

School Dropouts – A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract: *The following article is a fragment of a PhD thesis and is aimed at outlining the main traits of the school dropout phenomenon starting from the different perspectives of the authors in defining the concept, explaining the causes, understanding the consequences. The summary of an important collection of studies on the subject is meant to serve as theoretical basis for researches in the field and to offer the premises for elaborating prevention and intervention strategies.*

Keywords: *dropout, abandon, early school leaving, special educational needs*

I. INTRODUCTION

Justification

In the context of the knowledge society, based on research, innovation, in the context of globalization and the continuously increasing demands for finding a job, in the context of the advancement of the competencies-based training, a phenomenon with alarming effects for the individual and also for the society as a whole is more observable: school dropout. The National Education Law (2011), Article 2(3), defines the educational ideal in the following way: the free, whole and harmonious development of the human individuality, in the shaping of the autonomous personality and assuming a system of values that are necessary for the personal accomplishment and development, for the cultivation of the entrepreneurial spirit, for the active civic participation in society, for social inclusion and integration on the labor market and Article 16 (1) specifically states that the general compulsory education is 10 years and includes the primary and lower secondary education. Secondary education becomes mandatory until 2020 at the latest. To achieve these goals, a proper legislative context is required, and also highly qualified human and material resources, coherent educational politics, innovative strategies and action plans. All these become useless in the absence of schooled population, in the context of a general lack of learning motivation, a reduced level of self-esteem, frequently caused by poverty, lowered trust in the school institution and the general devaluation of the idea of education.

The necessity of this paper comes from the need of understanding the school dropout phenomenon that became such an important issue at the national and international level. The lack of consensus regarding the definition of school dropout creates difficulties in any type of analysis, measurement and investigation of the phenomenon. The meanings of the concept vary from two-week absenteeism to three years.¹ If school dropout means the interruption of ongoing courses, in the general and professional education, early school leaving refers to the abandonment of all forms of education and professional training, before the finalization of the superior secondary education or its equivalent in the professional education and training (obtaining a qualification or diploma corresponding to the 2nd ISCED level).²

II. DEFINING THE CONCEPT

The attempt in defining the phrase school dropout heats the obstacles raised by the diversity of perspectives and the ambiguity of theories. The formal definitions that relate the phenomenon to obtaining diploma, enrolling into an educational system are in contrast with the functional definitions that refer to the competences that allow the individuals to work or to function in a specific environment.

The American studies [Schargel, 2001; Orfield, 2006] associate the concept of dropout with the situations in which youngsters leave the school without obtaining a high school diploma. The British literature [Bennett, 2003; Johnes & McNabb, 2004; Blanden & Gregg, 2004; Dearden et al., 2011] prefers the expression early school leaving considering all levels – from preschool to high school, the term dropout being used with a more narrow meaning, referring to the secondary or vocational education. The Romanian studies use school dropout and early school leaving as synonyms. Cristina Neamtu (2003) defines dropout as the behaviour of school evasion that means that the individual will stop attending school before ending the level of studies that he/she began by reflecting the lack of interest or of trust in the educational process.

The studies [Finn, 1989, Newmann, Wehlage and Lambord, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko and Fernandez, 1989] have emphasized the fact that school dropout is the climax of a process of

¹Ivasiuc, A., „School dropout for Roma children – myth and reality”, IN *Trimestral informative bulletin of UNICEF Romania*, no. 7, 2010, <http://www.unicef.ro/>

²Commission staff working paper, *Reducing early school leaving*, Accompanying document to the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving.

disengagement regarding school. Researchers describe the school dropout phenomenon by using correlative concepts such as: school misfit, absenteeism, repeat, early school leaving, and by emphasizing the predictors, by analysing the determinants and by outlining the profile of the student at risk of dropping out.

