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School Dropout Determinants in Rural Communities: The Effect of Poverty and Family Characteristics

Andreea-Mihaela NITA¹, Gabriela MOTOI², Cristina ILIE GOGA³

Abstract

This article presents the results of a quantitative research in a Romanian rural community, which aimed to analyze how the socio-economic conditions and family type can influence the phenomenon of school dropout. The results of our research are also confirmed by the results of other specialized studies that highlight the fact that 1 in 2 children living in rural Romania are at risk of poverty and socio-economic marginalization. Or, poverty and socio-economic marginalization, to which we can add the family profile (especially the parents' level of education) are the main determinants of the school dropout of children living in rural communities. In order to verify this hypothesis, our research was conducted on a sample of 363 people from a rural community in South-Western Romania, which is in line with the national demographic trends existing in the rural communities exposed to marginalization and poverty: a decreasing birth rate in the last 5 years, a high mortality (above county average), a negative natural growth, a high share of the illiterate, a high share of people whom children are facing difficulties in access to education etc.

Keywords: school dropout, family, economic conditions, poverty, social exclusion

Introduction

From the sociological, pedagogical, psycho-pedagogical perspectives, the problem of school dropout is of particular importance because it affects especially those pupils who face poverty, thus becoming an obstacle for a large segment of

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this vulnerable category of population towards the valorisation of their educational opportunities and improving their social status.

The issue of school dropout can also be analysed economically if we consider the fact that in the context of analysing this social problem, we see a part of the human resource- labour force - that is not being used properly and which has a negative impact on economic mobility within a society. In most cases, school failure leads to alienation and social exclusion and can have economic, social, professional, educational, and cultural consequences. Thus, people who encounter difficulties throughout school years are prone to becoming unqualified workers being offered lower wages.

Literature review

School dropout can also be understood as a consequence of a “deterioration of the bond between the young, the school and the society” (Favresse & Piette, 2004), or as a “progressive process of disinterest for school, the result of accumulation of several internal or external factors to the educational system” (Leclercq & Lambillotte, 2000). School dropout has major implications on the personal development, as well as short, medium, and long-term consequences on human resources development, on the community development, in general. School failure represents the discordance between the objective demands and the level of psychophysical development of the individual. School failure can be defined also in relation with results below expectations and current school requirements.

In American literature, we can find large articles and studies regarding this phenomenon, with a high focus on the early school dropout causality. Thus, many of American researchers indicate a large number of dropout predictors such as: poverty, race, lack of parental involvement in children’s educational life, parental level of education, arguing that “family background alone could explain most of the variation in educational outcomes” (Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Coleman, 1988; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Also, school abandonment represents “the ultimate evasion behaviour, which consists in ending school attendance, leaving the education system, regardless of the level attained, prior to obtaining a full professional qualification or training, or before completing the level of initial education” (Neamțu, 2003: 199).

In French scientific literature, we may observe the school abandonment defined as referring to the person who dropped out of school without having obtained a secondary education diploma during a normal period of 5 years (Brown, 1997: 737). In other papers, secondary school dropout refers to “the removal from the category of youth of those students who have not obtained a secondary school diploma or who are not enrolled in high school education” (Beauchesne, 1991: 3). To explain the social failure (and, thus, school dropout), there are several

theoretical approaches in literature, among which the theories of intelligence and the theories of material and cultural deprivation.

Intelligence theories consider the intelligence coefficient (IQ), advancing as a general hypothesis that people with a lower socio-economic level have lower scores in intelligence and IQ measurement tests than those with a superior socio-economic level (von Stumm & Plomin, 2015: 31; Schoon *et al.*, 2012: 716-722.). Moreover, the promoters of this theories claim that intelligence is an inherited fact. However, this perspective was strongly criticized by sociologists who considered that genetics and the environment have an interrelated influence (as in the case of poverty or education, for example).

The theories of cultural deprivation (Apple *et al.*, 2002; Douglas, 1964; Bourdieu, 1979, 1981) link school success to the ability to communicate. According to Bernstein, middle-class children learn to use their communication skills at a lower age than those who are part of the working class. As a result, middle-class children have a more elaborated code “which is essential to academic studies, for acquiring school success, whereas the working class were trapped in the use of restricted *codes* even in written work” (Apple *et al.*, 2002: 4).

