

## **Risk Factors in Romanian Schools**

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**Abstract:** *Concern about the efficiency of education emerged as soon as education specialists calculated the costs of non-education or the benefits of excellence in education, using data and social indicators translated into costs and benefits to highlight the need for investment in education, and on the other hand the need to maintain a minimum level of quality in education. According to the risk factors identified by OECD and confirmed most of them by Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Preuniversity Education (ARACIP), there is a huge influence of learning outcomes. In this concern, according to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Australia, when the student: does not attend classes (is uninterested or even absent), has a low level of procurement, manifests a clear intention to leave school, disagreeable with colleagues, show violence, aggressive behavior, attitudes, or performance, school should use tools to identify these symptoms, analyzing information about the family environment, educational history and personal information, data about the results obtained, related assessments the student's health, behaviors, attitudes, deviations. What really happens in Romanian schools? is this suitable to our school principal's mentality? The research reveals the perception of school principals from Romanian school and the issues that appear in this context are specific to an ex-communism country.*

**Keywords:** risk factors, resilience, school drop-out, education, disadvantages areas.

### **Introduction**

„If you think education is expensive, try ignorance” said Derek Bok, president of Harvard University. Data on social costs and benefits, demonstrated through social indicators, lead to the same conclusion: ensuring a minimum level of educational service and, last but not least, investing in education. Thus, in Mc Kinsey report "How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top", shows that both a higher performance level proven by higher PISA rankings would lead to GDP growth (9-16% of GDP, which are very high, given that 6.3% of GDP was the cost of the 2008 crisis), and the correction of inequities between African Americans and Latin American and white students would lead to GDP growth of 2-4% and 3-5% if the differences between poor children and rich children were reduced. Moreover, one more year of school increases the income level by 8% in Romania, according to Unicef<sup>1</sup>.

### **Paper theoretical foundation and related literature**

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<sup>1</sup> P. Varly, et al., *Costul investiției insuficiente în România*, Raport final Unicef, Alpha MDN, 2015, p. 19.

All data concludes that quality education benefits not only individually, but also socially. The OECD has been studying to identify the context factors that influence school outcomes to make education more effective and gain benefits. On the same model, in the Romanian educational system, in 2009, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education (ARACIP), based on data analysis from all schools in Romania, identified the factors that positively or negatively influence the learning outcomes, realizing the "Educational Risk Map" (HNRE) (oldsite aracip.edu.ro).

In this context, he listed the risk factors in Annex 4 of Minister Order no. 6517 / 19.12.2012 regarding the approval of the Methodology of external evaluation of the quality of education in pre-university education, according to which the level of the obtained results against the expected results is calculated. "All the research undertaken on the factors that determine these learning outcomes shows the overwhelming influence of the context factors and the "input" on the school results: the economic level of the family or the community (including the residential/ rural environment) parents, personal problems (existence of a disease or disability) or social (racial, ethnic, religious, cultural or other)"<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, national and international statistics show significant differences in school attendance and learning outcomes among children/ pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds / families / communities compared to other children/ pupils. In most cases, the influence of context factors on school results is even greater than the influence of the school itself<sup>3</sup>. This is also confirmed by the PISA ranking where the percentage of resilient students is 6%, where Romania is below 3%. "One thing must be emphasized: all these studies show that differences in results can in no way be attributed to a "natural" or "genetic" inferiority of the respective populations, but only to objective, context factors. As a result, to achieve better results, additional efforts and resources are needed from the school (which it often does not have, precisely because of its position in a disadvantaged community), to compensate, as much as possibly, the influence of the environment factors"<sup>4</sup>. "Therefore, the results - be they" good "or" weak " - cannot be entirely put to school"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>C. Novak, C. S. Iosifescu, *Rapoarte de cercetare ARACIP: Influenta evaluarii externe asupra educației*, Vol.I/2015, p. 5, <http://beta.aracip.eu/Resurse/Rapoarte%20despre%20starea%20calitatii%20educatiei>, accessed 12. 02. 2018.

<sup>3</sup>C. Novak, C. S. Iosifescu, *Rapoarte de cercetare ARACIP: Influenta evaluarii externe asupra educației*, p. 6. Gabriel Albu, Venera-Mihaela Cojocariu, "Teachers – at the Turn of Times," in *Astra Salvensis*, VI (2018), no. 12, p. 278.

