RESEARCH ON THE FACTORS LEADING TO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

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Abstract: *The consequences of early school leaving affect people throughout their entire lives by increasing their risk of unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion, including through reducing their children's chances of succeeding at school. In the specialized literature, there are several explanatory mechanisms for early school leaving phenomenon, and the factors that influence it are distributed in different orders or on different priority levels. In this paper, we present an analysis of the factors leading to early leaving from vocational education and training, based on two types of research, background research, and through questionnaires, conducted within an Erasmus+ project, in six European countries. In spite of different educational systems, the factors leading to early school leaving do not vary that much from country to country. Some factors sometimes have almost similar values and preferences, and sometimes they differ, less or more, even till the situation they are opposite, from a participating country to another.*

Keywords: *factors; early school leaving; research; questionnaires;*

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of school dropout, or Early School Leaving (ESL), or Early Leaving of Education and Training (ELET) refers to the early school leavers, means the percentage of youth 18-24 years old who did not finalise the upper-secondary education and who are not following any other educational path or are not enrolled in any other vocational training [5]. The consequences of early school leaving affect people throughout their entire lives by increasing their risk of unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion, including through reducing their children's chances of succeeding at school.

Romania continues to have one of the highest early school leaving rates in the EU. The rate of early school leaving decreased slightly, from 19.1% in 2015 to 18.5% in 2016, to 18.1% in 2017, and to 16.4% in 2018, but the target of 11.3%, for 2020, remains far from being reached [9]. In this context, concern for preventing and reducing early school leaving is seen as a priority of the education system, even more as factors of school dropout multiply and diversify, in the current complex context of the social, economic, cultural, and professional environment.

After a period of decline, starting with the year 2011/2012, VET in Romania has an upward trend, both concerning the number of schools and the number of students and teaching staff. The year 2017 was the Year of Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Romania. The staff of school inspectorates, TVET schools, economic operators and consultative partner bodies benefited from training and information sessions on how to organize and operate dual VET in Romania.

Despite recent measures, the quality of Romanian VET system and its relevance for labour market remain mostly insufficient. The attractiveness of VET as a career choice and not mainly as a 'second choice' option remains rather limited. The employment rate of recent VET graduates remains below the EU average, 63.3 % vs. 75 % in 2016 [7]. Despite continued reforms, especially on dual VET, several challenges remain to be addressed [4].

There are many reasons for what some young people give up prematurely to education and training: personal or family problems, learning difficulties, or a fragile socio-economic situation. Education system features and school climate are also important factors in the process of pupil engagement or disengagement.

In this paper, we present an analysis of the factors leading to early leaving from vocational education and training in Romania, based on two types of research: background research, and through questionnaires, conducted within an Erasmus+ project, in six European countries.

2. Analysis of the early school leaving phenomenon

In one of the most recently document in field, "Preventing early leaving from education and training", published by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, on EACEA National Policies Platform [5], is recorded that the Romanian schooling population is less every year and that by 2025 the school population will decrease by 40%. The most exposed groups to the risk of ELET are: the minorities and other marginalized groups; pupils in rural areas; pupils who are not able to pass their studies and have to repeat a class; youth and children with special educational needs.

To prevent and combat early school leaving and to support re-enrolment in school, Ministry of Education carries on its yearly social support programmes, conceived to assist students from disadvantaged areas: School supplies; Money for High-school; Euro 200; the Croissant and milk programme; Reimbursement of travel expenses; School shuttles [2].

The Romanian Government, through the National reform programme 2018, imposes for reducing early school leaving phenomenon, many clear and necessary key directions.

In present, the strategic framework for education and professional training in Romania includes five sectorial strategies:
- Romanian Strategy on the Reduction of Early School Leaving during 2015-2020
- Strategy for tertiary education 2015-2020
- Lifelong learning strategy 2015-2020
- Romanian Strategy on Vocational and Education Training during 2016-2020
- Strategy for modernising educational infrastructure 2018-2023.

To reduce drop out from VET, the National Agency for Qualifications works closely with the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice and with the Ministry of National Education, regarding strategies and policies for human resources training, also coordinating and controlling the activity of the training providers [8].

At the regional level, employer organizations, trade unions, schools, and local authorities, engaged in plan the supply and demand of VET, according to the regional and local plans, include measures to prevent and reduce drop out from VET.

During the period 2016-2018, the Presidential Administration has carried out a large public debate on Education and Research in Romania, under a national project "Educated Romania" [10]. This project intends to encourage the layering of society by value, to develop a culture of success based on performance, hard work, talent, honesty, and integrity. The main result of this project is a strategy for education and research in the time horizon of 2018-2030, with a country vision and specific goals.

There are a lot of national and international research projects related to school dropout phenomenon, which have like beneficiaries or partners different Romanian organisations/institutions.

3. Factors leading to ELVET

In the specialised literature, there are several explanatory mechanisms for early school leaving phenomenon: individual effects, family effects, peer effects, school effects, community effects.

