

THE IMPACT OF SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT ON SCHOOL FAILURE

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Abstract: School failure is one of the fundamental resorts of social exclusion of children. From the school-to-work perspective, school dropout highly increases the risk of unemployment or getting a less-paid job and therefore leads to socio-professional exclusion. Factors that favour school dropout are found among students' characteristics, family and school characteristics. This paper starts from the basis that there are a few situations in which a single factor is responsible for students' failure and, usually, weak students are under the influence of several number of unfavourable conditions. The study uses a descriptive analysis of a Hungarian teaching high school with a confessional profile, located in Oradea. The main research results indicate that a large part of the school achievements of students may not be explained solely by reporting to their socio-cultural and family environment; in this sense, we need to conduct complex explanatory researches that would target the educational establishment impact regarding the subjective and objective process of scoring students.

Keywords: family factors, school failure, family structure, relationships.

Theoretical background

Everywhere, the right to education is included in constitutions. The ideology of mass education promotes the idea of equality of chances, namely it states that each person, in a democratic system, has equal opportunity to rise in the social hierarchy based on personal merits and can compete on an equal footing in terms of the chances of success. However, the studies in the field revealed the actual relationship between school success and social stratification: children with similar skills, coming from different backgrounds can get different social performance.

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Equality of opportunity in education means, first of all, equal access to educational resources, a characteristic with direct effect on school achievements. It is all about an important domain in the attention of educational policies, which starts from the idea that school failure is one of the fundamental resorts of social exclusion, of the social cohesion compromise and of a human capital of a society (Hatos, 2008, p. 141).

In most works of the French sociologists such as Durkheim, (1922, posthumous, 1966), Bourdieu (1994), Passeron (1966), etc. it is recognized that the social class appurtenance of parents plays a decisive role in school success. For example, Bourdieu (1994, pages 184-187) has demonstrated that there is a direct connection between socio-professional level of parents and the educational performance level: he considers that at the base of scholar differences stays the different social origins of students, the educational inequality being determined by social inequality. This is the reason, argues the author, why the school achievements in France are explained, most of the cases, by the social-economic background of parents and the unsatisfactory living conditions of these families within children develop.

Establet (1979, pp. 202-205), who analyses the genesis and the consequences of school failure in France, arrives at the same conclusion: the social origin determines school success. The author classifies parents in two professional categories – “superior staff” and “inferior staff” (this includes workers and farmers), emphasizing that only those from the first category (high and medium level functionaries) know how to exercise a methodical and efficient control on school paths built by students, highlighting, in particular, the mother’s role as a parent to create good conditions for learning, control of homework, relationship with teachers etc..

This is why, after a successful experiment made in Geneva, where it was demonstrated that as an outcome of promoting innovative pedagogy, school failures number decreased by half in 15 years, the final conclusion formulated by the Belgian researcher Cardinet (1988, p. 68) was surprising: “Inequality remains however what it is: privileged classes seem to take as much or even more than others from improving learning conditions”.

The American sociologist Jencks (1972), after studying the problem of human inequality and the impact of family and school on this phenomenon, argued that no profession, no schooling, no knowledge can’t explain the social differences between people, the only factor being the family of origin.

Research conducted in Romania, especially in Bihor County, showed that the school failure concretised in illiteracy and low level of instruction “it is associated with other deprivations, such as those related to living places, jobs, providing resources for food and clothing” (Chipea, 2007, p. 82). Adrian Hatos notes that “education in Romania appears to be marked by serious access inequalities which are well known, both by politicians and researchers in the field” (Hatos, 2009, p. 15).

This study starts from taking into consideration three general types of factors that influence the probability of children to drop out of school, and which certainly favour the level of school failure:

- a) Students' characteristics: without being a specific problem for Romania, belonging to an ethnic minority is a variable with a negative impact on school participation. Even if in the case of our country, the studies (Burtea, Zamfir & Zamfir, 1993) show that this minority is first of all roma, from my point of view it is likely that students of other minorities can also be described with this negative impact, and not just at the level of participation in the educational process, but as much as the results obtained and the opportunity to move forward in the social hierarchy. This is the reason why I chose this descriptive research of socio-cultural situations of students from Hungarian teaching schools. Moreover, one of the main reasons for we had chosen this approach is that in Bihor county there are few institutions which had results of 100% promotion from last year baccalaureate, and the most advanced high school is one of theological-baptist, teaching in Romanian. In relationship with this, Romano-Catholic high school with teaching in Hungarian remains very far behind: of 48 students registered in the exam, only 8 have passed (it is a graduate of less than 15%, which lags far behind the rate of approximately 50% of the county), further: the graduation marks are also very modest.
- b) Family characteristics: education and parents' occupation, material and cultural resources present in the family, parental involvement in children's education. This research wants to bring some arguments and information about the features in this important category of students;
- c) School characteristics: number of students, material supplement, school climate. An interesting analysis of the situation in Romania is made by Hatos (2010).

