live. Previous studies have highlighted that many students tend to build and develop a self-image based on abilities, compared to others or with an idealised image of what they should be. Thus, they may come to consider themselves worthless because they do not excel in certain areas or are unable to establish relationships and communicate effectively.

The fact that some of our students are attracted to other activities that are not related to the educational process, which makes them abandon school, flee from classes, smoke and admit to committing offenses, has determined us to initiate a wider research on school dropout in Romania to help us find solutions to prevent the phenomenon. This paper is part of this research.

There are a number of factors in the educational space that can influence school dropout, namely:

- insufficient knowledge of students due to the large number in a class or because of the disinterest manifested by the teachers;
- disregarding the age and individual peculiarities of pupils;
- lack of concern for didactic quotes to stimulate interest in learning;
- insufficient professional and psycho-pedagogical training of some teachers;
- the teacher's trust;
- insufficient endowments with teaching material, especially in rural areas;
- labelling pupils as a "weak student", "not good for anything".

All these unfavourable factors that may be different, but most often they are associated, lead to school dropout, which is the phenomenon of ending school attendance, leaving the education system, regardless of the level reached, before obtaining a full professional qualification or training or before the end of the started cycle of studies.

Starting from the idea launched by Edmond McLoughney (2011), an extensive study was carried out by specialists of the Institute of Education Sciences (2012) with UNICEF support regarding the existing regulations and methodologies, as well as how to register children in the system input through exit and loss/cohort analysis over a school year/unit of education. Of all the aspects that lead to the final results on the number of students/education, we have chosen to study in depth those about real abandonment. This paper presents a preliminary study.

In order to identify causes and unfavourable factors and to develop measures for school abandonment at an international level, with the participation of UNICEF and UNESCO, in 2010, it was launched the project "Global initiative on children outside the education system", a project in which Romania participated too.

Through this work, we try to answer concrete requirements for enriching the quality of the knowledge and education activity of students who are under the influence of unfavourable factors to their psychosocial development, which can be of an economic or individual nature. For example, the tasks of the curriculum cannot be performed, the student is not reoriented toward schools that are adequate to their possibilities, the student suffers from negative influences from friends, the lack of educational assistance, the family and school environments, the social and socio-cultural contexts.

The dropout rate at the primary school level is lower than at the middle school level. Children living in poor families have less chance to receive full school education. The economic status, correlated with school dropout, is assessed by variables such as:

- the degree of education and parenting;
- parents' profession;
- family income and living standards.

The secondary education, which in our country is mandatory, is the starting point, essential for the entire educational process. Continuing teacher specialization, adaptation to new teaching and communication methods and techniques is a desideratum. Teaching at school is an activity in which changes (laws, normative) are constantly occurring, which requires a permanent study, a continuous update (Butoi, 2001).

In order to achieve results, people working in this field need to be aware of the need for education, learning (self-motivation) and employers have an obligation to motivate them (Carré, 2000) through different methods (including financial and public recognition of their positive results).

2. Problem Statement

School abandonment, a growing phenomenon in Romania, has been signalled for a few years on the occasion of presenting the School Abandonment Report (2013). Referrals to this issue were also made by Pricopie (2013), then Education Minister, according to which four categories of children are affected in Romania: Roma, those from poor families, the rural ones and those with disabilities.

In order to prevent the phenomenon or to diminish it, students need to enjoy recreational and social activities that help them maintain their psychological and physical balance necessary for their harmonious development. It aims at promoting moral values, raising the cultural, artistic and scientific level through non-formal educational, social, recreational, sporting means, etc.

In the physical activities, certain positive attributes of personality are developed, providing a favourable environment for acquiring social skills, values and behaviours. Sport is regarded as a social institution that covers an intense socio-cultural area. Sport and sport activities reflect the interests and problems of society, requiring cooperation, communication, respect, friendship, cohesion, working together, tolerance, dedication, competence, competition and non-violence.

The ideal of young people's integration into society is the formation or development of a more complex personality. The systematic practice of sports activities in an organized environment carries out this process of integration of those with problems, supporting the educational side and the social side, a therapeutic one.

In the context of being part of a Future Europe, the Europe 2020 Strategy is working to support children and young people to enrol in the education and learning curriculum, with a firm objective to prevent / diminish early school leaving (*Strategic framework – Education and training 2020*, 2017).

The study was conducted in stages, interviewing 25 students who are in school dropout, 25 parents of target group pupils and 17 teachers working in their own field of study, education.