Douglas (1964) analysed the role of the family during primary socialization in the formation of educational values: middle class children form much faster and better set their educational values than those from the working class, whose parents do not value education and its role in achieving social success.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the educational system in industrialized societies underestimates the knowledge, skills, experience, and therefore the culture of working-class children, “functioning in a way that legitimizes class inequalities” (Sullivan, 2002: 144). More specifically, Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective is based on several essential concepts: “the cultural arbitrariness of pedagogical action, through its social and linguistic codes, valorizes the *cultural capital* and the *habitus* of the dominant classes, generating a sort of symbolic *violence*” (Bourdieu, 1979; 1981). The school legitimizes “a bourgeoisie culture”, which is far removed from common culture (lower class culture). In contrast to the meritocratic discourse, “the educational institution pushes many of the children in disadvantaged classes to failure and neutralizes the (school) success of the children in the upper social classes; in this way *social reproduction* occurs” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990: 205). He also promotes the idea that middle-class students are included in the education system in a much more advantageous position and enjoy social success because they have the same social “foundation” as that of the predominant class (like their teachers). At the same time, children from the working class cannot enjoy social success because their level of knowledge and their social background is considered inferior and therefore does not fold on the features and the characteristics of the education system.

There are also sociological studies that are linking the problem of school dropout to the family, as an influential factor or highlighting the fact that, in

families lacking one of the parents, maternal education and poverty, alongside with individual characteristics, have an important role in the phenomenon of school abandonment (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992: 96).

The educational model provided by parents (Voicu, 2010: 22) is another determinant of school dropout. Most often, students who drop out of education come from families where parents have graduated lower secondary school. As a rule, these parents do not get involved in children's education, and they are not aware of the risk posed by early school leavers. Most of the time, they do not manage their daily activities "in such a way as to meet the child's communication needs, focussing his/her attention of the child" (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011: 216). Even though each child has their own personal and educational path, those who drop out of school have some common characteristics. First, they are of modest social origin, confronted with a precariousness of living conditions. Among the risk factors of school dropout we can mention the following: economic poverty, social poverty, lack of social and community services, lack of cultural services, poor living conditions, difficulties in traveling and transport, geographical isolation, lack of valorisation of education. Of all these factors, we can see that many of them refer to the problem of poverty (being generated by poverty or favouring its perpetuation).

The problem of extreme poverty is much more complex than the lack of resources. Consequently, the financial support, although very important, is far from sufficient. Living in a culture of poverty, children predisposed to the risk of abandon can hardly deviate from their situation. Very few of them can overcome the difficult situation and obstacles related to poverty, and thus to be resilient and succeeding in transcending those situations by developing surviving skills that later could help them to have a normal development. The relationship between poverty and education goes in both directions. First, poverty reduces the access to education and dramatically shortens the duration of school life and graduation level. Then, poverty is proportional to the educational level that is reached, so the lack of education produces poverty.

Consequently, the theoretical approaches to this issue are built around the idea that some families provide a cultural environment conducive to child development, while others present a precarious cultural and material situation. On the one hand, children from privileged social backgrounds appear as being advantaged, compared to children of the lower classes, given their family environment that promotes education and learning (Bourdieu, 1979). On the other hand, disadvantaged families cannot provide children the minimum cultural references needed to make effective the existing educational offer. Moreover, children belonging to disadvantaged backgrounds are educated in a culture that is different from the dominant culture offered by the school, because in their family they acquire values, attitudes, styles of work that are different to those that lead to school success (and, later, to the social success). Such children have high chances to come into conflict with the

norms of school, because they will perceive them as foreign, different from their living environment (hence, their attitude of protest or school dropout).

Methodology

Research type: methods and research tool

The *quantitative research* conducted by us in a rural community from South-West Romania was based on the *survey method*, using the *questionnaire* as a research tool. We have used a questionnaire with 28 questions: open-ended, close-ended, matrix-table, single or multi-response questions. The sample of the research was representative, the resulting conclusions being numerically reported to the studied population (the sample size was 363 people - 10,23 % of the total population).

The selection of the sample

Sample was selected according to the research plan: our respondents were persons aged over 18 and were living in households where there was at least one school-age child (6-16 years old). For the research, we have used a non-probabilistic stratified sample: by sex and age groups. The sample of respondents (gender balanced - 52.6% women, 47.4% men) was composed of people aged between 18 and 65 years old. Also, almost half of the respondents (41.3%) were between the ages of 36 and 45, being followed by the persons in the age category 26-35 years (28.3%).