<sup>4</sup>C. Novak, C. S. Iosifescu, *Rapoarte de cercetare ARACIP: Influenta evaluarii externe asupra educației*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>C. Novak, C. S. Iosifescu, *Rapoarte de cercetare ARACIP: Influenta evaluarii externe asupra educației*, p. 8. Nicoleta-Laura Popa, Ana-Maria Țepordei, Adrian-Vicențiu Labăr, Florin-

Factors that have a positive influence on students' results are: the number of hours of continuous training for each teacher, the number of volumes in the library, the percentage of pupils in the library, the number of computers per student, the number of computers with access internet reported to the student. Negative influence is given, as ARACIP declares the level of education of the family, the percentage of students in families with economic difficulties, the percentage of students in disorganized families (children with parents abroad let to be cared for relatives or neighbors, children provided from single parents families) , the percentage of Roma students, the percentage of students with special educational needs (ESC), the mobility of teachers of new teachers, the percentage of hours spent by qualified teachers, the space for student education, the number of absences motivated by the student, the number of absentees absent on the student. Thus, ARACIP's recommendation for school principals is to identify what risk factors are in school and find additional support measures to lessen their negative influence on student's outcomes ([www. notepentrucalitate.ro](http://www.notepentrucalitate.ro)). In the ARACIP's strategic document, „ Declaration of Principles”, as well as in all programmatic documents, in the Study on the School Environment in relation to the implementation of curricular reform conducted under ȘerbanIosifescu's coordination in 2012, it was emphasized the idea that school dropout is a problem for the disadvantaged groups only especially among those with Roma students.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Australia evaluates student's involvement on three dimensions: emotional (affective involvement), behavioral, and cognitive (engaging in academic achievement). Thus, any deviation from ordinary behavior, in all three components, has a family, community or person cause that needs to be identified and established support measures. So when the student does not attend classes (he is not involved or absent), he has a low level of purchasing, manifests his or her intentional intention to leave school, interacts badly with colleagues, manifests violence, is aggressive, exhibits changes in behavior, attitude or performance , the school should use case identification tools, analyzing information about the family environment, educational history and personal information, data on outcomes, student health assessments, behavioral data, attitudes, deviations. Westfall and Pisapia groups the characteristics of pupils at educational risk in: family and social issues, personal problems, school-related factors<sup>6</sup>. School-Based Strategies for

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Vasile Frumos, "Cognitive Styles, Motivational Orientations and Learning Processes in University Students," in *Astra Salvensis*, VI (2018), no. 12, p. 263.

<sup>6</sup> Westfall and Pisapia, *Developing Resilient Schools and Resilient Students*, Paper Research Summery, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED411343.pdf>, p.4, accessed on 12. 05. 2018.

Reducing Educational Risk Research<sup>7</sup> suggests that there are certain characteristics that are associated with failure in academic procurement, like other studies, poor and minority children are predisposed to school failure because of major differences between school and family. As a result, according to Alabama University research, students at risk should be helped to develop what we call "resilience" (the powerful intrinsic motivation to overcome socially defined obstacles). Westfall and Pisapia (1994), and Henderson (1998) reinforces allegations that policy-makers need to develop a protective mechanism to develop and encourage student resilience, development in a safe environment<sup>8</sup>. About resilience, Brenda J. McMahon of Nipissing University in Canada says that the internal factors of resilience (efficiency, self-confidence, clear orientation towards the future and problem solving) exist only in an educational environment that provides support, care for man, where there is a linkage between the students 'aspirations and their teachers' confidence in them, where teachers are concerned not only with academic acquisitions, but also with confessions, they have a coaching role.<sup>9</sup>

The cost of school failure is immense, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Workforce 2000, a school-leaving student who does not have the necessary skills and is disadvantaged on the labor market<sup>10</sup>. The school climate influences student's performance, the role of school leadership being to provide a sensitive environment to the needs of pupils, especially those in special situations, on the other hand, how the lessons are built-if they do not imply, climate and intellectual development can suffer, knowing that students learn better if their interest is stimulated. So, to sum up, Canadian researchers at the University of Alberta define what "risk students" means those who are "vulnerable groups" like school-dropped students in varying degrees, whether linked to acquisitions (they do not know how to write, read, reckon) or social (their behavior is deviant), both of which are at risk of dropping out of school. In this context, they recommend that steps:

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<sup>7</sup> B. Remediation, "School-Based Strategies for Reducing Educational Risk. Research Brief" #3 New York City Board of Education, Brooklyn, NY. Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment, 1990, p.8, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED325583.pdf>, accessed on 11. 07. 2018.

