

# Psychosocial dimensions of school failure

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## Abstract

If we start from the premise that the role of school is to train the student in relation to a social ideal, and the school fulfills an obvious socialization function, it follows that school failure is the failure of socialization in the school space. This failure can be interpreted both as a cause and as an effect of school dropout. The inability of the environment to provide the student with a supportive framework that meets his needs and to which he can adapt, causes him to give up attending school. Of course, in this situation, we discuss school dropout as a result of a personal decision of the student, motivated to give up the fact that he cannot adapt to the school environment. In this article, we aim to find out which are the individual and social factors that make school failure possible and how the two categories of factors are correlated. We will critically analyze a series of models in psychology and psycho-sociology, then we will highlight the importance of negative socialization in peer groups, as an important predictor of school failure, and we will finally discuss the issue of school phobia and methods of intervention in this condition.

**Keywords:** *School failure; school dropout; school absenteeism; negative socialization; school phobia; psychopedagogical intervention.*

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## 1. Introduction. Individual and social premises of school failure

One of the research questions we started from is how much the individual psychological factors matter in adapting or not adapting the student to the conditions assumed by the school environment and to what extent these factors can lead him to the decision (explicit or implicit, consciously assumed or no) to withdraw from the school space. A first answer comes from psychoanalysis, which blames the maladaptation on a weak superego, considering the antisocial act as the expression of a morbid condition, a deficiency of a psychopathological nature (psychosis), which has its origin in a certain type of personality - psychopathic personality - which, regardless of the social environment where it is born and evolves, ends up committing criminal acts." (Banciu, Rădulescu and Voicu 1985: p. 112). School maladaptation would be an indicator of such a personality type.

Another answer to our question comes from the perspective of developmental psychology. According to the theory of moral development, the maladaptation to school norms must be understood in terms of inconsistencies in the succession of individual moral development (from the pre-conventional to the conventional and, finally, to the post-conventional). The school can discourage this evolution in certain situations, the perverse effect being precisely the non-connection to the school norm: "The structure of the school can implicitly encourage a certain type of morality - for example, an

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authoritarian, conventional one. Some teachers' efforts to help students reach the post-conventional stage of moral development are hit by the frustration generated by the school atmosphere, which promotes only the principles specific to previous stages." (Csatary 1980: p. 117). In turn, Erikson blames school deviance on not resolving age-specific internal conflicts: diligence versus inferiority, respectively awareness of one's own identity versus confusion of roles (Swaterman 1988: pp. 147-184).

More recently, Bong and Skaalvik have developed an interesting theory, also in the area of developmental psychology, based on motivational research. This theory, called the theory of the academic self, considers the influence of self-esteem cognitive ability on performance in performing the task that involves intellectual effort (Popoviciu 2013: p. 264). According to the two, the academic self can be understood from the perspective of two analytical frameworks - the external framework and the internal framework. The first of them considers the comparisons made by the individual between his performance and the average performance of others (it is the case of self-assessment of his own position in relation to the positions of others, very obvious after finding the grades obtained at the control papers, when students evaluate their own grade obtained by others). Therefore, if the self is formed by comparison with others, this law of psychology is all the more valid in the case of the academic self. The second framework, the internal one, considers the synchronous comparisons between domains (comparison of grades obtained in history with those obtained in mathematics, for example) or diachronic comparisons between variations within the same field (grades currently obtained in mathematics, compared to notes from the previous year). The internal framework also refers to the discrepancy between the ideal and the real (how the grades should be according to the students' aspirations and how they are in reality).

In the construction of the academic self, individual factors, family factors, collegial factors, school environment factors and community factors intervene, being, in essence, a psychosociocultural construct (Popoviciu 2013: p. 264). A weak academic self, usually correlated with low self-esteem, are important predictors of school failure, requiring therapeutic intervention.

