



The phenomenon of early school leaving in Romania and strategies for reducing it

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Abstract

From a sociological point of view, by the term 'school drop-out' we refer to the calculation of irregular exits from the education system, i.e. summing up the various indicators of a bumpy ride: withdrawals, drop-outs, failures, repeats, delays, educational debts. Sociologically, therefore, school dropout is a phenomenon that encompasses everything that is lost during the evaluation of the learning process.

However, not all pupils but only a part run the risk of dispersal because schools operate a social selection function, distinguishing pupils on the basis of evaluation criteria for school success, which in turn is influenced by factors that are not biological but social, both ascribed such as socio-economic status and the cultural background of the family of origin, and acquired such as motivation, interests, degree of independence.

Keywords: *early school leaving; social consequences; Romania; cultural background; sociological research; educational and social inequalities.*

Introduction

Sociology provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of educational inequalities. At the outset, it is essential to recognize that social inequalities significantly influence educational opportunities and outcomes (Durkheim 1956). These pre-existing disparities—termed "inequalities at entry"—create barriers for disadvantaged individuals, limiting their ability to access schooling and, in turn, making it more difficult to achieve the theoretical benchmarks that are often set for educational success. This phase, characterized by "inequality of result," highlights how initial disparities can lead to a cascading effect, creating divergent educational trajectories based on socio-economic background (Fadda and Mangiaracina 2011; Zajacova and Lawrence 2018).

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Moreover, the educational system itself can perpetuate or exacerbate these inequalities through what are known as "inequalities of treatment." These inequalities may arise from systemic mechanisms that result in exclusion and discrimination, such as biased disciplinary policies or unequal resource allocation among schools (Uncu and Penu 2011). Additionally, even neutral actions, which might appear impartial on the surface, can inadvertently highlight and magnify these underlying inequalities when students are evaluated. Essentially, the evaluation process can act as a magnifying glass, illuminating the disparities rooted in a student's context and background (Fadda and Mangiaracina 2011; Zajacova and Lawrence 2018).

Furthermore, the impact of educational investments is not uniform, leading to what sociologists describe as "inequalities of profitability." This concept pertains to the differential returns that individuals receive from their educational qualifications in terms of access to the labor market, salary levels, and overall career progression. The timing of market entry, coupled with the qualifications possessed, can significantly shape one's economic trajectory, as individuals with higher educational qualifications often experience more favorable job opportunities and higher wages than their less-educated counterparts (Egyed, McIntosh and Bull 1998).

In summary, the interplay of these various forms of inequality—be they at the point of entry, during the educational process, or in the resulting benefits from education—creates a complex landscape where social disparities are not only upheld but also intensified. Thus, a sociological examination of education must consider these interconnected elements to fully grasp the systemic issues contributing to educational inequity (Fadda and Mangiaracina 2011; Zajacova and Lawrence 2018).

Empirical research: Romania and the phenomenon of early school leaving

Before 1989, it was almost impossible to talk about school dropout in Romania because under communism, school was free and compulsory and the regime was very 'violent' in this regard.

The presence of young people in the education system was very important, not only because the regime needed educated people to build the socialist society, but also because schools were responsible for indoctrinating pupils and preparing them to become pillars of communism.

With Law 28 of 1978, the communist regime introduced the compulsory attendance of at least ten classes (years) for all pupils, otherwise the fines for parents were hefty, but not only that, they risked becoming society's 'outcasts', with no chance of promotion to the ranks, while for children, since it was compulsory to work after finishing school, if they failed to complete at least ten classes, they risked, at least towards the end of communism, juvenile detention (Law 28/1978).