<sup>8</sup>N. Henderson, M.S.W., *Fostering Resiliency in Children and Youth: Four Basic Steps for Families, Educators, and Other Caring Adults*, 2002, <https://ccsme.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Fostering-Resiliency.pdf>, p.4, accessed on 01. 06. 2018.

<sup>9</sup> J. Brenda., „Resilience Factors and Processes: No Longer at Risk,” in *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, LIII (2007), no. 2, p. 127-142.

<https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ajer/article/viewFile/55258/42303>, p.139, accessed on 01. 06. 2018.

<sup>10</sup> B. William et al, *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century* <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED290887.pdf>, 1987, p.14, accessed on 20. 05. 2018.

- identifying students at risk and causes; developing the resilience of these students to mitigate the effects cultural support within the school through their cultural reunion in the school environment
- creation of a support environment (the environment is found at the intersection of several factors: socio-cultural, community, specific processes of the school and family, student personal factors )
- stigmatization and labeling, knowing that cultural discrepancies between family and school lead to problems of non-adaptation resulting in school failure
- implementation of strong support programs by the school.
- schools need staff involved, teamwork and good leadership.
- running effective programs.

However, in support of pupils and in contradiction with the established directions, there is a model of academic optimism that somehow counteracts the theory of the influence of the student's background environment on school results because "race and poverty are not a destiny", these goals can be filled<sup>11</sup>

This model includes several elements: teachers are effective, they can help students make purchases, parents and students trust teachers, so they can cooperate and a trustworthy place in which students are academically successful. The emphasis on pupils' results leads to the achievement of pupils' results as a central goal, collective efficacy is a collective manifestation in the sense of effectiveness, ie achievement of goals, trust in parents and pupils increases the power of the school structure to transform it into an efficient institution<sup>12</sup>.

Summing up, McGuigan et al says that the model of academic optimism includes schools that focus on academic results, have effective teachers, and a relationship between teachers and students, between parents and trustworthy teachers, but also with trusted students in them<sup>13</sup>. These are behavioral, emotional and cognitive aspects, the academic emphasis in the whole school climate on the cognitive component, or the belief that the whole staff, acting, can achieve the clearly defined academic goals can bring success to the academic achievements of the students<sup>14</sup>. So, in this vision, the students' environment is minimized, this being considered, the family being viewed with confidence, as in turn, overcome by prejudice and frustration, the family looks at the school with confidence the 100% success of the

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<sup>11</sup> G. Byron, A. B. Hancock, M. Laboissière, *The economic cost of the US education gap*, 2009, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> McGuigan, Leigh and Hoy, K. Wayne, "Principal Leadership: Creating a Culture of Academic Optimism to Improve Achievement for All Students," in *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, V (2006), p. 205.

<sup>13</sup> G. Byron, A. B. Hancock, M. Laboissière, *The economic cost of the US education gap*, p. 206.

<sup>14</sup> G. Byron, A. B. Hancock, M. Laboissière, *The economic cost of the US education gap*, p. 224.

student's training. Of course, from the perspective of teacher efficiency, there are many aspects to be discussed, especially the design and adaptation of a learning approach, focusing on the well-identified individual needs of students, their psychological and age characteristics, with sustained and always manifested.

