Analysis of the School Abandonment Rate
Among Secondary Education Pupils in Romania

Roxana-Marcela Zaharia
Alexandra Popa
Barbu Corina Aurora
"Ovidius" University of Constanţa, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Romania
z_roxanamarcela@yahoo.com
alexandrapopa946@gmail.com
coribarbu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The subject of this research is school abandonment in secondary education in Romania, marked by problems such as functional illiteracy and social exclusion. Secondary analysis of data collected between 2012 and 2022 reveals a decrease in dropout rates, suggesting a positive impact of recently implemented educational reforms. However, the persistence of differences between urban and rural areas underlines the importance of adapting education policies to the specificities of each region. The study's recommendations emphasise the need for continuous monitoring of data to support informed policy decisions and ensure equitable access to education, making an essential contribution to optimising strategies to combat early school abandonment.

Key words:education, abandonment, society
J.E.L. classification: I2, I21, I24

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, school abandonment has become a widespread phenomenon in today's school environment, illiteracy being an acute problem of the education system in Romania, but also a problem of the whole society, besides marginalization and social exclusion. Dropping out of school is in fact the result of a combination of personal, social, economic, educational and family factors, closely interlinked, which generate many disadvantages. Without investment in education and without the adoption of optimal educational policies that reduce school drop-out and that are in line with the education system in our country, we cannot expect positive results, but lead to lower educational standards, which obviously limit the future possibility for young people to train and develop professionally in order to integrate into the labour market. The study focuses on the phenomenon of early school abandonment and through research, aims to highlight the consequences of early school leaving and the effectiveness of the school system in terms of solving these issues in urban and rural areas. The investigation focuses on establishing a diagnosis by carrying out an analysis of the risk situations and effects of dropping out of school, in order to prevent this phenomenon and to identify and establish methods and strategies to reintegrate pupils and students in urban and rural areas who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out. The research method adopted for the analysis of the dropout rate in secondary education in Romania is based on a comprehensive secondary data analysis strategy.

2. Literature review

School abandonment is extremely widespread in today's educational environment, representing a major problem for the Romanian education system, but also for society as a whole, as early school leaving leads to social exclusion and marginalisation. According to the literature, school abandonment is defined by the absence of pupils and students from school, regardless of culture,

age, ethnicity, nationality, religion, social and financial status. Children at risk of dropping out of school are deprived of the opportunity that the educational institution brings in the formation of the future adult, both personally and professionally (Ekstrand, 2015: 459). In the author's view (Neamțu, 2003: 199) "dropping out of school is defined as a definitive avoidance behaviour that consists in ceasing school attendance, leaving the educational system, regardless of the level reached, before obtaining a qualification or a full vocational training or before the end of the cycle of studies begun. Students who abandon school are not readmitted to the same educational institution and are not enrolled in an alternative schooling programme".

The causes of school drop-out are diverse and can be generated by:

1. *Single-parent families and tragedies* involving increased levels of stress in the child's life, influencing decisions to drop out of school.
2. *The material situation of the family of origin* is a risk or protective factor in the pupil's adaptation to the school environment.
3. *Poor relationship with the education system*, teaching staff, group of students, lack of adaptation to the school environment due to low motivation to attend classes caused by bullying (Cace, 2010: 28).
4. *Student environment,* alcohol and tobacco use are risk factors that can cause dropout. The age of adolescence is an important threshold in further education (Bonea, 2019: 387-403).
5. *The student's inhibitions*, frustrations accumulated in the family, wrong school orientation, lack of emotional and moral support from teachers.
6. *School phobia*, pupil and student personality, depression and introversion decrease academic performance.
7. *Classifying students according to academic performance* and marginalising those who do not measure up to the collective.
8. *Family pressure* to achieve maximum results leads to frustration and traumatic experiences, drawing the student into destructive vices and environments (Manoil, 2019: 350-354).

Given the multitude of causes that lead to school drop-out, one solution to reduce this phenomenon would be to implement strategies to prevent and combat it. There are many aspects that make school drop-out a difficult problem to solve.

Preventing abandonment has its limits. No matter how well conceived and scientifically based prevention may be, limitations arise as a result of many interacting phenomena that influence this phenomenon. Drawing the analogy between early school leaving and pre-delinquency, the effectiveness of preventive action is undermined by internal and external limits.

An effective intervention by teachers through the educational process they carry out with children can be a means of preventing school drop-out by intervening at the level of individual, family and school risk factors determined by the environment of origin.

An important aspect of dropout prevention is the creation of special success situations for school difficulties, as success and rewards develop the pupil's initiative and increase their confidence in their own possibilities. Teachers can only be the promoter of programmes aimed at preventing and combating dropping out.