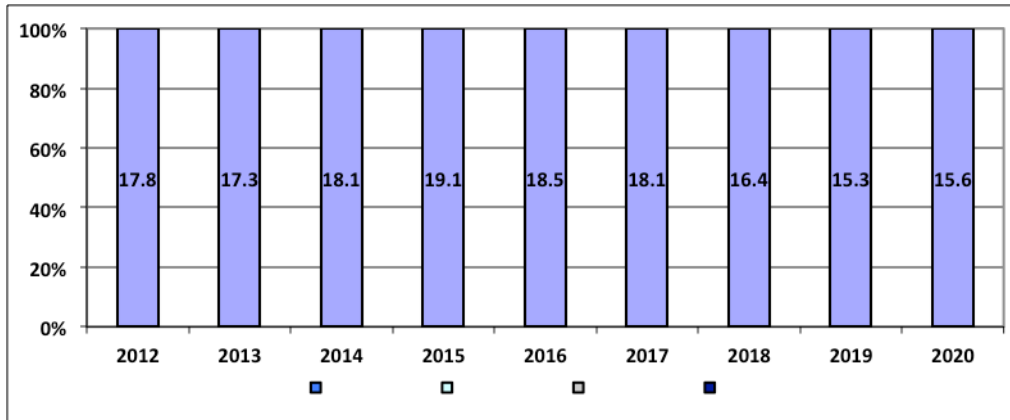
The compulsory and free education of the Romanian school system began with the first law of 1864, which fined the parents of pupils who missed school without legal reasons (Art. 35/Law 1150/1864).

Communism, towards its end, introduced the compulsory attendance of at least twelve classes (years) for all pupils, a compulsory requirement that would be lifted once the regime was removed in 1989.

As a result, early school leaving in Romania reached 17.8% in 2012, at which point the government took steps to decrease it. From 2012 until 2021, Romania has spent more than four million euro to decrease early school leaving, reaching 15.6 per cent in

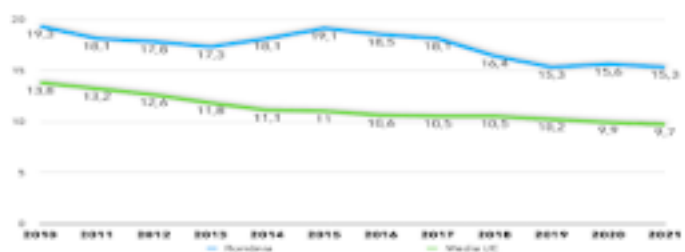
2020, exceeding the threshold of 11.3 per cent envisaged by the 'Strategy for decreasing early school leaving' (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

Fig. 1. The evolution of early school leaving in Romania (pupils aged 18 to 24) from 2012 until 2020 in percentages:



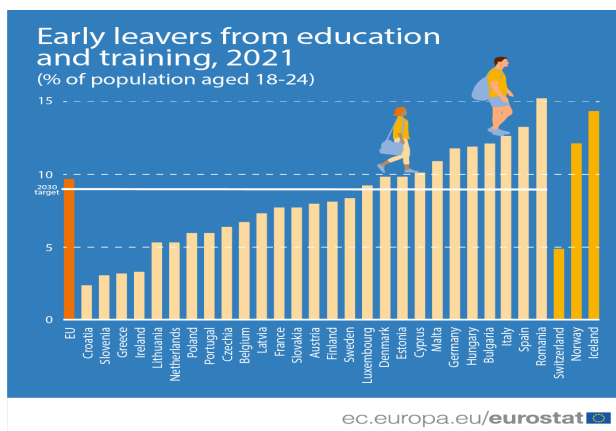
As can be seen from figure number one, starting in 2019, the strategies bore their first fruit, reaching the 2019 percentage in 2021, i.e. 15.3% (Romanian National Institute of Statistics 2024). However, the figures were still too high given the average in the EU, as can be seen from figure number two (Edu Pedu 2021).

Fig. 2. School drop-out rates in percentages for 18-24 year olds from 2010 until 2021 in Romania and the average in the European Union



In 2021, Romania was the state with the highest percentage of early school leavers (15.3 per cent), as can be seen from figure number three, followed by Spain and Italy, both with 13 per cent (Eurostat 2022).

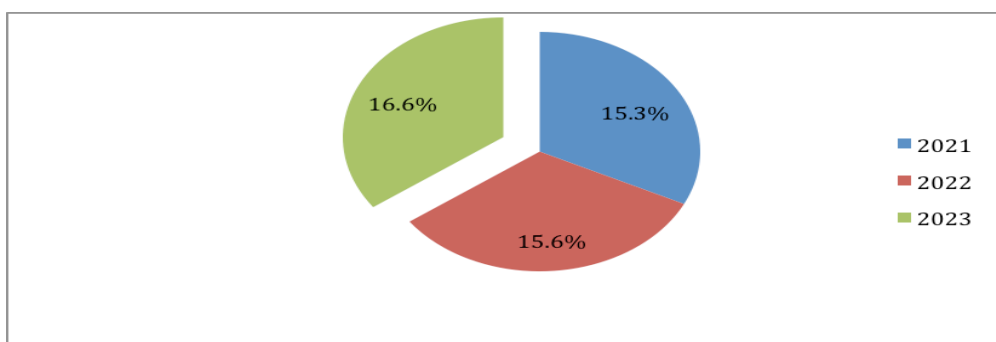
Fig. 3 (School drop-out rates)