Features of participants

Concerning the structure of the sample by occupation, this reflects the range of occupations of people living in rural areas: almost three-quarters (68.8%) of the interviewed persons did not have a job, nor were they registered as being “unemployed”. To a big percentage difference to these are those who worked as a “qualified worker”, “unskilled worker”, “farmer”, etc. Also, 29.1% of the interviewed population graduated high school, while 26.3% graduated gymnasium. The share of higher education graduates is very low - 6.4%. Moreover, this diversified structure of instruction level has been useful to verify the applicability of Boudon’s theory of inequality of chances. This theory argues that there is a close link between the performance of young people on the labour market and the level of education, income, and cultural level of their parents. At the same time, this theoretical perspective promotes the idea that children’s entry into the professional groups of the upper strata is related to the status of the parents, which puts children in unequal positions and prevents them from going up to the higher levels of the social hierarchy (Boudon 1971).

Results and discussion

According to the official statistics, the community in which we conducted our research is in the South-West of Romania and has registered in the beginning of 2020 a population of 3548 inhabitants, of which about 1100 were Roma ethnics. The rural community is in line with the national demographic trends existing in the rural communities exposed to poverty: a decreasing birth rate in the last 5 years, a high mortality (above county average) and, consequently, a negative natural growth. With a negative natural increase (-8.36%) is demographically among the marginalized communities, the negative natural growth being both a cause and a consequence of the social phenomenon of poverty.

From our research, we have chosen to present the results of those questions that prove the paradigm analysed by us in the theoretical part of this article: the socio-economic climate affects the pupils school participation, implicitly their school performance, eventually generating school dropout. Of the total of the population surveyed, almost a quarter, 24.1%, live in families where there is at least one school-age child (0-16 years) who does not attend school, which confirms the conclusions of many specialized studies advancing the idea that the Romanian rural environment is characterized by a high rate of dropout, starting from the primary level of education (Voicu, 2010). We should note that this rate of abandonment is much higher among the Roma minority (25% of our sample was represented by Roma ethnics) and a correlation of the affirmative responses (*yes, there are school-age children who do not attend school at all*) with the respondent's ethnicity is presented in the table below.

Table 1. The ethnic structure of families where there is at least one school-age child (6-16 years old) who is not attending school at all (Bivariate analysis)

	Roma minority	Romanians (majority population)
Yes, in our household there are school-age children who do not attend school at all	77.6%	22.4%

A possible cause of school dropout among Roma pupils is that Roma families are very numerous and often older children are forced to take care of younger children or take care of their household. Also, marriage is being practiced at younger ages (12-14 years), Roma girls being the ones who give up, most of the time, for school for this reason. At the same time, we cannot omit the precarious conditions in which Roma live: small houses, with no property, which is not a proper environment for children to learn.

For those who indicated that in their families there are school-age children but who do not attend school, we tried to capture the reasons why they did not attended classes. It follows that the main reasons why children do not attend school

are all the economic conditioning of the families they come from: 70.8% of the respondents said they cannot send their children to school due to the lack of money and 23.9% stated that this situation is caused by the relatively large distance to which the school is located from home.

Table 2. What are the reasons why your child / children do not go to school?

Lack of money	70.8%
Distance to school	23.9%
Teachers discriminate against them	4.0%
Another reason *	1.3%

* Less than 1%, each: do not handle learning activities, do not have the ability to learn they do not know to write and to read.

At the same time, 2.5% of the respondents said they did not send their children to school, because they are marginalized and excluded by teachers (87.2% of those who indicated this response are Roma). Indeed, the large distance to the school is also a cause of early school leaving, especially for pupils from rural environment, where poorly developed infrastructure and facilities limited transport represent an obstacle to the access to school. The bivariate analysis presented in the table below correlate the reasons of not attending school with the degree of poverty; thus, poor families are often facing difficulties for sending their children to school, either because of the “lack of money”, either because they live in peripheral zones, at a considerable distance from school. From the table below, we can find out also that there are children who are experiencing discrimination at school, because they belonging to poor families.

Table 3. What are the reasons why your child / children do not go to school? (Bivariate analysis – type of the family*)

Reasons for not attending school	Type of family	
	A poor family, whose income is very low and not permanent	Families of average condition, with revenues that cover expenses and allow small savings
Lack of money	87.6%	12.4%
Distance to school	67.5%	32.5%
Teachers discriminate against them	89.3%	10.7%
Another reason	56.2%	43.8%

* based on the respondents' self-perceptions

64.5% of respondents indicated that their child homework activity is not supervised at all. This are children whom parents are lacking instruction, either they have a low educational level. This percentage can be explained by the fact that in rural areas, most of the time is allocated to household and agricultural work in the plots of land near the house, being an activity that plays a very important role in securing the goods of daily living. Therefore, in those families where there are children between the ages of 6 and 16 and who are attending school, the supervision of homework activity is neglected; most of the time, their parents don't know how to help their children, because sometimes they have a low educational level.