I underline the idea that there are a few situations in which a single factor is responsible for students' school failure and usually weak students "benefit" from a number of unfavourable conditions. In this case, an unfavourable family environment doesn't automatically condemn to failure all children who come from these families, as well as coming from an advantage environment in terms of socio-cultural and economic capital not necessarily provides educational and professional success. The fact that an unfavourable condition can be the cause of failure depends on several conditions under which it is part and on the compensation effects that may exist. Not coincidentally Gilly (1976) said that a factor may become active in a certain context and inactive in another context. For example, the influence of the material conditions is dependent on how the family reacts to these conditions and how it is mobilized to deal with them. This influence can be balanced and compensated by the interest factor, the personal qualities for a high level of aspirations, a healthy educational environment, appropriate encouragement of parents. This would mean that adverse environmental impact is reduced to very talented and highly motivated students.

Methodological aspects

Research background

This research starts from the consideration that there is an obvious need for knowledge and analysis of behaviours and socio-economic and cultural development of all actors involved in the educational community – students, parents, teachers - in order to prevent the failure of the entire education system, based on students' absolutely alarming school performance, confirmed by the baccalaureate results from 2011 and recently from 2012.

One of the research directions refers to the origin social environment, as a factor with direct influence on students' school performance. The resources (and not only material resources) that family invests in the education of children have an impact on child's performance, manifested by school behaviour, school achievement, but also by the attitudes toward learning, social behaviour, self-confidence, etc.. The way the family allocates resources for education is determined absolutely by the perception of the importance and role of education, as the key to social promotion and/or for creating/maintaining a certain social status.

This research was conducted in January-March 2012 in Oradea, Bihor County, through an empirical study in the Roman Catholic theological school *Saint Laszlo*. We decided for a descriptive analysis of a Hungarian teaching high school with a confessional profile, located in urban area, having both students coming from urban areas (60%) and rural areas (40%). Saint Laszlo Romano-catholic high school is a school founded in 1991, whose main activity is undergraduate education and lower secondary school with IX-XII grades. The duration of training is 4 years with primary education territories: religious spiritual education, training in computer science, economics, deepening knowledge of modern languages.

Even though the sample cannot be considered representative in terms of the entire population, it may be relevant to Hungarian students (in Bihor County there are 50 high schools). We considered 80 students from IX-XII grades (ISJ Bihor Data - school network) from two profiles – theological and economics - in this educational establishment, sample that can bring information about the social reality of a considerable part of the whole investigated entity. Students were randomly selected from each high school, classes - IX, X, XI, XII.

Analyses and results

Taking the "urban-rural" stratification criteria in terms of student backgrounds, the percentage of 40-60% reflects their distribution in the educational institution. Considering that it is an educational institution with theological profile, it is obvious that it is preferred to a greater extent by the families of the students coming from rural areas, considering these areas more directly related to the practice of religion.

The sample consists of 28.1% boys and 71.9% girls. Even if it is a Romano-catholic high school, that in terms for a "career" in the field is more appropriate and more open to boys, this form of education is still clearly preferred by girls.

Regarding the level of education of parents, most of them have primary or vocational education. However, it may be noted that fathers have a higher education level than mothers.

Table 1. *Parents' education*

	Primary	Professional/Gymnasium	High school	Postliceal/Superior
Mother*	30.00%	37,50%	20.00%	10.00%
Father	17.50%	42.50%	27.50%	12.50%

** I have not included the category of 2,5% who did not finish primary school*

We found that 95.2% of students questioned live in their own families and only 4.8% said that this is an adoptive family or they come from a placement centre. Simultaneously, we found that the actual structure of family (members) may be an explanatory factor for the efficiency and capacity of the students' performance, given that the increased attention received by the child in a balanced number and space in which perform their existence, ensure optimal conditions for learning.



Figure 1. *Number of family members*

Most of the population lives with their parents, but in spite of the answers to the previous question, 6.2% of them have not mentioned their mother's presence or their father's among the members of the family, but make reference to brothers, grandparents or other persons with whom they are in relation. 62.5 % of students have brothers, but in the case of 10% of the total number, the father is not the biological one. The number of siblings varies between 1 and 4, but most of the students' families may be described as having two children.

