Early school leaving, a problem of the entire society

Corina - Diana PUȘCAȘ[1], Bianca - Varvara ANDRASY[2]

Abstract: Education is one of the main pillars of a society that supports the development of a country by being a basic tool in achieving a sustainable future. In our country the institutionalized education suffers, because of the instability of specific legislation, frequent changes in the curricula. Another cause of instable educational system is the social inequality, which is also a main driver for early school leaving. Moreover, the evolution of technology (tools, internet etc.) and current society changes are factors that deepen the social disparity phenomena and determine certain behaviors among young people.

Keywords Education, sustainable future, social inequality, early school leaving, evolution of technology, social disparity.

I   INTRODUCTION

„Education starts at birth and continues through the whole life by gaining knowledge. It should be considered a strategic development factor. The rhythm and size of the society changes and the problems of the humanity require a development and growth of competences of skills for a better acceptance of a rapidly changing world. The internet, computers, tablets, smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, commercial and educational websites have transformed the culture and economy of the whole world" [1].

Unfortunately, in the last couple of months, the humanity had to face this CoVid-19 horrifying pandemic, meaning that most of the education, socialization and commercial activities have been done online. The philosopher Aurel Codoban said in an interview for Adevarul Newspaper that the world in general and the education will be, for sure, a lot more digitalized after this CoVid-19 novel. H. G. Wells stated that the pandemic is the tail of the comet which will lead us to change. There change has come! The schools shut down, classes are done online, same as examinations. So, everything is different. Despite digitalization is not necessarily a bad thing, in Romania the digitalization of the educational services created severe inequalities. There are still families who cannot afford providing their children access to the technology necessary to benefit of the free education. Or even if technology is already present in a family's house, it could be that there are more children who would have to use the same computer.

Online education can, indeed, work. But for children with no access to technology and no possibilities to use it, it is not working at all, or working only partially. Furthermore, the teachers' efforts in preparing the digital lessons are a lot higher than a traditional way of teaching. And here we must not forget the parents, who are now more involved than ever to make sure that the children can and know how to use the digital tools which are necessary.

In the light of the COVID-19 novel, the teaching processes have changed a lot and, for children coming from poor areas or families, this could mean another category of children who are leaving school early. A sustained development of the way of living and of a community's economy cannot be realized without proper schooling.

The Ministry of Education in Romania has adopted special short-term measures for improving the quality of the online education. These measures are:

- Finding solutions to finance, purchase and distribute IT equipment free of charge for families who cannot afford;
- Creating support channels and teaching communities with the children, parents and teachers to ensure an easier knowledge transfer for digital education.

In the same time, on a long term, the Ministry of Education wishes to implement a national plan for online teaching and learning, including resources and equipment necessary for different stages of schooling. The numbers showing the early school leaving rate for Romania are higher and higher - 1.5% of the students from pre-university school and 7.5% from post-secondary school are abandoning education [2]. Figure 1 presents early school leaving for young people in high schools and colleges. Romania versus EU comparison.

---

[1] Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania, corina.hotico@gmail.com
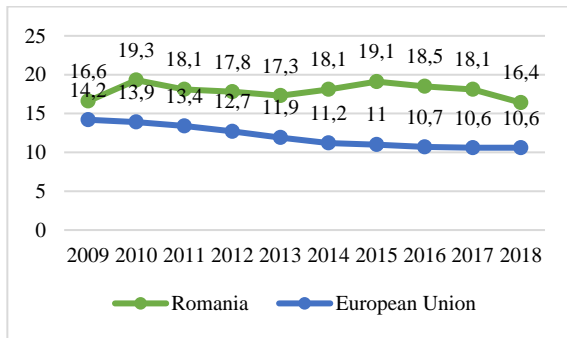[2] Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania, bianca_andrasy@yahoo.ro

Fig. 1 Early school leaving for young people in high schools and colleges [2; 3]

According to the European Commission's statistics, in 2018 the Romanian early school leave rate has dropped with 2%.

The reality is that many parents who migrate for work outside of the Romanian borders take their children with them because they have better benefits there (for e. g., Higher monthly payment for each child), but also to avoid leaving the children without parents.

In addition, 2018 statistics show that 20.000 children from Romania had both parents living in another country, and they were taken care of their local relatives. Most of them have left school. The challenges and lacks our educational and social services are being brought to light by data and studies of the public institutions but also by NGOs and international institutions.

II STATE OF THE PROBLEM

Reducing ESL to less than 10% by 2020 was agreed as a key objective of the Europe 2020 strategy and one of the five benchmarks of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training [4]. Though ESL is a multifaceted phenomenon with multiple causes, according to EU policies, comprehensive strategies should be introduced and implemented to reduce ESL that must focus on the whole spectrum of education and include prevention, intervention and compensation measures [5; 6].

