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Early School Leaving in Bulgaria: Trends and Determinants. Part 1

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Abstract. This research, carried out within the framework of the international project «Empathic and supportive teachers – key to quality and efficiency in education», Erasmus+ EU Programme, is devoted to the problem of early leaving school and focused on characteristics and profile of the individual that correlate with motivation for the dropout. The paper analyses the trends and determinants, which culminate in the student's rejecting, or being rejected by, the school in Bulgaria. The results of the empirical study of students' opinion, related to the phenomenon of ESL are broadly discussed. An emphasis is placed on mechanisms of inclusion and a various forms of support for the students at risk of ESL, which help them to be involved in the school community's life.

Keywords: education, school community, early school leaving, inclusion, educational integration, children at risk, children from low-status social groups.

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Introduction

The growing importance of education as one of the key factors in the formation of human capital needed for the development of intellectual production and the modern high-tech post-industrial society as a whole directly determines sufficiently high public expectations regarding the volume of knowledge and the level of education and qualification acquired by the individual in learning process. In view of this, such problems like school enrollment and early drop out of school acquire a great significance in the present time.

The phenomenon of early dropping is usually seen through the prism of the disrupted link in the relationship «student-school community» [Grissom, Shepard, 1989; Rush, Vitale, 1994; Schlosser, 1992]. The very erosion of this attitude may be of a different nature, but the final result is, in any case, a total detaching or disconnection of the student from the institutionalized structures and interactions within the system of formal school education as a consequence of his/her personal choice or family-determined one. The definition of “early school leaving” used at EU level refers to those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training [Reducing early school ... , 2013].

In view of this, early school dropout is perceived as an expression of very serious social dysfunction, which reflects a number of negative processes occurring both at the level of individual personality and related to violation of the integration of the individual in the society due to lack of the necessary knowledge and competencies, both at the societal level, aiming at reducing the development potential and the sustainability of the whole society.

This is precisely the reason why the problem of early drop-out is being treated with particular attention in European countries and occupies an important place in a number of EU strategic documents addressing the educational sphere. It is particularly highlighted that reducing early school leaving is essential to achieve a number of key objectives within the Europe 2020 strategy aimed at activating smart and inclusive growth in the Member States by raising the educational level of the population and reducing the risk factors in the form of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. In this respect, the Europe 2020 strategy includes the priority goal of reducing early school leaving from 14,4 % in 2009 to less than 10 % by 2020 [Council Recommendation of 28 June ... , 2011].

Early school leaving – key national policies

According to Eurostat, the share of early school leavers in Bulgaria has declined significantly over the past 13 years from 20,7 to 12,9 % (Fig. 1). Since 2007 Bulgaria has been aligning with the average values for the countries of the European Union and is already moving close to them. In line with the EU's key strategic priorities, the National goal for 2020 is that the proportion of early-leavers should not exceed 11 % (This goal is fixed in the national program for reforms (2012–2020 г.) as well as in the «Strategic framework of the National development program for Bulgaria: Bulgaria 2020»).



Fig. 1. Share of the Early Leavers from Education and Training (in %)

*The data for 2011 are revised. There is a break of the dynamic order.

In recent years, however, there has been a certain tendency to keep the values achieved without any positive dynamics. In addition, it is important to take into account a significant difference with regard to registered values depending on the region of the country. The Southwestern region, where the capital Sofia is located, shows ESL data more than three times lower than the average for the country. It is expected that there is a correlation between very high ESL indicators and low economic development and high unemployment in the Northwest and South East regions.

It is also important to note that dropping out of school is not a problem for all Bulgarian schools. But there are a number of school institutions with a high percentage of dropouts, and this is characterized by a sustained reproduction of this phenomenon over time.

Implemented measurements to decrease ESL during 2001–2011:

- Introduction of free textbooks for the students in I-VII grade (since 2008);
- Introduction (since 2010/2011 academic year) and progressive expansion of a whole-day organization of the school education from I-set to VII-trade;
- Free breakfasts and lunches (partially introduced); free transportation to school for students in compulsory school age from places where there are no schools;
- The introduction in 2007 and 2008 of delegated budgets for the schools – the school officials received strong motivation to seek out, enroll and retain each student who can be recorded at their school as the school budget depends from the number of students signed up;
- The improvement of the national electronic informational system for the number of students at school made more difficult the fictitious enrollment of students only by documents and pushed schools to actually ensuring the presence of the student at school. Since the academic year 2012/2013 a web-based register for the movement of children and students has been introduced at schools;
- Increased control on the schools to present to the Municipality directorates for «Social support» data about the students' absences (not more than 5 academic hours per month);
- In 2010 was introduced a mandatory preschool preparation for 5-years old children and funds are provided for free transportation of those children who live in places where there are no kindergartens or preparatory classes at school;
- Independent, part-time and evening courses provide opportunities for adult education;
- National Program «With care to each student» provides since 2006 funds to schools on a project basis for additional classes for students with low academic performance.