School misfit refers to a disparity between the student's needs and the requirements of the school or between the student's potential and the learning tasks. The authors [Popescu, 1991; Jordan et al. 1996; Schargel, 2001; Neamțu, 2003; Sălăvăstru, 2004; Zidărescu, 2009; Marcu, 2010] differentiate between the pedagogical misfit that refers to the incapacity of achieving the school tasks and the behavioural misfit associated to discipline and interaction issues regarding students inside the school environment. School misfit is fostered by a series of factors such as: school failure, incapacity of responding to the requirements of the school community, school immaturity [Cristea, 2000].

Absenteeism refers to the frequent and repeated absences of students from the curricular activities, due to weak motivation, to inadequate conditions of study, but also to other factors such as health problems, children forced to work, or other pressures of the school [Neamțu, 2003].

Repeat is the situation in which a student, who attended the necessary classes for ending an academic year, is required to take the same classes again during the next year. Retaking the classes is based on different criteria but for avoiding to consider this a punishment and instead to transform it into a strategy of school reintegration it is not enough to offer the student the chance of attending the same activities that previously generated the failure, but to implement an individual educational plan in accordance to the specific needs of the student who repeats the year with a special emphasis on covering the knowledge gaps, on developing achievement motivation, on avoiding isolation.

Early school leaving³ means that the student did not finish the secondary school, the compulsory education and did not obtain any qualification or diploma. Early school leaving implies giving up any form of education and refers to youngsters who:

- gave up school before finishing the compulsory studies;
- finished the compulsory school but did not obtain any qualification after the upper secondary level;
- Attended professional training courses without reaching an equivalent of the qualification at upper secondary level.

A common point of the approaches of this phenomenon consists in associating it with the idea of leaving school, no matter the level, before obtaining a qualification of a complete professional training aimed at ensuring the social and economic autonomy of the person or before closing a cycle of studies [Zidărescu, 2009; Marcu, 2010]. The studies [Zidărescu, 2009] are centered on two concepts by highlighting the determinant of the phenomenon:

- *drop-out*—the decision of dropping out belongs to the student and it is based on his/her individual features; the phenomenon coincides with a form of school misfit, with the lack of social and professional expectations, the absence of the self-accomplishment needs;
- *Push-out*—the school fosters the decision of dropout which becomes the expression of failure in implementing the school insertion policies as an institutional issue and as a problem of the society that lacks efficient prevention and intervention strategies.

Another terminological distinction appears between

- *the pull-out* theories, that associate the student's decision to leave school with factors such as: early marriage, having a baby, financial issues, the need to get employed in order to support their family. The pull-out theories assume the fact that students underlie the decision to stay in school or not on a cost – benefit analysis [McNEal, 1997; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997]. These theories consider the individual in a contextual way, in which school is an important part of his life, along with his family, colleagues, church and other organisations. A job or the family responsibilities, for instance, are able to get the student out of school.
- *the push-out* theories consider that the school is to blame for the dropout because it discourages students regarding continuing studies using as argument their personality traits. Internal institutional factors, such as the behavioural policies or the conflicts between students or teachers, may push the students outside the school. The pushout theoreticians claim that the students leave school not due to their individual attributes but because of the school structure [Fine, 1991]. Jordan, Lara and McPartland (1996) define the push effects as school related factors with negative impact upon the bond that teenagers achieve with the school environment and makes them reject the school context. These factors may be structural, contextual, climate related or individualized and may determine some students to consider school as an unwelcoming place [Stearns & Glennie, 2006].

The American literature [Schargel, 2001] identifies three types of students that leave school:

- *drop-outs*, the ones who left school and are usually included in prevention or remedial programs;

³ Commission staff working paper, *Reducing early school leaving*, Accompanying document to the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving, 2010

- *tune-outs*, the ones who are not motivated to learn, who finish the school years with good grades sometimes, who disturb the classes, who get bored during the lessons, who have educational needs that are not fulfilled, who are tolerated or ignored;
- *Force-outs*, the ones who get suspended, who repeat the year, who are expelled because they refuse to follow the school rules.

