

## SCHOOL DROPOUT AMONG ADOLESCENTS - SCHOOL SATISFACTION AND SELF-EFFICACY

**Cristiana CREȚ, Ph.D. Cnd.,**

Doctoral School of Education, Development and Reflection at the Babes-  
Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca  
[cret\\_cristiana@yahoo.com](mailto:cret_cristiana@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** *Dropping out of school is a topical phenomenon, being considered not only an act of dropping out of formal education, but also a risky behavior with multiple negative implications on the psychological, social and economic development of adolescents. Adolescence is a period of transition, characterized by a series of biological, cognitive, emotional and social changes. During this period, young people face a number of challenges and the decisions they make can have a long-term impact on the quality of their lives. Dropping out of school is thus a significant threat to adolescents' well-being, both now and in the future. School drop-out has a high incidence in many societies and is an important indicator of the educational health of a country. It affects not only the individual but also the community, contributing to a cycle of poverty and social exclusion. When students drop out of high school, this usually has a negative impact both on their personal development and on society, as they are exposed to an increased risk of unemployment, health problems and social integration difficulties. The aim of this article is to present the causes of school drop-out among adolescents and to present statistically the drop-out rates in different regions/schools, especially in Romania. The average of the 27 EU countries has a 78.5% school enrolment rate according to 2008 data, while our country has a 78.3% share, respectively the early school leaving rate is 14.9% in the EU and 15.9% in Romania. As a result of the analysis we can state that there is a strong link between the variables participation in education and the early school leaving rate, and a perfect link between the educational attainment and the unemployment rate. In Romania school dropout rates continue to rise, ranking first in the European Union in this respect. Thus, as the Social Monitor shows, in 2022 the dropout rate at the country level was 15.6% while the average at the European Union level was 10% and has continued to decrease in recent years.*

**Key words:** *adolescent; school dropout; school satisfaction; self-efficacy.*

### **Introduction**

School drop-out includes all students who drop out of school before formally completing their education, and is a phenomenon with multiple implications at both individual and social levels. The process is dynamic and cumulative, suggesting that school drop-out is not an isolated act, but the result of a series of ongoing experiences and influences that accumulate over time. The literature emphasizes the progressive nature of this phenomenon, highlighting the fact that dropping out rarely occurs as a sudden decision, but rather as the culmination of a multifactorial process, in which the interaction of numerous factors leaves its mark on the student's final decision to leave the education system (Pedditzi M.L., Fadda R., Lucarelli L., 2022). Various taxonomies and theoretical models have been developed to analyze and classify the determinants of early school leaving. These include individual, family, school, and community factors, each of which contributes to some extent to creating the context conducive to dropping out. For example, individual factors can include lack of academic motivation, learning difficulties or mental health problems, while family factors can range from poor socio-economic status to lack of emotional support. At the same time, school factors, such as a poor student-teacher relationship or a rigid curriculum, and social factors, such as community pressures or limited employment opportunities, may also influence this decision (Gonzalez-Rodriguez D., Vieira M.J., Vidal J., 2019). Although the literature presents a diversity of perspectives on the determinants of school dropout, there is a general consensus on its complex and cumulative nature. Studies have shown that no single factor is sufficient to explain the phenomenon, but rather a combination of interrelated factors contribute to the dropout decision. This complex interplay between variables underlines the need for a holistic approach to dropout prevention, focusing on interventions that address multiple dimensions of the learner's life and developmental environment. Thus, a multidimensional understanding of school dropout is essential for the formulation of effective educational policies and strategies that support school retention and reduce the incidence of this phenomenon (Gonzalez-Rodriguez D., Vieira M.J., Vidal J., 2019).

Numerous reviews of the literature (Pedditzi M.L., Fadda R., Lucarelli L., 2022; Gonzalez-Rodriguez D., Vieira M.J., Vidal J., 2019; Lyche C., 2010) have investigated which of these factors contribute significantly to the increased risk of school dropout among adolescents, identifying individual, institutional, socio-economic, relational, family and school factors as the main determinants of early school leaving. Among the most important individual factors (Bocsi V., Varga A., Fehevari A.,

2023) are school outcomes (including academic failure, repetition and low performance), risk behaviors (such as drug and alcohol use, involvement in crime and strained interpersonal relationships with peers), personal attitudes (such as beliefs, life goals, values and level of self-awareness), socio-economic conditions and health status (both physical and mental). Certain factors appear to have a stronger influence than others: academic performance, absenteeism, socio-cultural and economic status, family structure, quality of peer relationships, risk behaviors and mental health exert a significant impact on the risk of dropping out (Lyche C., 2010). Relevant psychological variables in this context include levels of anxiety, depression, stress and students' general mental health, all of which are associated with an increased risk of dropping out of school.