Data in the recent years show a slowdown in the process of lowering the ESL, suggesting that the implemented measures have exhausted their potential. Reducing the ESL with another two percentages to the targeted level and stable

retention at this level will require new measures in addition to those, which already have become part of the routine at schools.

A careful analysis for the dropout by academic years shows that from the academic year 1999/2000 to 2014/2015 г. there is no a positive breakthrough in tackling ESL.

The last academic year that the National Statistical Institute has data for is 2014/15. This data shows growth in the number of dropouts (13,4 %) compared to the previous three years. An explanation for this can be found in the clearly implemented policy of the Ministry of Education and Science and its regional structures for enhanced control over the absenteeism of students and fictitious keeping of students in school records in all forms of training.

The comparison among the educational stages shows a steady trend that ESL in the middle school (V–VIII grade) are more, compared to those in the primary (I–IV grade) and the high school (IX–XII grade). Dropout before completing the compulsory basic education is a significant and characteristic problem for Bulgaria. Compared to the EU countries Bulgaria reports the earliest average age of dropouts with a low level of education (lower secondary school at most): it is as low as 14,3 years, i.e. almost 2 years before reaching the end of compulsory school age.

For students from vulnerable groups who manage to avoid dropouts and successfully complete the compulsory basic education, there is a second critical moment – continuing to secondary education. Another risky period with high percentage dropouts is the first high school grade– IX class. The described three thresholds of ESL, typical for the Bulgarian context are associated with difficulties of a different nature. They all show that students at risk need ongoing support in the period of the middle and early secondary education until they reach the age at which they can choose between additional and more flexible ways of education and training.

National strategy for reducing ESL and problems of its implementation

The «Strategy for reducing the share of early school leavers», accepted in 2013 is the first national strategy in Bulgaria to combat this problem. It was developed by the Ministry of Education and Science and covers the period from 2013 to 2020. Measures and policies in the Strategy are grouped into the three aspects that are formed by the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union (2011/C 191/01 of 28.06.2011) on policies to reduce early school leaving – prevention, intervention and compensation.

Examples for the most significant measures in the field of prevention:

- creating a positive learning environment;
- developing and implementing school and community programs;
- evaluation, which creates motivation for learning;
- differentiated teaching;
- teacher training on identifying and dealing with cases at risk of ESL;
- educational integration of children and students from vulnerable ethnic communities;
- care for children with special educational needs.

Examples of the most significant measures in the field of intervention:

- increasing the participation and involvement of parents;
- individual and group mentoring to help children, students, parents;
- career guidance and counseling;
- guiding students at risk to work with a psychologist, guidance counselor, youth or social worker; recommending full-day organization of the school day;
- additional activities & counseling, directing students to pursue activities of interest.
- Examples of the most significant measures in the areas of compensation:
- return of early school leavers to the formal system of education and training through the use of various forms of education such as distance, evening, part-time, self-guided;
- promoting opportunities for informal learning in clubs, libraries, community centers, youth information and counseling centers, regional and local centers;
- workplace learning – more internships and apprenticeships and motivating local businesses for accepting trainees and apprentices;
- the possibility of inclusion in education and training of prisoners;
- national system for validation of competences acquired through non-formal training and/or informal learning.

The first sub-period (2014–2015) is already completed and a report for the outcomes of the implementation of the first biennial plan for the implementation of the strategy is published, where some serious problems are outlined, such as:

- Insufficient use of national information system that contains official data on Bulgarian citizens for monitoring of the enrollment of the children who reached the compulsory school age, as well as for supervision of their movement within the educational system;
- Late introduction of professional counseling and guidance;
- Hidden drop-out (hiding the absences of students by teachers; concealment of absences of students by parents in order to receive benefits);
- Inadequate or missing sources of relevant information, such as: actual residence registration; register for the students who went abroad; national database of persons not attending education;
- Problems of coordination between institutions, resulting from insufficient awareness;
- Problems of schools and other institutions in the specific communication with individual parents and the parent community as a whole;
- Lack of information about children left with relatives (who do not have parental rights and obligations), while parents are working abroad;
- Lack of adequate response by the authorities for child protection in cases when there signals for children and students left by the parents to relatives.