The questionnaires included independent variables and questions with variants of choice. Five variables from the respondents were considered relevant: sex; age; the geographical environment in which they live (rural or urban); the level of training: parents, teachers; status on the labour market: parents. For complex questions, the purpose of which was to identify employees' thinking about the role of education and the opportunities it offers, we turned to the following variants: very pleased; pleased; a little pleased; dissatisfied. After the end of the interview period, the questionnaires were analysed. Subsequently, the results were centralized and processed through variance analysis programs, taking into account the areas of activity, the age groups and the level of satisfaction of the respondents.

3. Research Questions

Does school dropout mark the failure of adapting the student to the requirements of school life?

Is the school environment tailored to the individual's possibilities and needs of the student?

Is school abandonment an indicator that signals the existence of difficulties in the school system and society?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of our study is to determine school dropout trends in rural areas in our country and to develop the knowledge base by highlighting the views of the main categories involved.

5. Research Methods

The methods used in the present study were the study of literature, the comparative analysis of the official documents of educational units on the inputs-outputs per school year and the survey by questionnaire.

6. Findings

If we refer to Vrancea County, the analysis of the documents reported by the schools for 2015-2016 showed that fewer pupils were registered at each level at the end of the school year (Table 01).

Table 01. Situation of students in Vrancea County in the school year 2015-2016

No.	School year	Level of study	Inputs at the start of school year	Outputs at the end of school year	Difference input/output 2015-2016
1	2015-2016	Kindergarten	8 569	8 524	45
2	2015-2016	Primary	16 266	15 849	417
3	2015-2016	Secondary	13 443	12 952	491

The good start in the primary education system is continued by the lower secondary education. This study presents the results of the analysis of the official documents of two rural schools in Vrancea County, the Timboiești Middle School and the Slimnic Middle School. The situation of inputs-outputs per school year 2015-2016 in the two schools is shown in Tables 02 and 03.

Table 02. Situation of pupils from Timboiești Middle School, Vrancea County, in the school year 2015-2016

No.	School year	Level of study	Inputs at the start of school year	Outputs at the end of school year	Difference input/output 2015-2016
1	2015-2016	Primary	113	96	17
2	2016-2017	Secondary	95	44	51

Table 03. Situation of pupils from Slimnic Middle School, Vrancea County, in the school year 2015-2016

No.	School year	Level of study	Inputs at the start of school year	Outputs at the end of school year	Difference input/output 2015-2016
1	2015-2016	Primary	123	110	13
2	2015-2016	Secondary	93	64	29

Regarding the data obtained from the questionnaire survey, as the main method for determining the actual conditions for early school leaving in Vrancea, the views of the surveyed categories are presented below.

The distribution of respondents by gender is shown in Table 04 and reveals a rather large discrepancy based on respondents' gender.

Table 04. Percentage breakdown of respondents by gender / teacher

Group of participants	Gender		Difference (%)
	Women (%)	Men (%)	
Education	13 (76.47%)	4 (23.52%)	9 (52.95%)
Parents	15 (60%)	10 (40%)	5 (20%)
Pupils	14 (56%)	11 (44%)	3 (12%)

Variations are significant in most women's education, mothers generally come to parent-teacher meetings, and school dropouts in these schools are more common in girls. Depending on age, data from Table 05 and Table 06 were obtained.

Table 05. Percentage breakdown of respondents by age / education and parents

Group of participants	Age					Difference (%) min-max
	21-30 (%)	31-40 (%)	41-50 (%)	51-60 (%)	Over 60 (%)	
Education	9 (52.94%)	4 (23.52%)	2 (11.76%)	1 (5.88%)	1 (5.88%)	(47.05%)
Parents	7 (28%)	15 (60%)	3 (12%)	0 ()	0 ()	(48%)

Table 06. Percentage breakdown of respondents by age / pupils

Group of participants	Age			Difference (%) min -max
	12-13 (%)	13-14 (%)	14-15 (%)	
Pupils	4 (16%)	5 (20%)	16 (64%)	(48 %)

We note that the most representative age category of respondents is 21-30 years for people working in education, followed by the age group of parents of 31-40 years and the age group of pupils of 14-15 years, who are at risk of school dropout. We consider that the interest of young people in such a study is higher because they are the ones who suffer the most from the current labour market changes. The level of training of the persons who participated in the research is shown in Table 07.

Table 07. Percentage of respondents representing education staff according to their level of education

Group of participants	Studies			
	High School (%)	Post High School (%)	University (%)	Postgraduate (%)
Education	-	-	14 (82.35%)	3 (17.64%)

Table 08. Percentage of respondents representing parents according to their level of education

Group of participants	Studies			
	Primary (%)	Secondary (%)	High School (%)	University (%)
Parents	15 (60%)	10 (40%)	-	-

The recorded percentages show that the education staff meets the minimum level required to obtain a job in education (60% of the total respondents) and only 3 persons (40%) continued their training through postgraduate studies. As can be seen, the current situation of parents working in agriculture indicates that over 40% of them have not completed 8 classes.