Early school leaving (ESL) is one of the core issues in the European educational agenda and most of its member states. It is a fundamental concern as it not only limits the life opportunities of ESLers but also calls into question the very foundations of European educational systems as guarantors of equal opportunities, as well as the right to education for all. In fact, far from being a phenomenon that affects all social groups equally, ESL is particularly significant among the most economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged groups, and therefore, must be viewed as a central question in terms of educational equality and social justice.

There have been numerous reports and publications since the mid-1990s that have analyzed the causes and identified the main factors that lead to ESL. Taken cumulatively, this means that a significant body of knowledge on this matter has already been constructed: It is a social, multidimensional and procedural phenomenon that requires parallel prevention, intervention and compensation measures [7]; the profiles of ESLers are heterogeneous and diverse; and only those practices and policies focused on students' needs, interests and voices can be effective in the struggle against ESL.

However, despite these advances in research, many authors have pointed out that there are still few studies that examine the processes of ESL, especially from the subjective perspective of the students. What is more, there is still relatively little empirical evidence focusing on the effect that schools, and teachers in particular, have on students' decisions – towards the end of their period of compulsory education – to continue studying or to drop out [7].

II THE CASE STUDY

2.1. The research context overview – Romania situation on ESL

The phenomenon of school dropout, similar with Early School Leaving (ESL), or Early Leaving of Education and Training (ELET) refers to the early school leavers, means the percentage of youth 18-24 years old who did not finalize the upper-secondary education and who are not following any other educational path or are not enrolled in any other vocational training [8].

The consequences of early school leaving affect people throughout their entire lives by increasing their risk of unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion, including through reducing their children's chances of succeeding at school.

Romania continues to have one of the highest early school leaving rates in the EU. The rate of early school leaving decreased slightly, from 19.1% in 2015 to 18.5% in 2016, to 18.1% in 2017, and to 16.4% in 2018, but the target of 11.3%, for 2020, remains far from being reached [3]. In this context, concern for preventing and reducing early school leaving is seen as a priority of the education system, even more as factors of school dropout multiply and diversify, in the current complex context of the social, economic, cultural, and professional environment.

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

Despite recent measures, the quality of Romanian VET system and its relevance for labor market remain mostly insufficient. The attractiveness of VET as a

BUPT

career choice and not mainly as a 'second choice' option remains rather limited. The employment rate of recent VET graduates remains below the EU average, 63.3 % vs. 75 % in 2016 [9]. Despite continued reforms, especially on dual VET, several challenges remain to be addressed [10].

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

2.1. The case study

In 2017, a study for one of the neighborhood's schools has been conducted, in the context of a project implementation. 25 teachers were interviewed (both primary and gymnasium).

The result of the study was that most of the children who are abandoning school come from disorganized families, with parents left for work in other countries. In that school, 32.8% of the children had their parents migrated to other European countries. Another problem highlighted by this study was the representation of the children by the relatives with relative here, in Romania. The migrating parents are leaving the children in the care of the neighbors, relative, but most often with the grandparents. The legal tutor of a child is the parent. In case the parents are missing, there should be another tutor legally named. Without the legal documents, the child cannot be legally represented in public institutions (Population Services, AJPIS, etc) and in education institutions.

The study shows that the percentage of children without representation documents is 21%, meaning more than a half.

A severely important problem is the child's psychological trauma which comes after the parents are leaving. This trauma must be handled with attention, professionalism and seriously by the school together with the state.
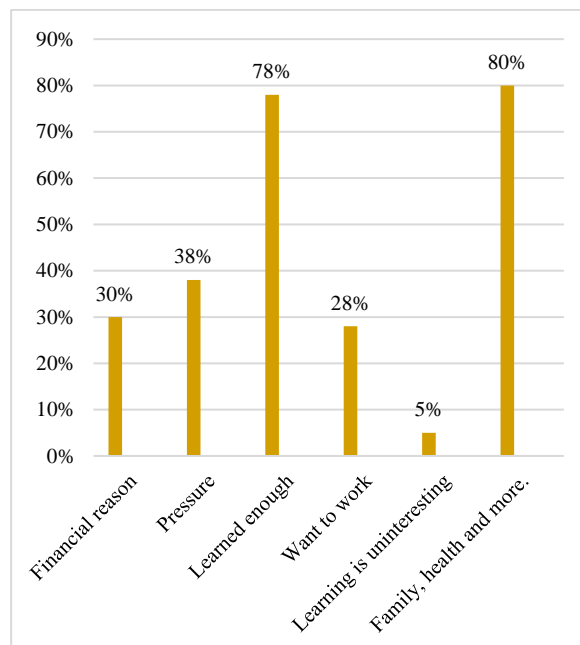