Another element in combating school drop-out is the participation of all children in the educational programme, according to their respective strengths and possibilities. The starting point is the premise that every child has value, uniqueness and learning potential, regardless of their social needs. "*For better prevention of dropping out of school, it is necessary to know the competences and needs of each child integrated into the education system, whether they are of a different religion or ethnicity than the rest of the children*" (Țoc, 2018: 39).

Early detection of cases at risk of dropping out is the main solution that can improve the phenomenon. The social worker, educational counsellor, psychologist and highly trained teaching staff may be able to recognise the early signs of dropping out and establish an individual and personalised intervention plan to reduce the problem.

Combating and preventing the phenomenon of early school leaving is a current problem for both specialists and authorities in Romania and the European Union. The welfare of the person and human rights present the importance of equal opportunities for any child in terms of completing compulsory education, but the reality presents the ethnic and genetic characteristics of the individual which are discriminatory factors favouring school dropout.

Securing a future for people in society, ensuring respect for the principle of non-discrimination, and the moral commitment of institutions are facilitators in maximising efforts to support students to have an equal chance at education(Bridgeland, 2006).To combat school drop-out, pupils need to adapt to educational requirements and teachers and their families need to provide moral support to help them manage at-risk situations.

Young people who wanted to go to vocational school and were forced to enrol in secondary education subsequently dropped out because of the demands, expectations and discrepancies between what the students wanted and what they received from an educational and less vocational point of view. The main motivation given by high school students for dropping out is based on the hard tasks they receive and the lack of intellectual skills needed to complete them. The difference between school students with intellectual skills and those who want a job needs to be understood by the Romanian state. Tackling the school drop-out rate can be focused on giving importance to vocational school training, which prepares professional workers in specific fields. In this case, attending high school and completing secondary education and then, at the young person's wish, higher education, can be directed only to those high school students who want it, without any obligation (Bonea, 2019: 394-398).

Basic and continuous teacher training is needed to prevent and combat the phenomenon of school drop-out. Children show certain symptoms in different situations, such as juvenile delinquency, decreased motivation, school engagement and performance, they may be introverted or have comprehension problems. The attention of teaching staff must be focused on the problems and symptoms of the pupil in order to be able, together with specialists in education, psychology and social work, to address specific needs. Family problems, social marginalization, prejudice and discrimination, insufficient income are effects that lead to dropping out of school, effects that a well-trained teacher should notice early (Bonea, 2019: 387-394).

EU Member States must implement public policies to prevent and combat early school leaving in order to reach the target of reducing the school drop-out rate below 10%. Through prevention, Member States must facilitate access to educational institutions for pupils on an equal basis, without discrimination and social stigma. Implementing programmes to train teachers to identify and support only pupils at risk of dropping out is another way of reaching the target. Ensuring the quality standards of Romanian education, adequate equipment of schools, implementation of European projects for the rehabilitation of rural schools, as well as compliance with hygiene standards and educational requirements of children, regardless of their status, are other solutions that the Ministry of Education wants to implement (Ministry of Labour, 2014).

Teacher training should include sections on how to tackle and prevent early school leaving. In 2015, the Romanian Government approved the Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving, which includes measures to be implemented by 2020 to combat early school leaving. Through this strategy, Romania has set as its main objective to reduce the school drop-out rate from 17.3% in 2013 to 11.3% in 2020. Romania has recognised the problem of school drop-out and wants solutions to prevent and combat it, but these solutions need to be implemented from the very beginning of a student's life. Kindergarten is the first environment in which the child is integrated from an early age (Crosnoe, Crumb: 2007:267-282).

Providing continuous and faithful feedback to school pupils and students aims to keep them engaged in the educational process, maintain their curiosity and desire to attend school, with the ultimate goal of lowering the dropout rate. Focusing the educational unit on students' needs and development and less on teaching and memorization is a sustainable solution that can bring positive effects in students' lives (Weerman, 2010: 339-355).

To prevent dropout, educational institutions need to train their teachers to focus on the inclinations of each pupil or student to achieve performance in one or more subjects for which they show curiosity and passion. The support provided by the teaching staff should be focused on helping students towards a correct orientation towards certain fields of study, with the emphasis on preparing high performing students in the field in which they possess skills and aptitudes and less on preparing all students, regardless of their passions, abilities, fields just for the purpose of being promoted to the next grade. Eliminating the traditional and rigid education system can be a starting point in the fight against dropping out. (Dianda, 2008)

3. Research methodology

The research method adopted for the analysis of dropout rates in secondary education in Romania is based on a comprehensive secondary data analysis strategy. This methodology involves the use of existing data collected by authorised government entities - in this case, the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Statistics. Data extracted from the "Report on the State of Pre-University Education in Romania 2021 - 2022" and from the online platform of the statistical institute were used to provide a longitudinal and comparative assessment of trends in the dropout rate over a period of nine school years, from 2012-2013 to 2020-2021.