Regarding the parents' activity from the economic point of view, I followed the aspects of their active integration into the labor market. Reported to the official data provided by the unemployment office, students' parents questioned provided the following data: 75% of the children's mothers have a place of employment and this proportion is also valid in the case of fathers. Before making some conclusions on this aspect, we should make a clarification: more than 10% of students did not give an answer regarding the economic activity of the father, but it does not necessarily mean that he didn't or doesn't have a job, but in any case data show that the mother has a higher employment rate in comparison with the fathers. It is rather a strange aspect, especially from the point of view of education level, which, as we have said before - are considerably higher in the case of fathers. In an effective way, only 12.5 percent of the children said that their father does not have a job.

Regarding the category of mothers who don't work, the main reason is the unemployment (58 %), retirement (21%) because of disease and seasonal work. In father's case the unemployment does not appear as a reason of economic inactivity, but seasonal work and the occasional work predominates (64.5%).

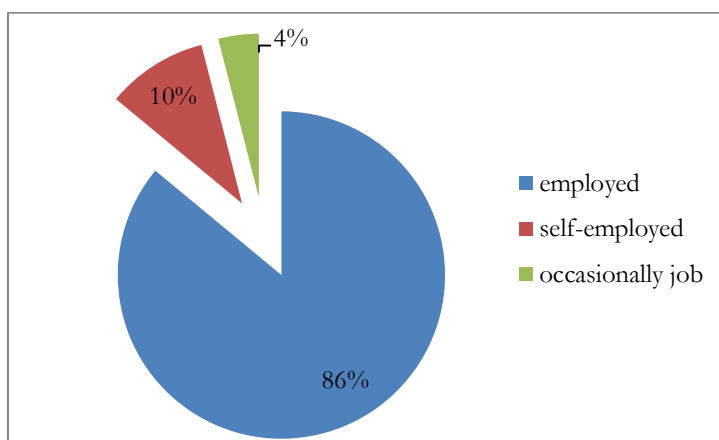


Figure 2. *Parents place of work*

We defined the wealth of the family through a self-assessment variable about the existential conditions that students see in their daily life, taking into account that it can be one sensitive area of our investigation. For this reason we have not operated with the question regarding the family budget, instead I've let the students to categorize their family between two extreme points: giving up many goods, and a permissive lifestyle from the resources point of view.

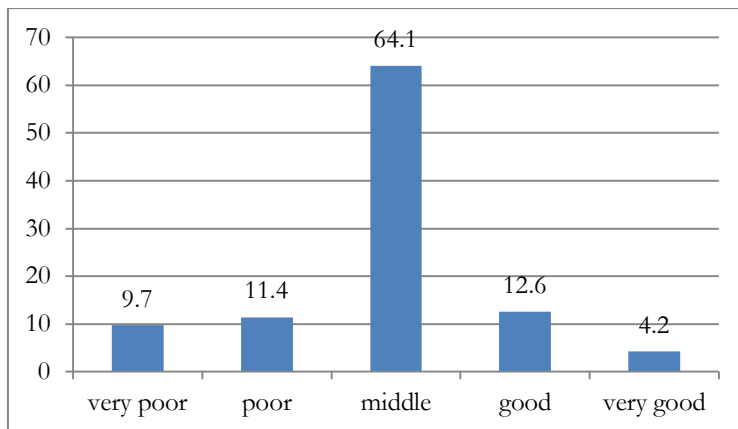


Figure 3. *Financial income of the family*

In this vision it is clearly obvious that most of the students (accounting for 62.1 percent) consider that they have a decent living environment, and the fact that 21.4 % of them describe as having a poor to very poor living environment, reflects a social reality that exists across the entire Bihor county.

An overall picture of the socio-cultural familial environment may be provided by the space that a family holds, in particular to the ratio between the number of rooms and the number of people who share the space. The comfort and conditions necessary for learning are closely linked with getting favourable academic achievements.