The Romanian studies [Ungureanu, 2000] distinguish between the forgotten children who were not included in any school, who belong to isolated communities, to poor social and cultural environments and the lost children who entered the educational system but got lost along the way: homeless children, disabled children.

The school dropout phenomenon is complex, generated by a multitude of individual, institutional, social and economic factors that do not have an isolated influence. No matter the approach, the causes, the consequences, the ambiguities or the agreements, a constant aspect in all definitions and theories is the dropout rate calculated according to a report of the Romanian Ministry of Education as the difference between the number of students enrolled in the beginning of the academic year and the number of graduates of the same academic year⁴. The dropout rate or is, along with the ratio of graduates, one of the most important indicators in assessing the efficacy of the educational system.

Another concept associated to the phenomenon is the risk of dropout that refers to a range of psychological, social and economic, individual or extra-individual factors that involve the features of the person and of the environment. The term “at risk” implies the existence of factors such as: the poor socio-economic statute, the lack of parental support, absenteeism, age. Any combination of factors leads to the impossibility of a student to graduate high school [Henry, 2009].

The interest in studying the dropout determinants is motivated by the possibility of finding efficient ways to prevent the early school leaving by controlling the factors, by influencing the elements that may predict the decision of abandoning the system before obtaining a qualification or diploma.

III. DETERMINANTS

The causes of school dropouts are numerous [Oakland, 1992; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003; Jimerson et al. 2000]but identifying them is necessary for emphasizing the general aspects that constitute starting points in elaborating intervention or prevention strategies.

At international level, substantial studies highlighted the relationships between variables that refer to the students’ personality [Kaplan & Peck, 1995; Kirazoglu, 2009], the teacher-student relationship [Barclay, 1966; Lessard et al. 2010], the students’ background [Crowder & South, 2003], the family context [Franklin & Streeter, 1995], the parents’ educational background, the behavioural patterns [Frotin et al., 2010], the involvement of the community in the school life [Figueira-McDonough, 1992], the structure of the group of friends [Framer et al., 2003].

Family features [Franklin & Streeter, 1995] increase the possibility of school dropout: one or both parents dropped out and thus their jobs are instable and underpaid, offering their children access to low quality medical services, less attention, insufficient cognitive and linguistic stimuli. Also, the impact of belonging to a minority or to a poor social and economic environment is critical. Drugs and alcohol abuse, lack of extracurricular activities, affiliation to groups that believe that school is useless and that support the early adult roles, are factors that foster the school dropout [Frotin, Lessard & Marcotte, 2010].

Other studies [Farmer et al., 2003]have emphasized that teenagers are influenced by non-parental adults in their neighbourhood. Teenagers who live in poor communities do not have role models and are confronted to inappropriate interpersonal relationships that could become social and economic opportunities. The impact of the neighbourhood disadvantages upon the dropout rate is deeper for teenage girls. The disadvantage of the neighbourhood seems to increase in a significant manner the chances of premature sex life and premarital pregnancy.

Also, school dropout implies peers’ rejection and affiliation to delinquent groups. Many children do not have any classmates who could help them face the impact of negative social experiences. The lack of friends increases the risk of disengagement [Vitaro et al., 2001].

The Romanian studies [Zidărescu, 2009; Chirteş , 2010; Surdu, 2011; Mihalache, 2011] indicate the following categories of factors that foster school dropout:

- a) **economic factors**[Zidărescu, 2009; Chirteş , 2010; Marcu, 2010; Voicu, 2010; Andrei et al., 2011; Surdu, 2011; Mihalache, 2011; Costache, 2012]: low level of family income; difficulties in assuring daily meals, lack of clothes and shoes, inappropriate environment for life and study; premature engagement of children in the labour field or in domestic tasks; belonging to isolated communities, great distances between home and school with no transportation available; low level of resources