Longitudinal analysis allows the evolution and dynamics of the drop-out rate to be tracked over time, providing valuable insight into temporal changes. This is essential in understanding persistent trends or variations that may indicate the impact of policy interventions or other exogenous factors. Also, the comparative approach to the data by residential background reveals disparities between urban and rural contexts, highlighting the need to differentiate education policies and support initiatives according to the specificities of each area.To ensure rigorous interpretation of the data, the research included data cleaning and validation steps to eliminate potential inconsistencies or errors. Statistical analysis was carried out using appropriate methods that allow data to be visualised in graphical and tabular formats, thus facilitating better understanding of the results and dissemination of information to the general public and policy makers.

It is important to emphasise that although the use of secondary data offers the advantage of access to a large volume of information that has been systematically collected, there are certain limitations that need to be recognised. These limitations include dependence on the accuracy and reliability of data collection by primary sources and the possibility of data gaps that may result from methodological changes over time. Also, the analysis of existing data does not allow causal relationships to be established, only correlations and trends to be identified.

4. Findings

In recent years, the number of pupils enrolled in the Romanian pre-university education system has been decreasing from one year to the next. In the school year 2021/2022, the pre-university education system has seen a slight increase in pupil numbers (by almost 2000 pupils), comprising 2905.3 thousand pupils.

Figure no. 1 Changes in pupil numbers in pre-university education
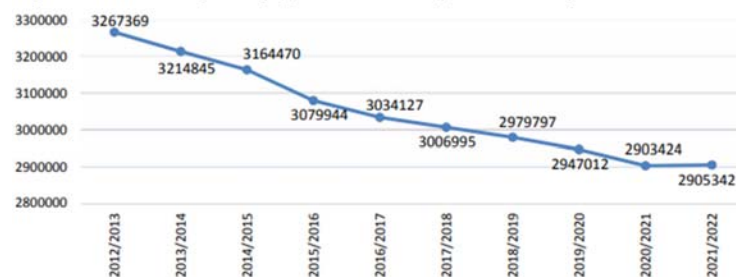
Source: Data processed based on NSI information, 2013-2022

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the number of pupils in pre-university education in Romania over time. It shows a decreasing trend in pupil numbers from 2012-2013 to 2021-2022.

Specifically, in the 2012-2013 school year, the number of registered pupils was 3,267,369, which is the peak of the graph. Subsequently, there has been a gradual decrease in pupil numbers over the years, with minor fluctuations from one year to the next. For example, in the 2013-2014 school year the number drops to 3,214,845, and in the 2014-2015 year it drops further to 3,164,470.

This trend continues in subsequent years, with a notable decrease in the 2015-2016 school year to 3,079,944 pupils, continuing with a gradual reduction to 2,903,424 pupils in the 2021-2022 school year. The data reflect possible demographic changes, changes in educational policies or other socio-

economic factors that could influence the number of pupils participating in pre-university education in Romania.

Analysis of this development requires a comprehensive approach to understand the causes and long-term implications of this decline, with the potential to affect the planning of educational resources, the quality of the education process and the dynamics of the future workforce.

In the school year 2020/2021 the drop-out rate in primary and secondary education has slightly decreased compared to the previous school year. Overall, 1.2% of primary and secondary school pupils dropped out. The rural environment, i.e. the lower grades, has high drop-out rates. The highest dropout rates in primary and secondary education were recorded for the rural school population (1.7% overall, 1.8% primary, 1.6% secondary) and for pupils in preparatory, first and fifth grades. (Ministry of Education, 2022)

At the end of the school year 2020/2021, the number of pupils in mainstream primary and secondary education was 1,545.2 thousand (excluding pupils in the Second Chance Programme). Of the total number of pupils in primary and secondary mainstream education on record at the end of the school year, 97.4% were declared passers and 2.6% repeaters. Compared to the previous school year, the promotion rate decreased by 1 p.p., which is reflected in the repetition rate. The corresponding data for special education are relatively constant compared to the previous school year: 17.2 thousand pupils at the end of the school year, of which 98.5% were declared passed and 1.5% failed.