In the study "Theoretical and methodological considerations when studying early school leaving in Europe", conducted within the project "Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe" [6], it is presented a model with three main levels commonly distinguished influencing ESL, but that interact with and influence each other:

- the macro-level of the structural and systemic features and policies: education and social policies; socio-economic context; social imaginaries
- the meso-level of the institutional context such as the policies and capital resources in school, the alternative learning arenas and the family
- the micro-level, which focuses on the individual.

In a research report, Early School Leaving: causes and consequences [3], is said that there is a significant correlation between school dropout and few factors:

- Limited family support (low educational and cultural capital of parents/guardians).
- Unfriendly, non-inclusive school environment (the degree to which the student is pleased to go to school, the extent to which he/she feels integrated, the seating in the classroom, non-involvement or low participation in preschool education).
- Low grades (self-representation and education valuing).
- The transition from one stage of education to another (the highest dropout rate is registered after the completion of the 8th grade).
- Pertaining to a vulnerable group.

But, usually, there is a mix of possible causes for school dropout, that varies from one case to another, depending on the personal situations of each of the students at risk of dropping out.

In table 1 we present the feedback analysis of the 67 answers to questionnaires, completed by teachers, educators or scientific staff in VET in Bihor County of Romania, regarding reasons why students dropping out of school. The model of questionnaires is inspired by [1].

Table 1. Feedback analysis of the questionnaires

Reasons why students dropout of school	*Very much [%]*	*Ade-quately [%]*	*Very little [%]*	*Not at all [%]*
Gender: Students who drop out are more likely to be male. Females who drop out often do so due to reasons associated with pregnancy	5	37	48	10
Ethnicity: The rate of dropout is higher on average for minority groups	42	54	4	0
Disability: Students with disabilities (especially those with emotional/ behavioural disabilities) are at greater risk of dropout	18	34	33	15
Grades: Students with poor grades are at greater risk of dropout	9	64	27	0
Mobility: High levels of household mobility contribute to increased likelihood of dropping out	6	46	46	2
Sense of belonging: Alienation and decreased levels of participation in school have been associated with increased likelihood of dropout	8	55	37	0
Lack of motivation: Students without motivation to study are more likely to drop out of school	27	63	9	1
Region: Students are more likely to dropout if they live in urban settings as compared to suburban or non-metropolitan areas	4	27	48	21
School size and type: School factors that have been linked to	0	7	54	39

dropout include school type and large school size				
School climate: Positive school climate is associated with lower rates of dropout	39	25	21	15
School policies: Alterable school policies associated with dropout include raising academic standards without providing supports, tracking and frequent use of suspension	9	22	55	14
Educational support in the home: Students whose families provide higher levels of educational support for learning are less likely to dropout	51	36	9	4
Parenting: Homes characterised by permissive parenting styles have been linked with higher rates of dropout	20	61	19	0
Family structure: Students who come from non traditional families (single-parent, unmarried, or blended families, tutor) are at greater risk of dropout	33	51	12	4
Socio-economic background: Dropouts are more likely if the students come from low-income families or in which the parents are unemployed	16	54	28	2
Stressful life events: Increased levels of stress and the presence of stressors (e.g. financial difficulty, health problems, early parenthood) are associated with increased levels of dropout	31	61	8	0

Other factors leading to dropping out, presented by the respondents:
- Searching for jobs in other localities. Seasonal work.
- Lack of interest in school.
- Precarious home.
- The material situation of the family.
- Lack of financial support from the family.
- The Roma customs or some Romani traditions.
- Families with parents left abroad or disinterested.
- Children who have their parents abroad have more freedom and they are harder to monitor.
- Disorganized families.
- Entourage.
- Other concerns (sports competitions).
- The health status.

In our both types of researches, background research and small-scale research, we have been identified and hierarchized the following factors conducting to the school dropout or early leaving from VET in Romania:

Table 2. Factors leading to school dropout

Background research	**Questionnaires**
1. Family factors:	*1. Family factors*:
a) the material situation	a) ethnicity
b) family relationships	b) educational support in the home
c) parents' disinterest	c) family structure
d) the level of low education of parents	d) parenting
e) quality house	e) socio-economic background of the family
f) the family environment	f) mobility of household family
g) lack of aid to learning	g) parents left abroad or disinterested
h) reluctant parents	h) disorganised families

	i) precarious home
2. School factors: a) organization and teaching methods b) inadequate attitude of teachers c) the material basis of the school d) school disinterest	*2. Individual factors*: a) stressful life events b) lack of motivation c) poor grades d) sense of belonging e) disability f) health status g) entourage h) seasonal work i) other concerns
3. Individual factors: a) psychological state b) personality characteristics c) attitude towards education d) limited potential	*3. School factors*: a) school climate b) school policies c) school location d) school size and type

4. Conclusion

By comparing the results obtained in the researches from those six countries, one can be said that, in spite of different educational systems, the factors leading to early school leaving do not vary that much from country to country. Some factors sometimes have almost similar values and preferences, and sometimes they differ, less or more, even till the situation they are opposite, from a participating country to another.

A 'whole school approach' is needed, where the entire school community (school leaders, staff, learners, and families) engages in a cohesive, collective and collaborative action, with strong cooperation with external stakeholders and the community at large. A good cooperation between VET schools and enterprises places a major role in influencing the decision for staying or leaving /dropping out of VET.

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