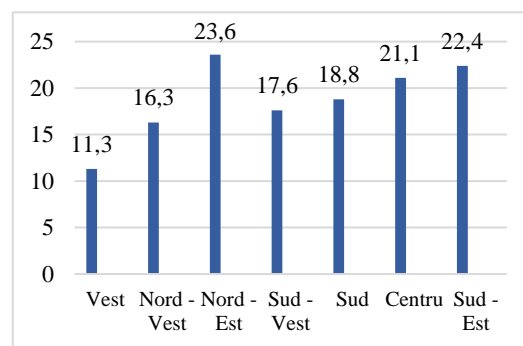Fig. 2 The reason for ESL in Romania [10]

Fig. 3 Percentage of abandonment on the regions of Romania [10]

Following this study, the Social Services Institution from Timisoara has founded a center for children coming from the type of families mentioned above. The center has hired social workers, educators, psychologists and doctors.

The children are brought after school to this center, they are fed and helped with their homework. The specialists monitor the children regarding their presence at school, and they provide support to the families in relation with the public institutions [3]. Figure 2 presents the reason for early school leaving in Romania.

The main factors for school leaving are:
- Financial difficulties, especially in the families with large number of children, with parent working abroad, with no resources, with issues in ensuring proper clothes and are somehow obliged to work (in the field or their own property);
- Disorganized families have, therefore, financial issues. Divorces, alcoholism and

violence are signs that precede the decision of early school leaving.

To fight against this phenomenon it is necessary, as a first step, to understand its causes, besides the social causes (economic situation, example set by parents, disorganized families, lack of jobs) and psychological causes (low motivation, lack of interest, anxiety, passiveness). Figure 3 presents the percentage of abandonment on the regions of Romania.

Judging by the dates published in the Social Monitor at the end of 2018, the highest rate of school leaving in Romania can be found in the North-East side of the country (23.6%), and the lowest in Bucuresti-Ilfov (5.5%).

The same source shows that school leaving rate is a lot higher in the rural areas compared to urban areas. To be more specific, in 2018, the rate in the rural areas was 27.1% and in large urban areas (over 50.000 people) it was 4.5%.

Moreover, the data shows that approximatively half of the young people leaving school do this for getting a job. According to the European Commission, most of these young students come from poor families.

Europe 2020 (European platform for combating poverty and social exclusion) is considering two main approaches: prevention (the most efficient and viable way to stop poverty and social exclusion) and early intervention (for avoiding the situations in which the people can reach to poverty or remain in difficult and problematic conditions).

The current law says that there should be allocated enough schooling figures to ensure that the 0-18/26 years students are included in pre-university and/or special education programs.

III. CONCLUSIONS

School leaving is not only an individual problem, but also a problem of the whole society. It looks like school leaving cannot be stopped. By the contrary! Reality shows that the phenomenon grows and is higher compared to official data.

There is an important segment of children who do go to school, but only to ensure presence in order not to lose the monthly allowance or to not be expelled which could happen at 40 absences per month.

Early school leaving is a dangerous phenomenon because it determined negative effects from a psychological point of view, but also social point of view, because the lack of school success can lead to stigmatization and labeling. Therefore, the involvement of all the public services are necessary to stop the early school leaving is mandatory.

REFERENCES

[1] Tiulescu L. N. (2013). Abandonul școlar în România, Pro Universitaria Pb.

[2] Ministery of Education in Romania, https://www.edupedu.ro/category/stiri/

[3] *** eurostat.ec.europa.eu, accessed on 19 February 2019

[4] TWG (2013). Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving. Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support. Brussels: European Commission.

[5] OECD (2012) The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Equity and quality in education: Supporting disadvantaged students and schools. OECD. Paris: OECD Publishing.

[6] Schmitsek, S. (2019). DANISH GOOD PRACTICES FOR COMBATTING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: A CASE STUDY FROM COPENHAGEN. European Journal of Education Studies.

[7] Popovici, M. (2019). Research on the Factors Leading to Early School Leaving. Educația Plus, 23(SP IS), 147-151.

[8] Preventing early leaving from education and training (ELET), published by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency on EACEA National Policies Platform, https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/content/

[9] Vocational education and training statistics, Statistics Explained, published by Eurostat, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained, 18/10/2018

[10] Country Report Romania (2018), Staff Working Document of the European Commission, SWD 2018 Report, no. 221 final