For primary and secondary education as a whole, the dropout rate (indicator calculated on the basis of the "entry-exit" method) in 2020/2021 was 1.2% (representing 18.4 thousand pupils in absolute figures) (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Compared to the previous year, the value of the indicator is slightly decreasing.
- The decrease in the value of the indicator is due to its downward trend in rural schools; in urban areas the value of the indicator is constant compared to the previous school year.
- The difference between the values of the indicator by average is 0.9 p.p. in favour of the urban environment.
- As regards school drop-out by gender, the indicator records for the second consecutive year a low value of 0.1 p.p. (1.2% boys and 1.1% girls). This is the lowest value in the time series analysed.For each level of study, characteristic aspects are highlighted.

In primary education:
- School dropout remains constant compared to the previous school year (1.3%).
- The gap by residence remains high (0.9 p.p.), with rural areas still disadvantaged.
- The gender gap increases slightly in the context of the increase in the value of the indicator for boys (1.4% of primary school boys drop out of school compared to 1.2% of girls).

Figure no, 2 Primary school dropout rate by residence background
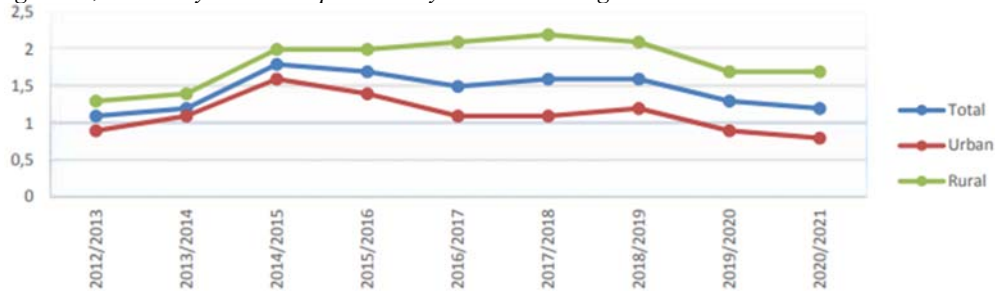
Source: Data processed from NSI information, 2014-2022

The graph shows the school years 2012-2013 to 2020-2021, and the evolution of dropout rates is illustrated for each school year.Analysing the trends in the graph, it can be seen that the overall drop-out rate (blue line) starts to increase slightly in 2012-2013 and reaches a more stable level in 2013-2016, after which it seems to decrease slightly towards the end of the period, until 2020-2021.

The urban drop-out rate (red line) also starts at a relatively stable level between 2012 and 2014 and then fluctuates over the following years. A sharper decrease is observed in the last years analysed, suggesting possible improvements in retention in urban areas or the effect of educational programmes aimed at preventing dropout.

In rural areas (green line), the drop-out rate is consistently higher than in urban areas. There is a peak in the years 2013-2014, after which the rate seems to decrease slightly, but still remains at a relatively high level compared to the urban environment throughout the period analysed. These trends suggest that while progress has been made in reducing school drop-out rates in both urban and rural areas, there are still significant disparities between the two environments. The persistence of higher dropout rates in rural areas could be attributed to specific challenges such as limited access to educational resources, economic difficulties or lack of transport infrastructure.

In secondary education:

- there is a 0.2 p.p. decrease in the drop-out rate compared to the previous year, thus continuing the downward trend of the indicator in recent years;
- for the second year in a row, the drop-out rate in secondary education is lower than the indicator value at primary level;
- the difference between the values of the indicator by residence is slightly higher than in primary education, with rural areas being disadvantaged in this respect (0.6% secondary school dropout rate in urban areas, 1.6% secondary school dropout rate in rural areas);
- this is the first time in the time series analysed that the values of the indicator by gender are equal.

Figure no. 3 Dropout rates in secondary education, by residence background
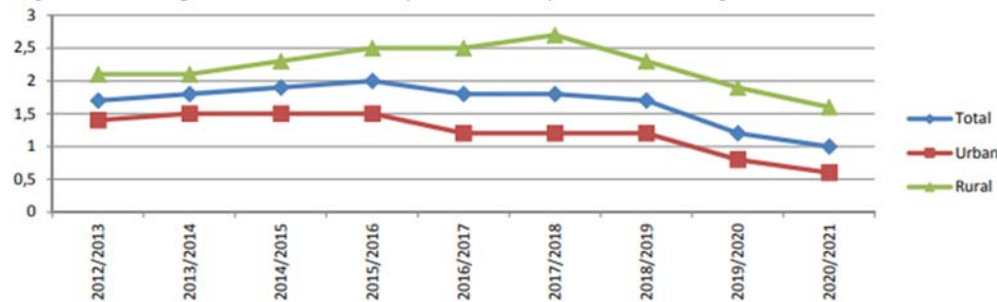
Source: Data processed from NSI information, 2014-2022

Analysing the graph representing the dropout rate in secondary education in Romania by residence, we can observe the following trends during the school years 2012-2013 to 2020-2021:

Blue line - Total: This line represents the total dropout rate for the entire secondary school population. An upward trend in the dropout rate can be seen until the 2014-2015 school year, after which it seems to decrease slightly, reaching its lowest point in 2020-2021. This trend indicates possible improvements in the retention of pupils in the secondary education system towards the end of the period.