### **General information**

#### **Adolescent students' satisfaction with school**

Overall life satisfaction, a commonly used indicator of happiness, is a person's cognitive appraisal of the overall quality of his or her life. In the case of young people, this assessment is thought to be mainly influenced by the child's level of satisfaction in the five core domains: family, friends, living environment, self and school. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of international studies devoted to assessing children's well-being, reflecting the growing concern to understand and improve it. This trend is partly due to the recognition of the importance of child well-being in relation to key areas of policy intervention, particularly in the education sector. Recent studies highlight not only the relevance of well-being for children's personal and social development, but also its impact on children's educational performance, mental and physical health, and social integration. Research on children's well-being is essential for the formulation of educational policies that holistically respond to the needs of students. In a global context in which social, economic and technological challenges can profoundly affect children's development, assessing children's well-being becomes an essential tool for identifying risk factors and promoting effective interventions. This increased focus on children's well-being in international studies supports the development of an integrated perspective on education, in which the focus is not only on academic achievement but also on students' quality of life as a whole (Marquez J., Main G., 2020).

Students' satisfaction with school is described as a personal cognitive appraisal of the value they attribute to their school life. In this context, school satisfaction can be a significant way of optimizing students' mental and physical well-being. For adolescents, levels of school satisfaction also reflect the quality of interpersonal relationships with

peers and school staff, as well as other relevant psychosocial experiences (Lund J., 2011). Children spend a large proportion of their time at school, making it essential to address factors that can enhance their enjoyment and satisfaction in this environment. Suldo et al. have emphasized the importance of considering school satisfaction as a way to improve students' mental and physical well-being (Suldo S.M., Bateman L, McMahan M., 2014). Research has shown that high levels of school satisfaction and overall life satisfaction are associated with personal well-being and psychological health in adolescents, reflected in self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, and clarity of goals in life. In the study by Tomyn and Cummins, a significant correlation was found between adolescents' school satisfaction, the quality of relationships with teachers, and their sense of safety in school (Tomyn A.J., Cummins R.A., 2011). In addition, another study examined the link between school satisfaction and subjective well-being among adolescents, concluding that school satisfaction is closely related to students' sense of belonging to school as well as their perceptions of competence and autonomy (Tian L., Chen H., Huebner E.S., 2014).

Research based on feedback from adolescents has shown that academic success can have a significant impact on school satisfaction and well-being. At the same time, students' satisfaction with the school environment is significantly influenced by factors such as the social support and support they receive. Positive relationships between teachers and students play a crucial role in shaping students' satisfaction with the school experience, and students who show less consistency in their studies tend to perceive their relationships with teachers in a less favorable light compared to their peers. Research on satisfaction with peer relationships suggests that the level of satisfaction expressed by adolescents depends on the quality of relationships in the classroom and varies according to factors such as peer group, age and gender.

Numerous studies have sought to identify predictors of school satisfaction, showing that some factors have a stronger influence than others. For example, teacher support is frequently mentioned in the literature as a significant predictor of school satisfaction. Another study has shown that students' liking of teachers is a predictor of school satisfaction, suggesting that students who value their teachers tend to be more satisfied with the school environment. Interestingly, one study found that both boys and girls expressed a preference for male teachers, while peer relationships were found to be the most important area of satisfaction in another research. However, two other studies have indicated that satisfaction with peers and classmates has a low correlation with overall satisfaction with school (Telef B., Gökmen Arslan G., Mert A., Kalafat S., 2015).

Strong relationships between teachers and students not only facilitate

effective knowledge transfer, but also provide an essential channel of emotional support for students. Supportive and encouraging behaviors on the part of teachers, regardless of the academic level or status of the students, can instill in students the basic confidence needed to learn and develop harmoniously. As formative figures in the educational journey and stages of personal development, teachers help pupils to recognize their potential and explore the directions in which they wish to develop. This support, provided by the teacher as a developmental agent, provides students with essential cognitive information that helps them to objectively assess their learning abilities and potential (DeSantis King et al, 2006). Increasing adolescents' school satisfaction can be achieved with the help of teachers by providing as many educational experiences as possible and analyzing those experiences through the prism of emotions, thoughts and states experienced by adolescents; motivating adolescents to aim for success; providing useful information to them and being a supportive, improvement-oriented teacher, helping students to reach their full potential. Teachers have a crucial role in the formation of a positive, pleasant, effective educational climate; therefore, it is also necessary to develop an open communication, with active feedback and in which teachers discuss problems or difficulties in the instructional-educational process.

