

SCHOOL DROPOUT: A CASE STUDY ON PREVENTION MEASURES

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Abstract: In the context of quick population decrease, school dropout endangers Romania's progress perspectives; therefore, implementing programmes aimed at preventing school dropout by both public institutions and the third sector can reduce the risk. This paper makes a brief analysis of the evolution of a project implemented in 2012-2018 by the For Help Association from Timișoara to prevent school dropout – caused by both family and individual factors – for children aged 6-14 and coming from socially and economically disadvantaged families. The main goal of the paper is to point out the importance of alternating school dropout preventing methods, of diversifying and combining them for a long-lasting educational approach, at least at the minimum level stipulated by current legislation. The conclusion of the case study brings forth a chronicle of the progress of beneficiaries involved in the project, such as increase of school attendance rate, reduction of exam replicates or year repetition, recovery of delays in knowledge acquisition, improvement of writing, reading, calculus, and school record. There were positive changes in getting children and parents aware of the importance of institutional education. Developing and implementing this project taught that acting at different levels – child, family, school, community – school dropout can be prevented.

Keywords: School dropout, children from socially and economically disadvantaged families, family-school-community partnership.

Introduction

The high levels of school dropout are a main issue in Romania nowadays. According to the most recent data presented by Eurostat (2017), Romania ranks third in the European Union in early school leaving. Education is a significant vector of European Union and Romania's strategies: *Europe 2020 - A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*; *Programme Education and Professional Training 2020*; *National Strategy for Long-life Learning 2015-2020*; *Strategy for the Reduction of Early School Leaving in Romania 2015-2020*; *National Reform Programme 2017*. In the schoolyear 2014-2015, the last statistics published by the Ministry of National Education showed that school dropout rate had increased compared to previous years. At general level, 31.700 schoolers attending primary and grammar school left school, i.e. 1.8% of the total schoolers (*Report on Pre-academic Education State in Romania, 2016*).

School dropout has several causes, both internal and external: each schooler has his/her own history which, in interaction with other social, pedagogical, or psychological aspects, have different short- and long-term consequences. A study carried out during (Ivan & Rostaş, 2013) shows that school dropout significantly correlates with low family support (low educational capital from parents/tutors and low cultural capital); unfriendly, non-inclusive school environment (pleasure in coming to school, integration in school group, place in the classroom, lack of participation or low participation in pre-school education); low grades (representation and valorisation of education *per se*); passage from one educational level to another (after the 8th grade, there is the highest school dropout rate); belonging to a vulnerable group. Another study by Mihalache (2011), claims that the lack of parents' involvement in school activities in grammar school can influence negatively school performance and the way they relate with school during school hood. Vulnerable children categories – children from poor families, children from monoparental families – have a lower school attendance rate and a lower level of school records than children from non-vulnerable environments (Ivan & Rostaş, 2015). Domestic violence can be a predictor of school dropout (Trancă & Runcan, 2013).

The route map of a schooler highly depends on home preparation for consolidating knowledge and making progress (Ivan & Rostaş, 2015). Children from vulnerable environments rely on less favourable conditions preventing them from preparing: a large family (crowded living conditions), lack of food, involvement in chores, raising younger siblings, lacking people able to help them do their work or explain what and how to do, etc. This is why they need another educational environment (Gavrila-Ardelean & Gavrila-Ardelean, 2017; 2018).

According to the *Governance Programme 2017-2020*, “reducing school dropout, which has reached alarming rates and is growing, as become crucial for Romania’s sustainable development, allowing each child to develop”. To do so, the *Governance Programme* encourages the reduction of school dropout of young people for financial reasons. To extend measures regarding the prevention and reduction of school dropout, the Ministry of National Education implemented, in 2017 (*National Reform Programme*, 2017), the development of the programme *School after School*, and the development of procedures regarding the identification and monitoring of children from outside educational system. One of the main changes stipulates that children from vulnerable environments have priority in accessing the programme.