The strategy for reducing the share of ESL has common points and similar measures planned in the Strategy for educational integration of children and students from ethnic minorities (2015-2020), as far as the most vulnerable group of dropping out of school are the children and students with non-Bulgarian mother language, especially from the Roma ethnic group.

Analysis of the responses from the inquiries for students

In order to differentiate the determinants that provoke the persons to interrupt their education and to highlight some main trends, related to this phenomenon in accordance with the students' opinions a special survey was carried out. It was conducted within the framework of an international scientific and educational project «Empathic and supportive teachers – key to quality and efficiency in education» (564547-EPP-1-2015-1-BG-EPPKA3-PI-FORWARD, Erasmus+ EU programme), whose consortium brings together partner institutions from Italy, Malta, Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria. The chosen methodology followed in preparing this research included questionnaire survey. The questions were structured in the form of an electronic web questionnaire. The Google Drive WEB application was used to create the online questionnaire. When processing the obtained data, a percentage analysis was used and scaling ranking.

The main objective of the survey is to explore the views of Bulgarian students on the phenomenon of early school leaving in order to highlight the main characteristics and profile of the individual, correlating with the motivation to dropout, outline the key trends and determinants leading to school leaving and identify factors contributing to inclusion in the school community.

The contingent includes 469 students who are studying in secondary and post-secondary schools. The questionnaire consists of 35 questions, divided into the following groups:

I. Demographic data

1. Date of Birth

In accordance with the data collected from the first demographic question in the survey, 32 % of all students participated in it (465) were born in 2000 and are now 15-16 years of age respectively. The next most widely represented age category (about 26 %) is that of children born in 2002 and aged 13-14. A sufficient number of respondents – just over 18 % say they were born in 2003 and are 12-13 years old. If more than 13 % of those born in 2001 are added to this aggregate, this means that the absolute majority of the respondents is between the ages of 12 and 16 and is trained in secondary and post-secondary schools.

It is assumed that they have already reached a relatively high level of consciousness, and their experiences of school life with its institutional framework, requirements and challenges have a lasting and sustainable character.

2. Gender

In terms of gender, the distribution of responses shows a relatively equal number of individuals from both sexes who participated in the survey – about 45 % girls and 55 % boys, respectively.

3. Place of birth

The respondents are from different small towns and cities which are predominantly in the Eastern part of Bulgaria. Almost 30 % were born in Dobrich, 26 % in Silistra. The rest come from Stara Zagora, General Toshevo, Haskovo and Duloovo.

4. Where you have spent most of your life

The results of the answers to the 4 question indicate that the number of respondents living in the cities is 250 people (about 54 %), and those who live in the village are 212 people respectively. This means that the data that is shared in the course of the survey to a good extent reflects opinions, attitudes and perceptions both of students from the cities and those of children living in the countryside.

5. Current grade at school

According to the answers to the fifth question, the significant share of respondents are taught in grades 6 and 7 (17.3 % and 29.0 % respectively) and almost as many as in grades 8 and 9 (slightly above 9 % and 36 %) (Fig. 2). This shows that most of them have already gone through a particularly critical phase in their development, linked to the so-called "window of vulnerability" (different surveys show that nearly 20 % of adolescents have experienced serious problems that come out for adolescents when they turn approximately 12 years of age) and are fully capable of recognizing a number of high risk factors leading to early school leaving, incl. starting from his own experience.

Moreover, at this age, between 12 and 15, children begin to be seriously influenced in their assessments by their peers' opinions and attitudes, namely the identification with the peers determines a model of the development of their moral perceptions, assessments and values.