### Methodology

The purpose of the research was to identify whether school managers are aware of the influence of risk factors on student outcomes and whether they have additional support measures for pupils at risk. The research took place in 32 schools from all 8 regions of the country, schools in disadvantaged areas and children at risk of school dropout. Also, it was intended that the selected schools should have the other represented risk factors (single-parent families, low-level education for parents, but this can be proved by the parent's average for the years of study that is under 12 years). The methods used were both quantitative and qualitative. Thus, 32 interviews with school curriculum directors / coordinators were carried out, 640 questionnaires were applied to parents, focus groups were organized in each of the 32 schools with teachers. 32 institutional development projects and 32 Annual Internal Evaluation of Quality Reports (RAEI) were analyzed. The instruments used for research are described in Table no 1

Table no 1. Summarizing description of the content of tools used for research

Tools used	The content
640 questionnaires for parents	Trusting the school benefits High qualified teachers School trust in students' potential
1 guide for structured interview applied to 32 school principals	The teacher's professionalism The risk factors identification Recognize the existence of children at risk and on a case-by-case basis Additional support measures for students in risk
1 guide focus-group for 32 focus groups with teachers	Believe that even students in risk would succeed Trust in their own strengths that they can change the students 'destinies through education Support, special relationship/connection with any of the students at risk
Indicators for analysis institutional project development	Strategic targets for additional support for children at educational risk
Indicators for analysis RAEI	Additional measures to improve work with students at educational risk

In each school investigated, students are defined as "at risk of education" as well as Roma students and the level of study years does not exceed 12. As a result, the parents did not finish high school. Both students at risk, other than Roma students that represent students at risk by default are

superficially perceived, their situations and causes are clearly identified, but they are not concrete measures. From interviews with school principals, it has emerged that Roma students are a preoccupation with them, even if they are not found in the projective documents stipulated by their support in learning. Additional support in learning is given "through additional free-time training by school teachers (" especially who teach examination subjects "), and there are concrete ways of financially motivating students ("to be able to attend courses, set up the school scholarship for 18 intern or commuter students "). As we can see from the analysis of the documents, these measures are not addressed specifically to Roma students, but to students at risk, and there are no specific ways of stimulating participation for each student. However, there are no expectations directors or teachers, even though there are additional programs (school meditations) in 3 out of 32 schools. Other schools (5 out of 32) found the "support teacher" solution that gives them extra time in preparation. The reasons why students are absent are: lack of financial means of transportation or accommodation, as well as their use in domestic or agricultural work. Models of risk pupils in those schools are teachers ("they can learn from their teachers more - these are the real life and education models") and the impact of learning support actions is measured by "classroom performance "However, when classroom evolution is not visible (in 24 schools out of 32, eg 75% of schools), there is no change in the approach, lessons or meditations, or other forms of support.

Both the identification of students at risk and the impact of the measures implemented are done through the teacher or the teacher, helped in some cases by the school psychologist (31.25%).

Asked who should be the responsibility for educated students, including Roma students, in structured individual interviews, school principals have appreciated that "care should be taken of society, family and school. The ministry should take care of it, we are responsible, and we are responsible for the leadership of the school, the school principal and the school psychologist. " Therefore, it is confirmed the dilution of responsibility, which, on the one hand, is disseminated at the macro level: government-minister-inspectorate, and on the other hand microsystem, family and school in cooperation with the local authority and from the school- leadership, teacher responsible for the class and psychologist. So, we can say that school does not assume this role entirely, but it gives it a general, top-down public policy, specific to a centralized society, and on the other hand, a local scale, in which includes the local community, and more school leaders, such as leadership, psychologist, and schoolteachers. In our opinion, this is an ineffective one, as the quality of education is generated at the level of the teacher-student relationship. We therefore consider the solution unfeasible, as the teacher responsible for class assist his/her students without result, if the teacher cannot do so by creating the very joy of learning. The

role of the school is recognized as "in the recovery of students in difficulty", but "only in close connection with parents and local authorities".