It is needless to explain how the CoVID19 pandemic has affected school drop-out. Despite the efforts of the government, especially in rural areas, where poverty did not allow many pupils to have computers, tablets etc., but also because they were not yet connected to fast internet to at least allow those with the means to get online.

Under these auspices, the year 2022 saw an increase in school drop-out rates, reaching the 2020 instalment at 15.6%. Unfortunately, the year 2023 did not show better values either. The Romanian Ministry of National Education reported a 1% increase in early school leavers to a value of 16.6%, thus surpassing the year 2018 when a value of 16.4% was observed.

Fig. 4 (The evolution of early school leaving in Romania (pupils aged 18 to 24) from 2021 until 2023 in percentages) - (Edu Pedu 2024)



The 'Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving' in Romania

Given the high rate of 19% early school leavers, in June 2015 the Romanian Ministry of Education published the Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving, a document approved by the Romanian Government. The document included measures to be implemented until 2020 and was based on the European Strategy 2020, where the

target for decreasing early school leaving was 10% in the European Union, and 11.3% in Romania (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

In accordance with the Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving in Romania, the main causes of early school leaving are:

1. The “low level of income per family, as a financial constraint to bear the collateral costs of education, especially among poor and disadvantaged families;
2. Low territorial accessibility of educational services in isolated rural areas;
3. Involvement of children in seasonal work activities and care of younger siblings;
4. Migration of parents from some communities abroad (leads to temporary withdrawal from school);
5. The parents' level of education, particularly that of the mother;
6. How the benefits of family schooling are perceived;
7. Children with disabilities and special educational needs;
8. Health, early marriage and/or pregnancy, other personal reasons;
9. Poverty, poor employment opportunities and low parental participation in education (Kazdin 1997; Niță, Motoi, Ilie Goga 2021) in many rural/suburban communities; high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder among Roma children, poverty and, in some cases, cultural factors are also associated” (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

From a sociological perspective, it is social inequalities that precede educational action, in other words, inequalities in entry, that are an expressive factor influencing access to education and educational success. This phenomenon has been extensively documented in the scientific literature, which notes how social inequalities, such as the difference in income and educational level between families, influence school choice (Stancu and Popp 2020) and access opportunities to higher education (Kovach 1991). A 2007 study showed that class inequality in the possibility of obtaining a high school degree increased slightly, while inequality in the possibility of obtaining a university degree remained stable (Checchi, Fiorio and Leonardi 2007; Anghel 2014).

This suggests that although there has been progress in reducing entry disparities, social inequalities continue to play an important role in determining school choice and access to higher education (Brunello and Checchi 2007)

According to the 2015 Romanian Strategy, the main factors influencing educational provision (Palaghia 2018) are:

1. The „insufficient number of places and the limited availability of Second Chance, Initial Vocational and Technical Education and School After School type programmes in rural areas and poor communities;
2. Insufficient number of places for apprenticeships/traineeships;
3. Lack of infrastructure at kindergarten level, especially in rural areas;
4. Insufficient infrastructure at the level of vocational and technical education;
5. The poor quality of the current initial vocational and technical education system in some educational units;
6. Insufficient correlation between the educational offer and local economic specificities;

7. Educational quality, processes and practices: behavioural problems at school level, especially concerning teachers' attitudes towards students (and each other) or teachers' attitudes towards parents (Patterson 1976);

8. Insufficient support for students belonging to minority groups;

9. Quality of teaching (Țăranu 2020) and learning processes (Ratiu, Popovici and Codorean 2019): teaching skills and teaching methods of teachers do not correlate with modern methods and are inadequate to meet the needs of at-risk groups; teaching methods are inadequate; lack of teaching resources available in schools; students fail the national examination at the end of year 8; teachers are not motivated;