### **Adolescent students' self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a person's perception of his or her ability to perform predetermined tasks effectively and confidence in succeeding in assigned activities, even in the face of challenges. Academic self-efficacy reflects a student's level of confidence in his or her ability to successfully complete educational tasks, thereby reducing the risk of dropping out of school (Pedditzi M.L., Nonnis M., Fadda R., 2023; Caprara G.V., Vecchione M., Alessandri G., Gerbino M., Barbaranelli C.,2011). Students' self-efficacy beliefs play a crucial role in their academic performance, influencing their future professional choices and career directions. In this regard, cognitive-social theory examines the sources that contribute to the development of self-efficacy. Butz and Usher's study found that 'mastery experience' and social persuasion are among the most common sources of self-efficacy. At high school level, social relationships at school become important factors in enhancing self-efficacy and school satisfaction. The support provided by significant others also plays an essential role, acting as an important protective factor in school adjustment, especially during the transition period from middle school to high school (Caprara G.V., Vecchione M., Alessandri G., Gerbino M., Gerbino M., Barbaranelli C.,2011; Mena J.A., 2011.).

Various studies have investigated the impact of academic support provided by schools on student satisfaction. For example, Lund's research found that students with higher levels of school satisfaction performed the best academically (Lund J., 2011). In contrast, a comparative study looking at student satisfaction in Spain and Romania found that students in both countries had the lowest satisfaction scores in relation to their academic performance.

### **Causes of school dropout in Romania**

We will analyze the causes of school dropout in Romania based on literature and scientific studies conducted between 2005 and 2015. The causes of school dropout differ from country to country, from education system to education system (traditional Romanian education system, Montessori system, Step-by-Step system, etc.), from environment (rural or urban), from economic influences, etc. The study conducted by Ferran Casas, Sergiu Balțătescu, Irma Bertan, Monica Gonzales and Adrian Hatos demonstrates the differences in the causes of school dropout and school satisfaction between schools in Spain and Romania. There are also common factors in the sense that similar significant scores were obtained, but also factors that demonstrated the accentuation of other factors of dropout. The sample of the experiment was a group of adolescents aged between 13 and 16, both girls and boys. This study emphasized that students' school satisfaction is an outcome of schooling and not a prerequisite for academic achievement. Over the years, numerous questionnaires have been designed to measure pupils' school satisfaction, including: MSLSS - Multidimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Heubner, 1994) which includes 8 items for different aspects of student satisfaction and school life. The application of this scale by Heubner in 1994 found that students associate their school satisfaction with cognitive evaluation. Another instrument that was used in this study was the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1969) which was adapted and included items on the teacher-student relationship, school skills, school safety and general life satisfaction. A further element that was taken into account was whether satisfaction with friendships and collegial relationships at school influenced adolescents' school satisfaction. To the researchers' surprise, both in the sample schools in Spain and in the sample schools in Romania, the result was insignificant, which means that this element has no influence on adolescents' school satisfaction.

Interpersonal relationships in the school environment play a key role in defining overall life satisfaction and school satisfaction, but their contribution varies significantly depending on the type of relationship analyzed. Good peer relationships were found to be more closely related to overall life satisfaction than to school satisfaction. This finding

reflects the importance of socialization among adolescents and the role of friends in their emotional and psychological development. Friends and classmates are not only sources of emotional support, but also catalysts for a sense of belonging and social acceptance, factors that profoundly influence overall life perception. On the other hand, relationships with teachers contribute more to school satisfaction than to overall life satisfaction. This suggests that teachers are perceived mainly through the prism of their professional role, being evaluated on the quality of classroom interactions and support for academic performance. Although teacher respect and support are important for a positive educational environment, these relationships do not have a significant impact on overall perceived well-being.

One difference between students in Spain and students in Romania regarding their school satisfaction is that Romanian students are more uncertain about their professional future compared to Spanish students. This is a cause of school dropout among Romanian pupils because many of them choose to work in order to have an income and be able to support themselves. In Spain, adolescents scored higher on personal satisfaction and security for the future than in Romania. The inclusion of satisfaction with student life in the PWI-7 had a significant impact on the scale's ability to correlate better with overall life satisfaction, thus reinforcing its value as a measure of subjective well-being among adolescents. This additional item accounted for a unique variance of 2.5%, exceeding the contribution previously reported by other studies, such as that of Tomy and Cummins, which found only a 1% variance for similar items. This significant increase suggests that satisfaction with student life is a valuable indicator that may reflect an important dimension of adolescents' experiences related to the school environment. The resulting extended model, labeled PWI-8, demonstrated good internal consistency, as assessed by Cronbach's coefficient, and an increased ability to explain the relationship between various dimensions of school life and overall well-being. This model provided a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing adolescent well-being, particularly in terms of educational background. In addition to its statistical advantages, the PWI-8 opened up new perspectives for future research, suggesting that the inclusion of a specific domain dedicated to satisfaction with student life is essential to capture the nuances of the relationship between school life and general well-being. The model was able to highlight cross-cultural differences between adolescents in Romania and Spain, demonstrating its flexibility in reflecting varied socio-cultural contexts.

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