## **2. Positive socialization and negative socialization in pair groups**

Man is formed as a social being in society, through direct contact with his peers. Social interaction is the necessary condition, from the first years of life, for the newborn to become a member of society. The concept of socialization (Hatos 2006; Otovescu 2009) refers, from a psychological point of view, to the process of self-construction and personality structuring, and, from an anthropological point of view, it is the process of acquiring the fundamental cultural elements for living in society. In the first 7 years of life, when primary socialization occurs, the family is almost the only agent of socialization, and during the secondary socialization, the school and peer groups play a decisive role. As each pair group develops a specific culture, it may conform to the dominant culture (positive socialization) or, conversely, may conflict with generally accepted norms and values (negative socialization). Negative socialization in peer groups, which become reference groups, can be considered a major cause of school failure.

Theoretically, but also practically, in order to know how to intervene, the question is: Why do peer groups appear, which encourage a negative socialization and, through this, an antisocial behavior? A. Cohen explains the deviation from the norm by institutionalizing new cultural systems (delinquent subcultures, also called countercultures) that develop and function within the global cultural system (basic cultural system). Cohen

focuses on the research of "neighborhood gangs", demonstrating that the development of a parallel norm comes as a natural reaction to the frustrations and anxieties generated by global culture, as well as to the inconsistencies and contradictions of the system of values and norms. At the base of the establishment of delinquent subcultures are a series of shared motivations (fears, frustrations, conflicts) which, although manifested at the psychological level, result from the structural configuration of society (Bordua 1961: pp. 119-136). The similar psychological condition is the variable-cause of the coagulation of delinquent subcultures, which, once established, in turn generate effects on the social structure that facilitated their crystallization. From this point of view, the theoretical model described by Cohen tends to be included in the category of phenomenological psychosociological approaches (Ciuchi 2011: p. 47).

Cohen criticizes the alienation encouraged by the urban environment and capitalist society, with delinquent subcultures viewed from the perspective of "parallel societies," capable of distributing high status positions to those who would not have had the opportunity to obtain them in the dominant cultural system. anxiety, to provide a value-attitude system not for the purpose of replacing or deconstructing the dominant one, but as a compensatory complement to the latter's shortcomings (Bordua 1961). Inevitably, the delinquent subculture ends up directing its resources against the dominant culture, without this being the motivation for its establishment, but only the form of its manifestation. Members of the subculture do not act rationally-utilitarianly, in terms of ends and means, as in Robert Merton's theory, but unconsciously and irrationally, driven by subconscious desires, only to consolidate status within the group and strengthen the subculture (Bordua 1961).

An important exegete and continuator of Cohen's conception - David Bordua - notes in his synthesis of the theory of delinquent subcultures: "From school and family, some boys are much more inclined to street life." (Bordua 1961: p. 123). Moreover, "when a working-class boy begins to attend school or other middle-class-controlled institutions and hits the evaluation grid of that class, he inevitably faces great disapproval, rejection, and even punishment. In short, in the eyes of the evaluator, it does not matter. Cohen refers to this by the problem of lack of status, which is the fundamental problem of adaptation, to which the delinquent subculture is a solution." (Bordua 1961: p. 124).

Following the line of neo-Marxist conflict, Cohen is surprised by the degenerative evolution of capitalism in the first half of the previous century, seeing in the disadvantaged status of the lower social classes the cause of their non-integration into the school system, which would have thought only for the upper classes. Subsequently, the same factors would make integration into the community and society difficult. The author insists on the psychological mechanisms that determine the exponents of the lower classes to access the subcultural values and norms, without being able to highlight the differentiation criteria. The theory does not explain the situations of social success of many young people in the lower classes, nor the very high frequency of antisocial behaviors committed by solitary individuals, not integrated in delinquent subcultures. Moreover, the explanation of the axiological reversal, according to which delinquent subcultures take over and reverse the meaning of the dominant cultural elements, has never been empirically demonstrated.