To prevent school dropout, several authors (Bryan & McCoy, 2004; Kempeset *al.*, 2005; Smithet *al.*, 2007; Bryan & McCoy, 2007; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Voicu, 2010; Țibu & Goia, 2014) claim that achieving a school – family – community partnership is needed. In Romania, in schools from disadvantaged environments, this partnership is almost absent because of cultural or psycho-social barriers. This is why the project supported here relies on the building up and development off such a partnership between the families of beneficiary children, their schools, and the Association For Help. The concern at national level for school dropout speaks of the importance of this topic and points out the necessity of joined efforts of all those involved.

Methodology

This is an analysis of the evolution of a project implemented during 2012-2018 by the Association For Help from Timișoara (Romania) as a response to the issue of school dropout of children from socially and economically disadvantaged environments.

The main objective of this paper is to point out the importance of alternating methods of school dropout prevention, of diversifying and combining them to make up a long-lasting educational approach at the level of at least the minimum stipulated by legislation. In the context of school dropout, in Timișoara they have initiated several projects meant to prevent or intervene by both local authorities and non-governmental organisations. One of these programmes is presented below – “Education for Your Successful Future!” – initiated and developed by the Association For Help between 2012 and 2018.

The sources of information used in this descriptive case study was the project chart, the reports of the financier during project implementation, interviews with the members of the multidisciplinary team implementing the project, interviews with direct beneficiaries of the project (children, parents, volunteers), as well as direct observation. Data collection took place in February-September 2018.

The case study presented here answers the question: what were the features that contributed to the prevention of school dropout in the children involved in the project of the Association For Help from Timișoara?

Presentation of the Organisation and of Project Context

The Association For Help is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation established in 2005 and accredited as supplier of social services in June 2007. The goal of establishing it was to prevent, limit, and remove the situations that can generate marginalisation, social exclusion of those who, for economic, physical, psychical, or social reasons, cannot meet their social needs and develop their own capabilities and competencies for social integration. The association aims at improving life quality of the people in difficulty – particularly children and families – by providing quality social services, by observing their rights, and by promoting professional practices in the field of social work.

The association is located in an up-town neighbourhood of Timișoara, characterised by lack of social cohesion, of economic power, and where there are socially and economically disadvantaged families, families with numerous children and low finances, families with little education, without jobs, some of them even without identity papers, and living in places too small for all the family members.

In 2012, they initiated the project “Education for Your Successful Future!” aiming at preventing school dropout caused by individual or family factors, and maintaining them in the educational system for pre-schooler and schooler children from socially and economically disadvantaged families from Timișoara. The risk factors identified in the beneficiaries of this project through complex evaluation by the multidisciplinary team and coordinated by the social worker were external and internal:

- *External factors*: lack of support for the children in educational activities; family climate – domestic violence, alcoholism; lack of material or financial resources necessary to send the child to kindergarten or school; lack of proper places for study; lack of motivation in parents for pursuing education – in most cases, supported by their own experience;
- *Internal factors*: lack of sufficient cognitive acquisitions; difficulty in learning; special education needs; lack of motivation; low self-esteem.

The project supports parents who lack resources necessary to send their children to “school after school” programmes or whose material status is low despite the fact that they are employed, and who lack the necessary education to support their own children in doing homework.

Currently, 30 schoolers aged 6-18 from socially and economically disadvantaged families (with an income of maximum 200 RON/family member/month) benefit from this project: they are from south-east Timișoara (Dâmbovița, Iosefin, Fratelia, Freidorf, and Rona neighborhoods) with risk of school dropout (children having skipped school too often, children having difficulty in learning and lacking support from family or from school, children from families whose condition has a negative impact on the child's school route map (psychic disorders, aggressive behaviour, alcoholism, different forms of impairment, single parent, parents working abroad, etc.), and children's parents. Schoolers can be referred by schools, non-governmental organisations, authorities, physical persons, or brought in by other children involved in the project. At the beginning, there were only 15 beneficiaries, but little by little the organisation was able to double the number of beneficiaries. To be included in the programme, children were evaluated psychologically, socially, and pedagogically and their families were evaluated socially and economically, focusing on such aspects as psychical development level, level of knowledge and competencies in relation to curricula, attitude and behaviour of both child and family in relation to school, family climate, social integration of the family, living standard, and medical record of the family.