10. School environment - lack of communication between different levels of the education system and parents/community and other relevant institutions at local level;

11. Lack of additional financial resources at the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research level: budget and staff allocations for the approach of early school leaving were insufficient; conditions in schools are inadequate;

12. Lack of school counsellors or psychologists to help children with special educational needs (Kazdin 1987); students with disabilities do not receive adequate support;

13. Lack of reliable, transparent and timely data hinders the sector's ability to adequately monitor trends in early school leaving;

14. Weak correlation between education provision and the skills and knowledge required by the labour market;

15. Limited funding per student from the school budget (because the number of students is small), which only covers basic administrative costs and teachers' salaries, with no funds available for specific measures concerning early school leaving” (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

The Strategy acknowledged many problems, including the non-functionality of the Integrated Education Information System in Romania, for which the government had just allocated four million euro to make it functional.

According to the government and its strategy, the „groups most at risk of entering early school leaving are:

1. Minorities and other marginalised groups. Data from the Family Budget Survey (BFS) show indicative differences between children in the poorest quintile and those in other categories. According to recent studies, the main reasons for early school leaving, identified by both educational actors and families, are directly associated with financial difficulties. The Roma population is the most vulnerable to them and the situation is even worse for Roma girls (Olah 2009), due to poor living conditions and traditions. Recent research has shown that out of 597 Roma children (aged 7-11) from families with at least one child not attending school, almost half (44.2%) do not participate in any educational or vocational training programme. According to the 2011 census, 14% of the Roma population is illiterate, compared to 1% of other minorities or Romanians, and only 9% have completed high school, compared to 39% of other communities or Romanians. The lack of reliable official statistical data on the situation of Roma in general and on Roma participation in education in particular is a major obstacle to correctly assessing the extent of this problem and current trends. Cultural factors are partly responsible for this problem, as it is difficult for Roma to identify themselves as Roma without facing discrimination. Experts' estimates place the number of Roma much

higher than official reports: according to Council of Europe data, in 2010, the Roma population in Romania was estimated at between 1,200,000 and 2,500,000 (i.e. between 6-12% of the total population). Furthermore, data from the UNDP/WB/EC Household Labour Force Survey (2011) indicate that more than a third (37%) of the Roma population in Romania is under 15 years old, in stark contrast to the ageing demographic profile of the Romanian population.

2. Children from rural communities. Early school leaving in Romania is, in most cases, a major problem, especially in rural areas .

3. Students repeating or dropping out of school. Many factors influence the completion of studies, including the risk of drop-out by students with poor results or those who are older than the level at which they are enrolled. These children and young people will certainly contribute to an increase in the number of school drop-outs, especially those who have repeated more than once or who did not enrol at the right age.

4. Children/young people with special educational needs. Romania has traditionally organised special educational services in special schools (special education). Since 1998, a series of measures have been implemented to integrate these children into mainstream education. Funding for the schooling of pupils with special educational needs enrolled in mainstream education has not been adjusted to the additional costs for new teachers and teaching assistants, equipment and materials to increase accessibility and to modify classrooms. Therefore, the potential benefits that children with special educational needs could enjoy through integration are significantly reduced by the lack of attention to their special needs” (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

According to Gabriela Neagu, "those with economic capital invest both directly in education - buying books, supplies, paying school fees, transport, accommodation - and indirectly - in health care, ensuring optimal conditions for studying at home, organising children's leisure time, etc.". On the contrary, material-financial instability discourages the elaboration of strategies, the setting of medium- and long-term educational goals, and represents a potential source of conflict in the family, with negative effects on the psycho-physical and intellectual development of the children" (Neagu 2007).

The strategy to reduce early school leaving was based on three guiding principles: prevention, intervention and compensation. "Prevention measures aimed at reducing the risk of early school leaving before potential problems arise. These measures optimise the provision of vocational education and training to support the student in achieving better educational outcomes and to remove obstacles to educational success. These types of measures aim to establish a solid and early foundation for students to develop their potential and create opportunities for better school integration (Patterson, Dishion and Yoerger 2000). Intervention measures aimed at eliminating the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder by improving the quality of education and vocational training, at the level of educational institutions, by providing specific support to students or groups of students at risk of dropping out of school early warning signals received (O'Sullivan and Tennant 1993). These measures consider all levels of education, from early childhood education and care to upper secondary education, with a focus on

1. policies at the school level, to be integrated into the overall development policies of the unit;

2. the individual level, in order to develop students' 'resilience' to the risk of dropping out of school and the recovery of concrete difficulties, which may be of a social, cognitive or emotional nature.