When asked to choose from a list, in order of importance, the main causes for which rural children do not attend school, the results obtained for each category of response are varied, but they could be grouped into the two major categories of factors: those related to family and those related to socio-economic conditions. Therefore, the highest share of responses was obtained by those indicating lack of material resources of the family, poverty (38.9%); they are part from disorganized families (21.5%); large distance from home to school (11.8%); their parents left them and went to work abroad- (13.2%); low level of education of parents (5.3%).

Table 4. What do you consider to be the reasons why rural children do not attend school?

Lack of material resources of the family, poverty	38.9%
They are part from disorganized families	21.5%
Their parents left them and went to work abroad	13.2%
Large distance from home to school	11.8%
Low level of education of parents	5.3%
The negative influence of the entourage	4.1%
Refusal of parents to send their children to school	1.9%
Another reason*	3.3%

* Less than 1%, each: school absenteeism, involvement to housework, a school curriculum too difficult, early marriage, parents' alcohol consumption

The fact that the third place in the order of answers indicated is the departure of the parents to work abroad confirms an unfortunate reality of the Romanian society, especially after the year 2007: the mass external emigration of adults, who left their children to be taken care of by relatives (in most cases grandparents). This has been the subject of numerous Romanian sociology studies, which have attempted not only to present the causes and the effects of this phenomenon of child abandonment by parents, but also to identify prevention strategies and solutions (Sandu, 2010).

One of the main characteristics of the lower social classes is the indifference of parents on children's education and school activities that can cause failure, which

on long term, could become a school dropout. Often this indifference is due to the way the school is valued by parents, regardless of their financial situation. In many societies, especially emerging ones, school came to be abandoned, because it is often not perceived as a value, being not important in different hierarchies.

Over 65% of our respondents are not keeping a strong contact with the school where their child is learning, if we take into consideration that 27.4% of them say they go to school rarely, only when there are special problems, 26.1% only get in touch with the teachers when they are invited to school, while 15.8% do not get in touch with the teachers at all.

Table 5. Do you contact the teacher to inform you of your child’s educational progress?

Yes, but very rarely, only when there are special problems	27.4%
Only when I’m invited to school	26.1%
No	15.8%
Yes, once a semester	15.7%
Yes, periodically (monthly)	14.9%

These percentages also confirm the findings of other studies that point out that parents with a higher educational level (high school or university), or parents of upper classes are those involved in the educational path of their children, while parents from working class do not have a strong contact with the school. This is what Meirieu called “bulky parents and chronic absentees” (Meirieu, 2000: 221-222).

School absenteeism is one of the first signs of abandonment risk. If it does not degenerate into abandonment, it remains a social problem characterized by escapist behaviour, reflecting a lack of interest, motivation, and confidence in school education. Regarding this issue, 64.4% of respondents said they were aware of their children’s unmotivated absences, but they get this information because they are announced by the schoolteacher or the head teacher. This confirms the lack of close communication between parent and child regarding their school attendance, and this gap of communication is deeper when the educational level of the parents is lower.

The previous idea is also highlighted by the answers to the question: *How often do you ask your child about what happened at school?* Thus, the statistical processing of the responses revealed that 67.8% of the respondents rarely ask their child about their activity at school, compared to only 9.0% who do this every day. Those parents who are having a stronger communication with their children (regarding school issues) are parents who have a higher educational level – high-school (54.5%), tertiary level (27.5%), or post-secondary school (7.5%), as we may observe from the bivariate analysis, presented in the *Table 6*.

Table 6. How often do you ask your child about what happened during the day at school? (Bivariate analysis –level of education)

	Primary school	Lower secondary	High school	Vocational school	Post-secondary school	Higher education
Rarely (quite rare)	37.5%	30.0%	12.5%	12.5%	-	7.5%
Often (quite often)	4.5%	12.5%	27.5%	17.5%	4.5%	33.5%
Every day (very often)	-	2.5%	54.5%	7.5%	7.5%	27.5%
Never	47.5%	47.5%	-	5.0%	-	-

Basically, given that our respondents have a low level of instruction, the answers to the question above confirm the following hypothesis: the higher the value of education in a family, the greater the involvement of the family. However, parental involvement in schooling is very important because it has “indirect primary effects on the child’s self-image as a person who learns and, thus, strengthens their high expectations” (Smith *et al.*, 2007).