The objectives of the project were: a) increasing school attendance in 30 children from disadvantaged families; b) increasing the level of information and understanding of the parents in relation to the importance of school attendance and of limiting school dropout; c) ensuring minimum resources for the children to attend school; d) increasing community awareness about school dropout among children from disadvantaged families through awareness-raising campaigns promoting the principle of non-discrimination in relation to the right to education; e) developing the civic involvement abilities of volunteers through participation in awareness-raising campaigns and support for children in educational and leisure activities.

Besides the members of the multidisciplinary team – social worker, psychologist, and psycho-pedagogue – there are also 10 volunteers who help children with their homework and raise awareness about the risks of school dropout, as well as 6 volunteers who organise bi-monthly leisure activities (gaming, recreational, educational).

This project helps prevent school dropout at three levels – individual (pre-schooler or schooler), family, and community. At individual level, children are provided with individual or group psycho-pedagogic counselling; their school attendance and school record are monitored; they are involved in creative, recreative, gaming and socialising activities important for their motivation to attend school: theme contests, trips, shows, exhibitions, visits to cultural sites or economic agents, theme festivities, and annual camping as a

form of reward for their school performances. Other types of activities are cultural, ecologic, sports, musical, theatrical, IT, technical and scientific, civic, tailoring, and fine arts. At family level, parents are provided with individual psycho-social counselling, as well as with counselling meant to motivate them participate in their children's education and to make them responsible for their children's education; they participate in the parental support group; they are guided to take professional training courses; they are supported in learning new strategies of identification and preservation of jobs; they are materially supported with school supplies and clothes for their children at least thrice a year. The project team keeps in touch with the schools attended by the children in the programme to monitor their school record and parent-school cooperation and, if necessary, they mediate the school-parent relationship to increase family involvement. At community level, twice a year volunteers organise campaigns for the information and awareness of the public, schoolers, and parents about the implications of school dropout and the observance of the principle of non-discrimination in child's rights, with emphasis on the right to education and on the difficulties children from disadvantaged families have to face.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The AssociationFor Help made significant efforts during the 6 years of project to ensure high-quality services. Thus, they identified the following strengths: it is a service delivered to a community from a disadvantaged area of the city; its image at community level is positive; external financing was constant and sufficient; it continually developed partnerships with other organisations to carry out cultural, ecological, sports, etc. activities; it has an attractive educational environment, which contributed to the constant attendance by the children; it maintained a constant sufficient number of volunteers (15-16) to carry out homework and leisure activities with the children; it supported its employees pursue their training to develop new working competencies with children at school dropout risk; it participated in good practices exchanges with domestic or foreign organisations; it combined different activities to have the children attend activities on a regular basis; it diversified activities and it approached activities in a creative manner to maintain children's and volunteers' interest in the activities; it approached every child individually depending on his/her needs to produce significant changes at cognitive level; it valorised positive results of children, which contributed to a positive attitude toward learning; it developed an open, stimulating climate in the relationships between specialists, volunteers, and children.

The weaknesses identified during the project were: parents being not aware of the interests, desires, or aptitudes of their children; the low level of

education and culture of the parents that minimised the importance of education and of school attendance by their children; family members asking for material rewards for their participation in common activities; lack of appreciation from the parents for the school supplies from the association (they sold them to get money); children 12-13 years old abandoning the project because they did not like to obey rules; improper cooperation with some of the schools in the neighbourhood and difficult, time-consuming partnership with some schools;; lack of financial results necessary to ensure payment for several employees working with children.

Project Evaluation and Impact

This project was a way of providing support for education for children from vulnerable groups, based on a partnership between children's families and schools, and association. In this project, children were provided support for intellectual development, for better communication, for constant intellectual effort, for numerous, diverse learning experiences in a stimulating environment. The association organised activities that aimed at compensating inequities in children from disadvantaged environments. Starting from the identification of individual and family factors in each beneficiary child, alternating, individualising, and adapting activities and services to the needs of every child, results show that, compared to the initial evaluation, there was progress.