The compensatory measures were aimed at supporting the reintegration into the educational system and the training of early school leavers and the acquisition of the qualifications needed to enter the labour market" (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

As a mode of action, the strategy identified the following main pillars: Pillar 1: 'Ensuring access to education and quality education for all children'. According to the ministry, the measures proposed in this pillar aimed 'to increase enrolment rates in pre-school education (pre-school education - children from birth to 3 years and pre-school education - children from 3 to 6 years) (Tremblay, Pihl, Vitaro and Dobkin 1994), primary and lower secondary education. Within the goal of expanding access to education, special attention will be given to pre-school education and the continued expansion of pre-school education (3-5 years), in order to achieve a near-universal enrolment rate and a substantial increase in the number of children (especially those aged 2-3 years) who can access pre-school care and educational services, including services leading to greater parental involvement in children's education (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

Further results are also proposed concerning enrolment in primary and lower secondary cycles in order to address asymmetries in learning outcomes for the four selected target groups: children aged 11-17 years, particularly those from poor economic backgrounds, from rural areas, Roma children and other minority groups. The central objective of this pillar is to substantially improve the quality of primary and lower secondary education (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

These improvements will attract more students to school by forcing them to stay in school'; Pillar Two: 'Ensure that all children complete compulsory education'. The strategy proposed that the second pillar "will focus on improving retention in compulsory education. Special attention will be given to classes/levels of education where this problem is acute.

This pillar will promote the development of early detection and intervention systems; strengthen, expand and customise counselling services; and introduce mechanisms to promote student-centred remedial education programmes in schools (e.g. after school, summer kindergarten, etc.), as well as other types of programmes to improve retention in the system. This pillar is designed to ensure the educational success of all children, including children from socially marginalised and at-risk groups, by guaranteeing them equal access to educational opportunities, rights and services" (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

The third pillar entitled "Reintegration of early school leavers into the education system" was aimed at "supporting early school leavers to reintegrate into the education and training system by offering them reintegration pathways, through which children and young people acquire the necessary qualifications to occupy a position in the labour market. This pillar focuses mainly on a better quality and greater expansion of Second Chance programmes" (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

The fourth pillar, Developing Adequate Institutional Support, "aimed to create a compelling environment for the strategy, which focuses on the Romanian government's ability to adopt an integrative governmental approach to respond to the challenges of early school leaving. In particular, the Pillar focuses on the ministry's capacity to administer, plan (annually) and implement the Reducing Early School Leaving Strategy' (Romanian Strategy for decreasing early school leaving 2015).

Conclusions

Obviously, the strategy contained all the actions to be taken to achieve all the objectives, infrastructural interventions in schools, planned costs and a whole series of tools for monitoring and evaluating the interventions. The document also enumerated the institutions empowered to intervene for each objective and at each stage, the cooperation between them, the responsibilities of each, etc.

Unfortunately, although some results were seen for a while, as I said before, the strategy missed its target of 11.3% until 2020.

The causes are complex, but the main ones have as their background the lack of investment in education. Although education is a strategic goal in Romania, which is also enshrined in the Constitution, it seems that so far no government has ever managed to give it the importance it deserves.

The low salaries of teachers in comparison with the rest of the European Union (Ilie 2014), especially the western states, the financial allocation based per student, the overcrowding of classrooms, the lack of adequate staff in rural areas, and lately also the depopulation of these areas are only some of the reasons why the Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving has failed.

Although the Strategy succeeded in decreasing early school leaving from 19.1 % in 2015 to 15.6 % in 2020, with the lowest value in 2019 with 15.3 % (see fig. 1), the values were still too high for the imposed target of 11.3 %, let alone the EU average of 10 %.

Unfortunately, the following years were worse, with 2021 and 2022 remaining at the average of 2019-2020, but the year 2023 brought a 1% increase to a value of 16.6%, one of the highest since 2017 (fig.4.).

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