The next two questions aimed, on the one hand, at finding out the perceptions of the respondents about their family in terms of income level, and, most importantly, what are the main needs that they cannot fully satisfy; on the other hand, through the answers to this question, we were able to confirm that our respondents are part of families who are facing a severe economic marginalization, being exposed to the risk of poverty.

The economic marginalization brings with it the danger that parents will no longer be able to send their children to school, as confirmed by the percentage of 25.5% of respondents who indicated that they have difficulty in “keeping the child in school”.

Because we have analysed a rural community where the level of incomes of the population is low, the most important needs indicated by the respondents are conditioned by the lack of money: the most important need is related to the difficulties encountered in “ensuring daily family food”, indicated by 33.4% of respondents; the explanation of this percentage comes from the fact that we are talking about a high unemployment and unoccupied community, with a small share of people who have a monthly income.

Table 7. Which of the following needs you cannot fully satisfy?

Ensuring daily family food	33.4%
Keeping child in school	25.5%
Payment of taxes	11.8%
Treating health disorders (diseases)	10.4%
House repair	8.3%
Clothing	6.2%
Payment of agricultural and farm works	2.8%
Ensuring food for animals in the household	1.0%
Other needs	0.3%
N/A	0.3%

Thus, the following three needs confirm the theory that poverty affects the population health and its level of education. Thus, our research revealed that: 33,4% of respondents have difficulties in providing daily food for the family they belong to; 25.5% hardly keep their child at school; 10.4% cannot properly treat their health problems.

Table 8. In what category does your family belong to?

A poor family, whose income is very low and not permanent	74.1%
Families of average condition, with revenues that cover expenses and allow small savings	25.9%

Regarding the self-perception of the type of family they are part of, the table above show that nearly three-quarters (74.1%) of the respondents perceive themselves as part of poor families whose incomes are very low and are not permanent. The answers to this question also confirm the fact that poverty is a factor that affects the quality of education, obstructing the formation of the pupil's abilities for learning.

Conclusion

As a result of our research, we confirmed the hypothesis that there are two main causes of school abandonment: family and poverty. Poverty, as a determinant of school dropout, action in two ways: either children cannot attend school because of their parents' inability to buy clothes or school supplies, or they must contribute to family maintenance, which no longer allows them to allocate time to learning.

As far as the influence of the family factor on school dropout, our research has highlighted the fact that children from poor families (where at least one parent does not work), where parents are devoid of education (especially those who are part of the Roma ethnic group) or have a low level of education (neglecting the educational activity of children), tend to follow the models offered by parents and their concepts, according to which education is not a priority and the attendance of the school does not increase the chances of a better future.

In the long run, two trends can be outlined, which, so far, educational policies that have been nationally implemented have failed to fully correct: the rural environment is deficient in terms of educational infrastructure, an environment where we meet families whose level of income is insufficient to send their children to study in the city, poor families that due to the lack of education and of the pressure to send their children to start working as early as possible; the rural environment is specific to those families with a low level of education who tend to also reduce their children's level of education, this way, condemning them to poverty. In the community where we have conducted the research, the poor economic and social situation of families, the migration of parents abroad leaving their children in the care of other relatives, the lack of education or the low education of parents, the use of children by their families for various household activities, are the causes that lead the pupils to drop out of school.

Recommendations

An effective school dropout prevention and control program must consider all its determinants and include measures for each of them. From our point of view, a particularly important role should be given to two types of dropout: school dropout due to the "physical absence" of parents - who are working abroad, and dropout caused by "resignation of parents" - parents who are not interested in their child's educational activity. The first type of dropout is worrying, amid an alarming increase in the migration of Romanians for work abroad. In this sense, a successful program to prevent school dropout must also include activities with parents, in order to make them aware of the role of education in the personal and professional development of their children. The more parents or other family members are involved in the education of pupils, by supervising their homework, participating in meetings with parents or in other types of educational activities, the better the pupils' school results; also, pupils will become more prepared and motivated to actively participate in educational and extracurricular activities. For the proper functioning of the school-family partnership, it is necessary for parents to give importance to school, to show interest in their children's education, to show concern for children's professional training.

Also, an important role can be played by the financial support programs of educational institutions, which must ensure adequate infrastructure and human resources corresponding to a quality education: endowment with laboratories and

modern equipment, qualified and motivated teachers in their activity (through programs with European funding) etc. Last but not least, another recommendation aims at designing appropriate school and professional guidance actions, which should take place throughout schooling, but especially at the end of important cycles (gymnasium and high school), which can prepare pupils, later, for a successful transition to active life.

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