⁴ Report regarding the status of the national educational system, 2009, p. 66

- allocated by parents for attending school; high rate of unemployment; negative perception regarding the importance of school and education;
- b) **social and cultural factors** [Zidărescu, 2009; Voicu, 2010; Andrei et al., 2011; Surdu, 2011]: belonging to minorities or to delinquent groups; lack of social abilities that cause tensions at the community level; children' employment (mostly illegal) imposed by the family or at children' initiative; inappropriate model of social success – a shift at the level of moral values and promoting barbarism; addiction to social media;
 - c) **family factors**[Zidărescu, 2009; Marcu, 2010; Costache, 2012]: poor family structure; dismembered family and/or re-established after consecutive divorces (presence of step parents), long families, with considerable fraternal sequences, single parents etc.; children raised by grandparents/relatives or in foster homes, or children who temporarily live in boarding houses; unfriendly climate at home; health chronic problems; tendency to break the law; family cultural and educational level; negative attitude of the family towards education; bad example of older brothers who dropped out of school; inappropriate parental style; discrepancy between the cultural model of the family and the values promoted in school; parents' disinterest regarding children's school activities and results; lack of parents' trust and support; early marriage and/or pregnancy; too high level of children's responsibilities inside the family; children's leaving abroad together with their families (temporary or final); family transfer to a different city without previous transfer of the child to a different school;
 - d) **psychological/individual factors**[Zidărescu, 2009; Marcu, 2010; Costache, 2012](valid only for those who want to abandon school and not for the children who are forced to dropout): high level of aggressiveness; low level of cognitive intelligence; low level of communication and social skills – self-isolation; low level of resilience; school immaturity; mental immaturity expressed by the incapacity of analysing and planning learning tasks; moral immaturity; physical immaturity, expressed by the low resistance capacity for effort in school context; volitional immaturity expressed by the incapacity of coordinating the necessary actions in school context; lack of aspiration, preference for instant rewards; emotional lability; conflicts with school authorities; low level of self-esteem; inefficient self-control; inefficient mechanism of rationalisation in case of failure; low importance associated to education; the child at risk of dropout is older than his classmates; unhealthy lifestyle; drug addiction; juvenile delinquency; health problems; special educational needs; learning struggles;
 - e) **psycho-pedagogic factors**[Voicu, 2010; Andrei et al. 2011; Mihalache, 2011; Surdu, 2011; Costache, 2012](that refer to the features of the school institution and of the teaching and learning process): failure in establishing an efficient family – school – community partnership; the distance between the educational objectives and the students' learning needs; school regulations and behaviour policies versus discipline negotiated with students; fluctuation of teaching staff; simultaneous stages in the same classrooms; low level of teachers' motivation; inappropriate teaching styles; rigidity in approaching teaching; crowded classrooms; significant differences between teachers/schools regarding the nature and the level of cognitive expectances manifested towards the students; discrimination; lack of support programs for students at risk of dropout; inappropriate equipment and facilities offered by the schools, especially in the rural areas; bad results, repeat.
 - f) **legal factors**[Surdu, 2011; Andrei et al., 2011]:lack of ID cards; incoherence of the national education policies or changes introduced by laws and other legal acts; lack of a clear legal framework regarding school dropout.

Apostuand Fartușnic (2012), who aim at outlining a profile of the students at risk of dropout based on the data collected from 84 schools in 35 counties, emphasize that aspects like: parents' low education level, long families, the order of birth (older brothers are more vulnerable), living conditions, distance from home to school, family incomes, parents' negative attitude towards education, achievement motivation, health, special educational needs, learning difficulties, illegal pursuits contribute highly to the decision of abandoning school in Romania.

Data collected from other relevant studies [Adler, 1967; Tidwell, 1988] complete the profile of the student at risk of dropout with traits like: ambiguity in planning the future and anxiety regarding the insertion into the labour market.

The more the variable, the higher the risk, although the presence of the factors does not guarantee the appearance of the phenomenon. The final decision depends upon the individual structure and his ability to resist the influence. A rejection attitude expressed by the school, doubled by a negative approach of the family and/or of the school (discrimination) or of the community (isolation) correlate significantly with the decision of dropping out.