In addition, another limitation of Cohen's theory is that it does not clarify the mechanisms by which the deviant culture is internalized and the individual conforms to it. To explain the mechanisms of internalization of deviant culture, A. Bandura, through the theory of social learning, brings to attention a number of generally valid mechanisms. The model developed by the well-known psychologist was designed to explain aggressive,

violent acts, but can easily be applied to understand other forms of deviant behavior, which does not necessarily involve aggression. The theory of social-cognitive learning postulates the existence of two mechanisms underlying the internalization of deviant behaviors: direct learning, through punishment / reward systems, and indirect learning, through models (Neculau 1996: p. 438). Direct learning starts from the following observation: behavior in accordance with the rules of a culture (a subculture or dominant culture) has been punished and / or deviant behavior has been rewarded. This is the case of rural families, who resort to rewarding the student (generally implicit) who chooses to take care of household / agricultural affairs to the detriment of school attendance. Since the family has a monopoly on the system of punishments / rewards within the primary socialization, the nature of the value orientations in the family exerts an overwhelming influence on the learned behaviors, respectively on the behaviors rejected by the child. Also, we may observe that aspects of social origin play an important role “in shaping the initial values of education and work: youth from the rural communities give a less importance to extrinsic rewards than youth from the urban communities” (Motoi 2018: p. 144). In other cases, the reference group (peer group to which the student wishes to access) may condition membership by deviant behavior. The reward - that of being accepted in a group - can exceed the costs of absenteeism or abandonment, especially against a background of poor primary socialization.

The student may notice that the sanction, in the case of colleagues who do not attend classes, is insignificant in relation to the benefits they enjoy (freedom, fun, free time, group prestige, membership) and may in turn resort to this strategy. In this sense, what is needed in the prevention of absenteeism is what the common language has called "discipline": from a sociological point of view, the existence of pre-established negative sanctions, severe enough and firmly implemented to discourage undesirable patterns of conduct. On the other hand, it is important to have a system of positive sanctions (rewards) that encourage prosocial behaviors, turning them into role models. Education policy needs to take all these needs into account. According to A. Bandura, the influence of the models offered by the media falls into the category of “indirect learning” (Neculau 1996: p. 438). Promoting negative models of social success that do not rely on education and personal effort, as well as marginalizing positive examples, are common media practices, especially in today's Romanian society.

At the heart of the two forms of learning is the principle of behavioral consistency, according to which “the target can be achieved either by motivational references to current behavior (effective behavior in the past will be encouraged in the future) or by indicating new patterns of behavior. behavior that “promises”, through the so-called model of observational learning” (Gavreliuc 2007: p. 201). This model of observational learning has its roots in the psychology of the sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who, although he pertinently explained the mechanisms and forms of social imitation, did not elucidate the subjective motivation of the imitative act. Why do some children imitate antisocial behaviors and others do not? This was the fundamental research question that guided Bandura's studies. Beyond the "rational choice" type calculation, which we described above and which is specific especially to older school ages, the mechanism of imitation by observation that acts in the first years of life and will exert a major influence over the years of school is called by Bandura "modeling", referring to “the attraction of children to strong models and possessing objects desired by them or other traits. By behaving like these role models, children hope to gain their own valuable resources for the future. Bandura's research

continues to greatly influence studies on children's social development." (Sion 2003: p. 21).

### **3. School phobia or refusal to attend school. Characteristics and methods of intervention**

Cognitive psychology emphasizes the importance of a healthy way of thinking and its influence on appropriate, prosocial behavior, in accordance with the rules established in the community. The "father" of cognitive psychology, Aaron T. Beck, starts from the assumption that behind the lack of school hides a series of irrational maladaptive cognitions: the student considers himself inferior to others, unable to meet school requirements or, conversely, considers that the school can not meet its real needs and, as a result, attending it is useless. These cognitions predate school attendance, usually arising in primary socialization, based on the internalization of cognitive schemes of this type. They can be weakened or, on the contrary, strengthened during school, if the student faces traumas, failures, stigmatizations that come in confirmation of maladaptive cognitions. Also, bad experiences in transition periods, such as puberty, can update irrational cognitions and move them from the latent to the manifest (Hollon and Beck 2010).