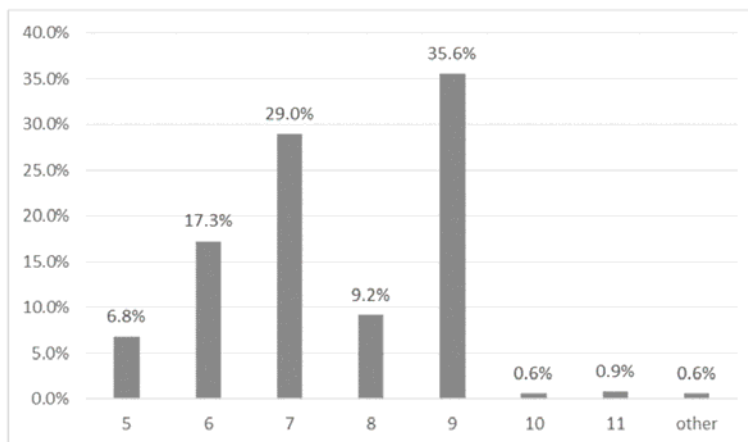


Fig. 2. Current grade at school

Therefore, their sensitivity towards classmates' behavior, attitudes and classroom relationships as a whole is definitely increasing and makes them more receptive to the different manifestations of social or psycho-emotional unwellness on their part, which brings a valuable point of view to our focus of research.

II. Retention at school

6. Have you repeated a grade during your school life?

The distribution of responses to the questions shows that the absolute majority of respondents did not repeat the year during their studies, while just over 3 % of respondents – only 15 students reported similar experience and that means that their views on the reasons to stay in school are most likely to be very helpful for our analysis of such causes and reasons for ESL.

III. Type of family and living conditions

7. Number of the siblings:

A large number of respondents did not give a precise answer to this question because of its widespread interpretation which led to the inappropriateness of data processing.

8. People you live in the same house:

Data from respondents' answers indicate that about 80 % of respondents live in full-time families, often in families of extended type, as parents and children live with their older relatives – grandparents. At the same time, not so low a share of respondents – over 7 % live in single parent families, and some respondents – a total of 8 children, say they live only with grandparents (Fig. 3). This generally outlines two rather unfavorable trends in the modern world concerning the upbringing and development of children.

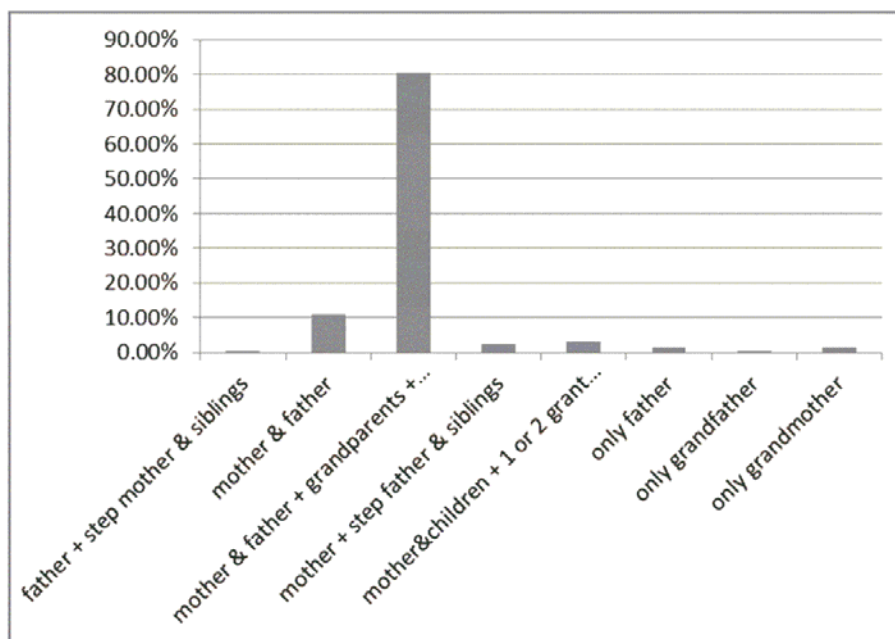


Fig. 3. People you live in the same house

One of the factors is the increasing number of single parent families. Children, who are raised by a single parent turn out to be much more vulnerable to a number of risks, included a much higher risk of ESL due to the fact that such types of families are typically characterized by increased disorganization, poor sustainability and serious threats to poverty and social exclusion.

The second trend concerns external, international migration, mainly influenced by economic reasons. Reflecting in the field of family relationships, parental migration, accompanied by leaving children to the care of elderly grandparents, leads to an acute shortage of parental attention and control. And the corresponding psychological trauma of separation adds to the feeling of internal harm to children and reinforces the negative effect on their ability to learn and the attitude to visit the school.