IV. SCHOOL DROPOUT OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Special educational needs are subsequent to the installment of intellectual, physical, psycho-motor, physiological issues or deficiencies. They appear also as emergent effect of certain psycho-emotional and social-

economic conditions that place the person in difficulty compared to the ones around, situation that does not allow the normal use of personal potential [Popa, Stan, Tobolcea, 2013, p. 56].

The different categories of factors described through the previous pages express their effects for the children with special needs too but in their case the decision of early school is also supported by:

- factors related to the deterioration of their health and the problems caused by the acclimation to the foster home or to the boarding school conditions;
- parents' difficulties in obtaining the medical certificate but also the problems that appear when the families must cross long distances (daily) to take the children to a specific centre or special school in a different city than the place of residence;
- institutional factors (especially when the schools do not have the necessary facilities for including a child with special needs – the lack of access ramps, adapted chairs, offices and staff for specific therapies) [Criu, Havarneanu, Popa, 2013].

The rate of illiterate disabled children in Romania is over 50%. The access of children with special needs to public education is limited either due to inappropriate equipment of the schools, or to the lack of well trained and motivated staff, or to classmates' rejection attitude and bullying.

According to the law, the school enrolment of students with special needs in the Romanian schools may be achieved in all the forms indicated by the specific literature: special schools, special classes, individual integration in classrooms of the public schools. The decision regarding the school to be attended by the disabled child is taken after consulting the parents or tutors, according to the specific type of disability. The school path is flexible by indicating the situations in which the transfer can be done towards the public school, based on the recommendation made by the teacher and/or the school psychologist who worked with the child, with the approval of the parents or tutors, through a decision of a committee of experts of the County Centres of Resources and Educational Assistance (article 54, paragraphs 1 and 2) [Popa, Stan, Tobolcea, 2013, p.54].

The Law of National Education (2011) stipulates also the insurance of a daily allowance for food, clothes and school supplies for all children with special needs no matter if enrolled in mainstream or special schools in equal quantum to the one assured for the children included in the child protection system (article 51, paragraph 2). The children with special needs integrated in mainstream schools benefit from the assistance of a support teacher and are entitled to all the support services offered by the County Centres of Resources and Educational Assistance (article 51, paragraph 1).

The strategies for including the children with special needs into the mainstream school system are emphasized at European level by a series of models –*the model of cooperation between a special school with a regular school, the model based on organising a special classroom inside a regular school, the model based on equipping a training and resources room for disabled children individually integrated in regular classrooms of the school, the itinerant model, the common model* [Popa, Stan, Tobolcea, 2013, p.57] - that correlate to the different options made available for the students with special needs in order to identify the best solutions for facing the educational process in accordance with the specific factors for each category of special needs.

In Romania, the preoccupation for disabled people is usually materialized by creating special institutions: school, kindergartens, dormitories, crafts workshops aimed, in fact, at isolating these individuals. The Organising and functioning regulations for special and integrated education (effective since October 2011) indicates in article 7 the models of school integration for children with special needs:

- in special classes and groups –for disabled children and students –in special school or public schools;
- in public schools, individually, with or without support services;
- in groups or classes instituted in the health units in which children, students and youngsters with chronic diseases are hospitalized;
- at home (itinerant school) for a fixed period;
- in other school structures [Popa, Stan, Tobolcea, 2013, p.58].

The Romanian inclusive education implies a continuous process of improving the school institution in order to support the participation to the education process of all students in the community with the purpose of:

- including all children no matter the type of degree of deficiency;
- implementing an efficient strategy for reducing children's attempts of intimidating and abusing disabled children;
- adjusting the building in order to become accessible to all children (furniture, specific offices for therapies/rehabilitation/recovery);
- assuring the programs of personalised services and support policies that concern finding solutions for behavioural difficulties;
- distributing school resources in an open and equitable manner;
- encouraging the engagement and participation of all teaching staff to the school management [Popa, Stan, Tobolcea, 2013, p.58].