Red line - Urban: Urban dropout rates increase slightly until the 2014-2015 school year, followed by an overall decrease. There is a significant decrease between school years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017, and then the rate stabilizes until 2020-2021.

Green line - Rural: The rural drop-out rate shows an increase up to the 2014-2015 school year, similar to the urban trend, but at a higher level. After this point, the rate gradually decreases, suggesting that there have been initiatives or changes that have had a positive impact on student retention in rural areas.

Observations on the graph indicate that, despite a start with higher dropout rates in both environments, progress has been made in decreasing these rates in the subsequent period, with a more pronounced improvement in rural areas. This may be the result of targeted educational policies, improved access to educational resources or other socio-economic factors.

5. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of empirical data extracted from the "Report on the State of Pre-University Education in Romania 2021 - 2022" and the information provided by the National Institute of Statistics, corroborated with the literature in the field of education, the present study reached the following academic conclusions:

About School Dropout Rate Trends: There is a general decrease in the school dropout rate in secondary education throughout Romania during the analyzed period (2012-2021). This evolution suggests a positive impact of the implemented educational reforms and intervention strategies that have been applied in the last decade. This positive dynamic responds to a central objective of education policies, in line with international recommendations on reducing school drop-out.

Disparities between Residential Settings: The persistence of significant differences between dropout rates in urban and rural settings highlights the existence of structural disparities. This phenomenon is consistent with literature that identifies unequal access to educational resources and socio-economic differences as among the main causes of these disparities.

Implications for Policy Formulation: Current findings recommend increased attention by policy makers in adapting education policies to the specific rural context. Interventions should be multifaceted, including educational support programmes and infrastructure development, in line with research studies that attest to their effectiveness in promoting equality in education.

The Need for Continued Research: The study highlights the importance of continuing applied research in education. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of educational data is essential to ensure a robust evidence base to inform educational decision-making and policy formulation.

The research findings therefore reflect the progress made in Romania's education sector, but also highlight the need for continued and focused commitment to address remaining challenges, particularly in rural areas. In this process, it is vital that decisions and policies are always informed by reliable data and rigorous analysis.

6. References

- Bonea, G. V., 2019. Abandonul şcolar [School dropout]. *Quality of Life,* 30(4), 387–403. [online], Available at: https://www.revistacalitateavietii.ro/journal/article/view/123.
- Bridgeland, J.M., DiIulio, J., Morison, KB, 2006. The Silent Epidemic. Perspectives of High School Dropouts. *Civic Enterprises.* [online] Available at: https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/thesilentepidemic3-06final.pdf .
- Cace, S., Tomescu, C., 2010. *Study on the phenomenon of mobbing and some forms of discrimination at the workplace in Romania.* [online] Available at: https://sindicatsinpen.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/studiu-asupra-fenomenului-de-mobbing-c899i-a-unor-forme-de-discriminare-la-locul-de-muncc483.pdf
- Crosnoe, R., Crumb, C., 2007. A life course model of education and alcohol use. *USA: Journal of Health Sociology. Behaviorism,* 48, https://doi.org/10.1177/002214650704800305.
- Dianda, M.R., 2008. *Preventing Future High School Dropouts. An Advocacy and Action Guide for NEA State and Local Affiliates. Washington*. DC: National Education Association. [online] Available at: http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/dropoutguide1108.pdf
- Ekstrand, B., 2015. What it takes to keep children in school: A research review. *Educational Review,* 67(4): 459–482. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2015.1008406.
- Manoil, P., 2019. School dropout. In *Modern Teaching Technologies-In memoriam dr. hab. prof. univ. Stela Cemortan,* Chişinău: Cavaioli Publishing House, 2016, pp. 350-354.
- Ministry of Education, 2021. *Report on the state of pre-university education in Romania*. Bucharest.
- Neamtu, C., 2003. *Social Assistance Treaty.* Iaşi: Polirom Publishing House.
- Weerman, F. M., 2010. Delinquency after Secondary School: Exploring the Consequences of Schooling, Working and Dropout. *European Journal of Criminology*, 7(5): 339-355. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370810373729.