In order to identify other factors that could represent causes for active involvement/non-involvement in the efforts to prevent/reduce school dropout by primary and secondary school students, we considered that the data obtained by applying the questionnaires to education staff and parents, referring to the level of satisfaction with their own professional training, would provide us with data for making relevant conclusions for our study. Table 09 shows the obtained responses and reflects the degree of personal satisfaction with the level of qualification as a result of the education received.

Table 09. Degree of satisfaction with the training of teachers and parents

Group of participants	Satisfaction level	Average (%)
Education	Very pleased	17 (100%)
	Pleased	0
	A little pleased	0
	Dissatisfied	0
Parents	Very pleased	0
	Pleased	4 (16%)
	A little pleased	18 (72%)
	Dissatisfied	3 (12%)

The teaching staff is very satisfied (100%), regardless of the age group they belong to, shows a certain degree of self-satisfaction and inertia in their own preparation. For parents, it appears to be a very large difference between the levels of people's satisfaction. In this case, extremes have values far below

average - few people are totally satisfied or dissatisfied, most of them being slightly dissatisfied. We considered relevant the satisfaction of the group of parents, since after the first discussions in this respect the responses to the questions "To what extent would you be willing to continue your studies if you had the opportunity?" and "To what extent do you think that professional training can help you in your career?" showed an awareness of the need for studies. 15 people state that they would like to continue their studies, thinking that this would be useful for them in the future, 8 people say that it is enough for them and 2 people have no motivation and do not want to go to school because it would be useless for them.

As far as the pupils are concerned, we have been interested in the reasons why pupils are absent from school, the frequency of absenteeism and what might help them not to miss school often.

Figure 01 shows the number of responses/absences from school.

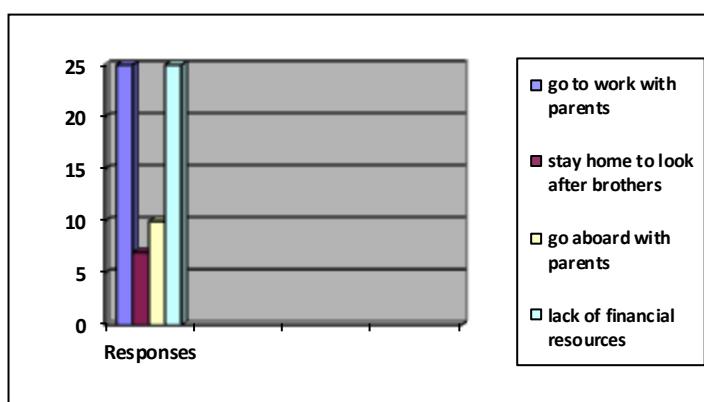


Figure 01. Responses about the reasons for absenteeism from school

With regard to the duration of absence, there are differences from 1-2/week to 2 months/semester (Table 10).

Table 10. The situation of pupils' responses regarding absences from school

No.	Length of school absenteeism	No. of students
1	1/2 days/week	4
2	1-2 weeks/month	11
3	2/3 months/semester	10

The surveyed students, in a 100% proportion, believe that financial support, organizing the after school program and increasing the number of extracurricular activities, especially those in which they could participate at school, would help and motivate them to come to school.

7. Conclusion

The study emphasises the tendency of early school leaving in the rural area of Vrancea County, which is quite high in the analysed levels of education. It is noted that there are degrees of satisfaction and professional results depending on the fields of activity. Parents have come to a degree of awareness of the need for education, but it is still a long way to putting thought into practice.

Education and the importance of continuous training must be promoted for both young people and adults at any age and in any occupational context, but especially at the level of teaching staff in education.

The family and school must provide the necessary assistance to remove the harmful factors and find motivating solutions such as: support for those left behind in order to attend the curriculum/level of education, organization of an after school program, diversification of extracurricular sports activities correlated with students' options, a prize system and recognition of progress. These must be priorities for rural schools in Vrancea County, in general, and for the two schools participating in the study, in particular.

Greater involvement of all actors with education, family, school, pupils themselves is needed to prevent/reduce/stop the phenomenon of school dropout. School failure is a dangerous phenomenon that causes negative effects both individually and at the society level.

We believe that the family and school environments have a duty to act for the value of the individual, to ensure the motivational context for the continuation of studies, the orientation/reorientation toward schools adequate to the possibilities of each.

Acknowledgments

This study is conducted under the aegis of the National University of Physical Education and Sports in Bucharest, within the doctoral studies.

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