Both the identification of students at risk and the impact of the measures implemented are done through the teacher or the teacher, helped in some cases by the school psychologist (31.25%). If we look at the strictly school-based assertion, we can say that parental involvement is only aimed at supporting students in attending school, not in the educational act, knowing that parents do not have the necessary training for student support, the local authority contributing to ensuring minimum financial conditions for school attendance. In this way, the family remains the will to leave their child at school. As such, we note that the school's responsibility for absenteeism is diminished, in the opinion of the interviewed school principal, while others are the causes. However, "the role of the school is to ensure equal opportunities for all children, to inform the families of students about their concerns and to provide advice to students and parents about the danger of dropping out of courses." From the school heads' statements, it appears that there is no intense concern from the school regarding the support of students at risk in learning. Ensuring equal chances for all students are only words because the principals can reproduce them, but there are no concrete measures for implementing this. It is necessary to ensure the evolution of the school-family-community relationship on the coordinates of the active-participatory and self-absorbed collaborations, through the joint management of the educational issues and the implementation of efficient educational strategies.<sup>15</sup>

### Results

Both the identification of students at risk and the impact of the measures implemented are done through the teacher or the teacher, helped in some cases by the school psychologist (31.25%). Parents at risk and others have said overwhelmingly that they "do not trust in school" (73%), as the behavior of certain teachers is not understood and accepted, is misinterpreted by students. Parents also associate negative feelings with the benefit of the school. Moreover, parents appreciate certain teachers, they do not have a global view on the professionalism of teachers. Kindness, the value of a teacher is dictated by the mode of relationship and less of the teaching mode. On the other hand, all participating teachers consider that "supports pupils with educational risk", although I understand through this support the actual and eventual consultations. All directors believe that "the responsibility of the school is high, but the family should be more involved." They are also concerned about these students, but improvement measures are lacking. In some schools there are additional training programs (Romanian and

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<sup>15</sup> Adriana Denisa Manea, "The Interrelation Teacher-Student-Family-Society Promoted through Educational Partnership", in *Astra Salvensis*, III(2015), no. 6, p. 133.

mathematics meditations), but these are not just for students at risk. On the contrary, students with higher motivation are co-opted. Of the 32 schools investigated, 4 of them (12.5%) have strategic targets that could be interpreted as endorsements referring to children at educational risk (eg "developing active methods used with pupils to improve outcomes "). There are no explicit references to students at risk, but measures are taken for all students.

### **Discussions**

The Romanian Agency Quality for Preuniversity Education's simple recommendation to identify risk factors did not even impact schools where the school belongs to a disadvantaged environment, for two reasons: schools have not yet developed a culture of improvement reported to results, and second, as implementing a management system quality was taken up in its raw form: documents that are salutary and uncontested. School principals from underprivileged backgrounds easily recognize all the risk factors, the effects they have but cannot establish a coherent set of measures aimed at supporting students at risk, so that school dropout occurs naturally.

There are no links between family and school, there is no relationship between them based on trust and mutual support, their positions being located almost in different camps.

Teachers perceive underprivileged school as a place of work that must lead them to the end and almost eliminate the optimistic vision. They do not understand their mission as a challenge, but rather as a condemnation, the affective investment being pretty much minimized. It has also been noticed in the schools that students do not trust that school is the solution, they take it as a given, and when the negative conditions of the context become more acute, it gives up very easily the only chance in life.

Thus, children who are supported to succeed (12 children at risk in all 32 schools< for each of them, family is more open mind and value the education) are also children with a higher intellectual level. For others, they are still at risk, the interest in individual support is not so great. We are talking about support created by a personal and individualized approach of some "special students". Teachers do not have the same friendly attitude for other students at risk who are not in the first echelon.

### **Conclusions**

Every child is a value and reporting to academic results is not fair and honest. Unfortunately, the school is still unprepared to deal with these children, which could only develop through school. Cases of success are random and random. Following the investigation, we believe that at least for the start, for a step by step cultural change, there should be much greater support for these executives. Moreover, the intervention should be carried

out in an integrated way at the level of teachers who do not understand their professional orientation in this direction, leaving almost a natural selection. Finally, parents need to know that in the given context, the whole school is the solution of the exit from the state of blockage in which they are found and which they would alleviate only through education. In assuming the role of developing the educational partnership, the school must admit a series of fundamental principles: widening participatory character of school management, attracting the family as the main partner of the school, expanding collaboration to all factors that can become sensitive to the development of education, raising awareness of all attitudes that may have a relative availability in relation to the problems of the school.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Adriana Denisa Manea, *Managementul organizației școlare. Implicații ale managementului democratic-participativ la nivelul unității școlare de tip incluziv*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Eikon, 2013, p. 157.