In order to keep the children with special needs in the lifelong education system and to promote the inclusive practices recommended at European level a clear legal framework is necessary that should set the

holistic approach to be implemented for the benefit of all children and students with special needs through: supporting the school efforts in approaching extracurricular activities; support offered to students and their families (not only financial support but also counseling and orienting services focused on parents' active engagement in the educational process of their parents; by raising the awareness of the community regarding the problems faced by disabled people; by creating a context in favour of changing the social attitude towards vulnerable groups based on the principle of equal chances to formal and non-formal education programs aimed at emphasizing the strengths of children with special needs by highlighting the idea that the disability or the affiliation to a group at risk of isolation is not the main feature of the individual but the individual personality traits, the interests, the aspirations, the specific skills (no matter if they are intellectual, social or artistic); by motivating the teachers and the other categories of specialists involved in working with children with special educational needs [Popa, Stan, Tobolcea, 2013, p.89].

V. CONSEQUENCES OF SCHOOL DROPOUT

Early school leaving is equivalent to raising a wall between the individual and a future that would have represented the manifestation of the individual potential as well as fulfilling the childhood dreams [Dekkers & Claassen, 2001]. Those who dropout will become a part of the unemployed population, with the lowest incomes, with any possibility of accessing high rated positions of jobs, without any chance of climbing too much the social-economic ladder, with no plan for tomorrow, starting families whose children will be deprived of the best opportunities in life, continuing the mentality according to which they did not succeed because society did not offer any opportunities to them. But opportunities were the cost they paid when they left school, blinded by the illusion of a false freedom.

The negative consequences of not graduating school are extreme, affecting the individuals, the families and the entire society. The subjects at risk of dropping out tend to be depressive, unsatisfied with their lives, alienated. The ones who abandon school have a poor mental and physical health and a high probability of committing crimes or of becoming addicted to the governmental support programs [Grossman & Kaestner, 1997; Rumberger, 1987; Witte, 1997]. These individuals have a great potential of entering gangs, consuming alcohol and drugs, adopting violent or even criminal behaviours [Blakemore & Low, 1984]. The entire society has to suffer from the increasing phenomenon of school dropout.

The research aimed at analysing the school dropout phenomenon [Kaplan & Peck, 1995; Kirazoglu, 2009; Barclay, 1966; Lessard et al., 2010; Crowder & South, 2003; Franklin & Streeter, 1995; Frotin et al. 2010; Figueira-McDonough, 1992] emphasize all these negative effects and claim prevention and intervention strategies. The initiatives for preventing and correcting school dropout and for supporting children belonging to disadvantaged groups must be extended and multiplied. Counseling and orientation, extracurricular activities, local partnerships, parents' higher involvement in the educational process, the importance given to wellbeing in school – for the ones who learn and for the ones who teach equally – would be a start.

Limitations of the study

This study aimed at offering an overview of the main theories regarding school dropout as framework to be used by the researchers in the field, as theoretical basis for the investigation of the phenomenon. The analysis is neither exhaustive nor perfect but it reflects the results of our documentation process aimed at identifying a common ground that the researchers in the field might have had when developing their studies. The school dropout phenomenon is globally spread and has consequences that affect the global society. Each country/region/school has its' specificities that may be analysed, reflected upon and reveal important aspects that could be used as basis for defining efficient strategies. Each dropout case may have its own determinant, context and, by extension, its own key. Each country has specific prevention and intervention factors or legal frameworks of dealing with the phenomenon. A unique approach is as impossible as finding the infallible definition or theory to adopt.

Directions for future research

After setting a theoretical background, the next steps would be to identify the incidence of factors at national and international level, to compare their influence and to analyse the prevention and intervention policies/strategies and their effects on reducing school dropout.

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