A special place in the child's psychopathology belongs to school phobia. Beyond the case-by-case variations, the literature highlights two major classes of causes of social phobia (Last, Hansen and Franco 1998). The first of these refers to anxiety disorders caused by separation. In this case, the phobic student cannot detach himself from the family environment, in order to adapt to the school environment. In general, these disorders are based on a hyperprotective parenting style, an exaggerated responsibility of the child in the family, the disproportionate sanctioning of mistakes in the primary group, etc. The second class of causes concerns anxiety about some elements of the school environment. An inadequate way of the teacher or students to relate to the student, labeling and stigmatization, certain events with traumatic potential can promote the development of social phobia, without in this case, a separation anxiety. Both separation anxiety and phobic disorders of specific stimulus in the school environment, translate into the student's refusal to attend classes.

Once diagnosed, social phobia is treated similarly to other disorders in the field of anxiety and specific phobias, by adapting general methods of intervention to the age and personality of the student. In the literature are recorded two classic studies on the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral interventions in treating social phobia. The first, by Blagg and Yule (1984), measured the effectiveness of three types of treatment - exposure to the situation that generates phobia, the application of cognitive-behavioral intervention in a specialized setting (hospitalization) and the application of cognitive-behavioral intervention at home. Finally, direct exposure to the phobia-generating situation proved to be the most effective. The exposure method, the main method used today in treating school phobia disorders, involves following four distinct steps: identifying irrational interpretations and cognitions that generate the phobic state; cognitive restructuring, by replacing them with rational and adaptive ones; direct and gradual exposure to the phobia situation and strengthening new interpretations of the situation.

If until Last, Hansen and Franco (1998) cognitive-behavioral therapy was the main method of intervention in school phobia, the authors mentioned bring to the fore another model of intervention with at least equal efficiency, namely the psychosocial approach. During the psychosocial intervention, "children are asked to share any specific fears or concerns that arose during the previous week. Subsequently, relevant topics for children

who refuse school are presented, such as fear, anxiety, phobias and maladaptive thinking. Unlike cognitive-behavioral therapy, therapists refrain from providing specific encouragement or instruction for children to deal with dreaded situations, and children are not verbally strengthened to go to school. Moreover, no instructions are given to teach them how to change their maladaptive thoughts.” (Last, Hansen and Franco 1998: p.406). The study concluded that "overall, the results suggest that psychosocial treatments are effective in returning phobic school children to school and that the highly structured cognitive-behavioral approach may not be superior to traditional educational and supportive treatment methods." (Last, Hansen and Franco 1998: p. 404). Traditional methods of psychosocial intervention today fall within the scope of social assistance, which, in turn, has proven effective in preventing and combating difficulties in relating the individual to the school environment (Breaz 2020).

#### 4. Conclusions

School failure is the result of a combination of factors, both individual and social. From the multitude of psychological, sociological and pedagogical approaches, the cognitivist paradigm - either in cognitive-behavioral form or in psychosocial form - offered not only a pertinent explanation to the phenomena of school phobia, but also an exceptional therapeutic system. The contributions of cognitive psychology in the scientific explanation of the individual causes of school failure and in the formulation of well-customized therapeutic solutions are complemented in the field of social psychology, starting from the decisive role that the immediate environment (family, peer group, community, delinquent subcultures, social modeling, class inequalities, labeling phenomena, etc.) play in the dynamics of the student's personality system. Also, school counselling has an important role, but unfortunately in Romania, there is a deficiency of counsellors. Thus, "the inequitable ratio of 1 counselor to 800 students in pre-university education confirm the hypothesis of school dropout and disorientation for students in the decisive stage of self-discovery and crystallization of skills, abilities and preferences" (Niță and Ilie Goga 2014: p. 29).

The solutions proposed by social psychology and psychopedagogy, comparable in efficiency with cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy (Last, Hansen and Franco (1998), do not stand out both for their clinical value and especially for their care and pedagogical purpose, of social psychology provides the teacher, pedagogue, psychologist and social worker with the tools necessary to understand individual school failure by reference to the intersystemic context of the microgroups of which the student belongs, making possible the optimization and harmonization of this context, in partnership with parents and community (Breaz 2019).

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