To monitor and evaluate beneficiaries' progress, we used indicators and instruments regarding their level of involvement and the level of targets reached. The indicators used to evaluate were the number of children from disadvantaged environments benefiting from the programme, the number of classes skipped without a reason, the school record, the number of people informed, the number of campaigns organised, the number of meetings and support groups organised and the number of participating parents, the number of families and the frequency with which they benefit from material support, the number of volunteers involved, the number of special events organised and the number of people attending them.

The most representative changes in the level of awareness about education in children and their parents from the formal environment and the minimum number of grades graduated from (currently, in Romania, 10 grades); gaining family support and involvement from the parents that had had a negative attitude toward education; a positive change of children's attitude toward school; an improvement of the parent-child relationship.

During the implementation of the project, we managed to get the support of schools attended by the children, to sign partnership contracts with them, to improve the feedback between school and families, and to establish a school – family- association relationship.

Extra-curricular activities were strong motivational tools for children at school dropout risk, which contributed to an increase of their interest in attending school.

As for school performance, children school attendance increased from 61.5% to 88.2%; the general grade mean increased from 6.43 to 7.68 (maximum grade mean in Romania is 10); 8 of the 25 schoolers got awards; after evaluating their performances in writing, reading, and arithmetic, we found an increase of their level in relation to their age and schooling features; the number of children replicating class dropped from 5 to 1, and corrigent schoolers dropped from 9 to 3.

There was also a development of social competencies, better cooperation in team work, less aggressive communication, more tolerance and solidarity.

We also evaluated the level of satisfaction in beneficiaries, children and parents in relation to services provided, and they said they were very satisfied.

We organised 16 campaigns of awareness raising in the community regarding school dropout among children from disadvantaged families: about 6,000 people were informed, including children, regarding the principle of non-discrimination in relation to the right to education.

Implementing the programme produced a change of the level of school attendance in the neighbourhood. Cooperation with the schools made the programme effective due to its information and sensitisation activities, as well as solved punctual situations regarding the beneficiaries of the programme.

By participating in awareness-raising campaigns within the community and by supporting children in educational and leisure activities, volunteers developed their civic abilities in the prevention off school dropout.

The experience of the 6 years of activity confirmed the value of the actions and of the multidisciplinary team approach, as well as of the volunteers.

Conclusions and Discussion

This case study presents a school dropout prevention programme with positive features in which children were provided with learning conditions that they do not have at home, an educational environment favourable to development, socialisation, cognitive stimulation, specialised support in homework, participation in extra-curricular activities, norms, values and rituals that guided them towards improving their school performance and contributed to school dropout prevention. The activities focused on both the children – to stimulate their motivation for school attendance, their families – particularly to make them aware of the importance of education for their children and of the school – parent – association relationship, and the community – to make its

members aware of the principle of non-discrimination in ensuring the right to education of all children, no matter their social and economic condition.

Implementing the project was not without back draws: it was a laborious project and the decisions were made by the team following comparisons, mutual communication of experiences, and understanding of certain differences and of implementing a wide range of activities. Children from disadvantaged need special attention because understanding the complexity of their situation – family and school – is essential in preventing school dropout. In such a programme, stability and continuity are necessary to consolidate relationships at micro-group level, to valorise aptitudes and competences and to ensure school attendance. Though we are aware of the efforts of organising, carrying out, and ensuring sustainability of such a programme, long-term effects on children at school dropout risk make us consider the efforts worthy. Efforts made to maintain schoolers attendance need to be done for each child apart, since reasons for school dropout vary from schooler to schooler. If the approach is individualised and focused on the complex of factors, school dropout can be avoided. We hope that successful experiences will multiply to consolidate the progress achieved.

An important role in preventing school dropout and in consolidating family – school – community partnership could be that of social work in schools but there is no such service in schools – only in special schools (Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2008). Social workers in schools could be involved in identifying the causes and difficulties making a child leave school, and their interventions could be done by both group and/or community activities, as well as by personalised actions addressed to children and their families.

Future research could consolidate long-term effects of implementing family – school – community partnerships to prevent school dropout.

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