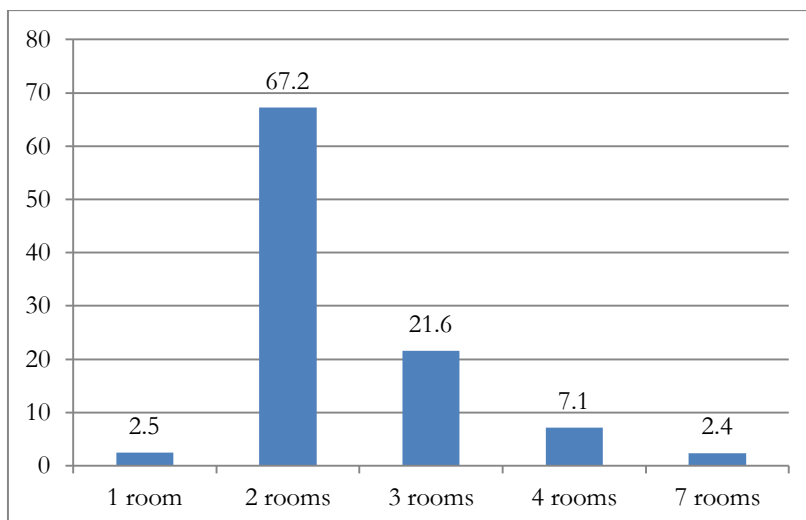


Figure 4. *Number of rooms owned by the family*

The ratio of the two mentioned variables shows an average of 3.78 of people living in the same household, compared to 2.48 average number of rooms of the investigated population, from which we can conclude the fact that a part of the students are deprived of an own room (0.65 rooms/family member). This aspect is also in a direct relationship with the economic status of the family.

For a more complex image about the goods and utilities that students' families have, we had four reference items: mobile phone, PC, personal car, bathroom. The possession or lack of these items may be an explanatory factor of the socio-economic situation of the family.

Table 2. *Utilities/goods in a household*

Utilities/percent (%)	none	1	2	3 or more
Mobile phone	0	1	10	89
Personal computer	7	51	32,5	9,5
Personal car	47,7	45,2	2,5	4,6
Bathroom	17,5	67,5	15	0

These items have been nominated in this way because at least 2 of 4 are goods increasingly present for the life of more and more families and they not require an out of ordinary investment. This is exactly why we showed their correct number, since the mere possession or lack of these utilities provides much less information than specifying the exact quantities. The mobile phone represents an extremely present good in the contemporary family life; there are no families that don't have this kind of communication device. It is also relevant to emphasize that only 10% of the students do not have a computer, while 40% of them have even several computers. In conjunction with this data, we must see that more than 90% of the respondents have access to internet at home. On the other hand, perhaps the most surprising information is the absence of the bathroom in the case of nearly 20% of the respondents. We consider that the stratification of the sample in the urban and rural areas may constitute an explanation for this fact: 60% of students come from rural areas and it is very likely that the share of those who are faced with no bathroom, can be found in their number.

The number of books held in the household related to the frequency of readings, respectively active and passive reading, can be a good indicator of the socio-cultural level of students' families; furthermore, it can influence the performance of the students.

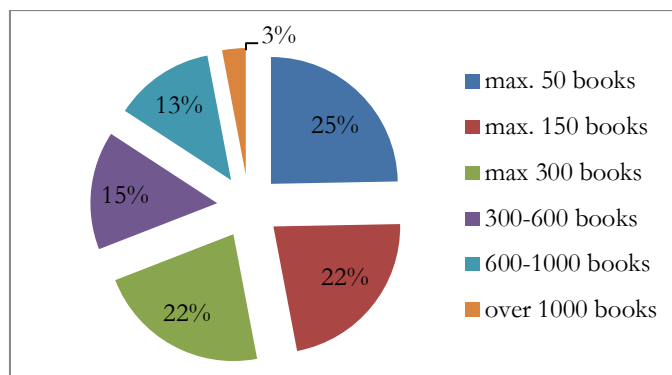


Figure 5. *Number of books held by the students' family*

In the figure above it is obvious that the students' home libraries are rather modest, only 14.8 percent of the interviewed students have more than 600 books, while 69.1% of them have no more than 300 books; we can't overlook the fact that 24.7 % (nearly a quarter) have less than 50 books in the family.

Conclusions and discussions

The study presents the situation of one confessional and prestigious school, in the sense of relating to standards, religious and ethical values which it wishes to promote. On the other hand, from the preferences point of view and the detachment of roman-catholic confession, it seems that there isn't a large "request" on the market for this form of education. This is the explanation for the fact that there is a higher percent of the students coming from rural areas than those coming from Oradea city, who choose other colleges with national prestige with better results for all exams. We think that this could be one of the explanations of the similar good academic results of the two students groups, the institution recruiting students with modest academic results, with modest socio-economic background and the grades which they graduate high-school may not reflect their true skills, which will be put to a test during the baccalaureate.

The research results indicate that a large part of the school achievements may not be explained solely by reporting to their socio-cultural and family environment; in this sense we need a more explanatory type of research that could target the educational establishment impact regarding the subjective and objective process of scoring the students.

The education level of the parents has a more or less strong effect directly on the results of educational process and does not offer an obvious and undisputed explanation in connection with the cultural capital and with the reading habits of the students. However, parents prove responsibility regarding their children. In other words it cannot be clear if the parents with a socio-economic status opt for schools with higher level of educational quality, or, on the contrary, if students coming from these families have a direct influence on quality in education.

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