9. Do you have a room of your own at home?

Almost one third of all respondents – 29 % do not have live in a separate room. This is a clear sign of unfavorable living conditions which could then lead to a more unfavorable living environment if there is a lack of a personal space for the student to prepare for school – a personal desk, or if the child shares the room with too many other members of his/her family, making him/her more vulnerable to ESL risk.

10. If you do not have your own room at home, who do you share with?

The most part of respondents are sharing a room with brothers or sisters, but in some cases, the respondents are sharing the room with parents and even with parents and brothers.

IV. Students' work experience and access to equipment

11. Are you currently working for money?

When asked about their current status, 445 of the children say that they are not working for money which leaves less than 5 % in the category “working for money”. The fact that some of them work does not necessarily have a negative effect on its own, especially when we talk about temporary employment (during school brakes) and when it involves students who are 15-16 or older. Meanwhile the *active use of child labor as a source of income – which often happens in Roma families in Bulgaria, definitely leads to a strongly established tendency toward ESL.*

12. Have you ever worked for money?

Almost 32 % (147) of the students say that they have worked at one or another point of their lives. This, in turn, testifies that a great many of them are aware of the nature of the paid work activity and have an idea of how engaging it is and what great extra efforts, motivational and organizational ones by the individual are needed to reconcile school and job responsibilities.

13. Do you have access to a computer / tablet at home?

Less than 3 % of the students do not have a computer at home which is very fair representation of our country's picture when it comes to ICT use. However, it should be noted that the picture varies considerably depending on the respondent's belonging to a particular socio- or ethno-cultural community.

In some minority communities such as the Roma minority, for example, the involvement of its members in the technology world is still limited for a number of reasons, mostly material-financial ones, and this negatively affects the access of Roma children to significant educational resources.

14. Do you have a mobile phone of your own?

Only about 4 % of the students say that they do not own a personal mobile which is almost identical to the access to computer at home.

V. Reasons for school attendance and ways to feel good there

15. 1. I enjoy coming to school when: [I have done my homework]

Reflecting the factors that contribute to good self-esteem and satisfaction with school attendance and participation in the learning process, the majority of respondents – 416 people or *almost 89 % of the total* – *completely or mostly support the view that their preparedness for school lessons in the form of home done work definitely increases the level of their emotional comfort and satisfaction with their involvement in the school community by helping to build their positive attitude towards the school* (Fig. 4). And this is fully consistent with the children's natural desire to have a high degree of self-esteem that is achieved when the individual is in a state of psycho-emotional equilibrium and stability when he does not bother about something he has not understood or failed to end when he feels confident and sure of his own strengths and abilities.

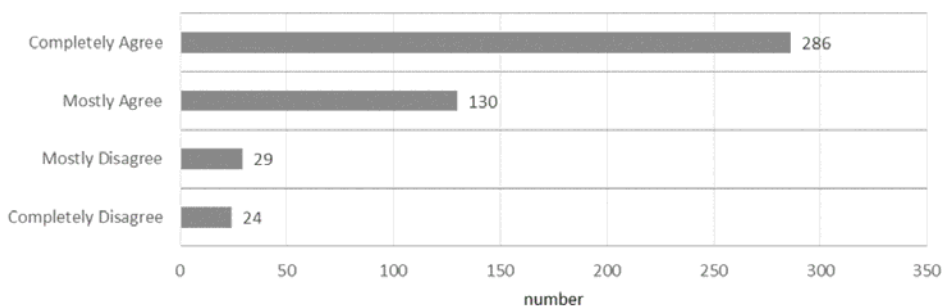


Fig. 4. I enjoy coming to school when: [I have done my homework]

15.2. I enjoy coming to school when: [I have my favorite class]

The other factor, which is appreciated by the interviewed students as very important in determining the attractiveness of the school environment, is their favorite lessons. *More than 90 % of them think that the availability of classes on their preferred subjects increases their level of satisfaction with visiting the school* (Fig. 5). Such an appreciation can easily be explained because the active interest of the child in learning activities, which are appealing and attractive to him, increases his motivation in the process of learning, seeking to learn new knowledge and ultimately leads not only to – his/her serious educational commitment and involvement in the implementation of various learning tasks, but also determines the development of positive attitudes towards the respective school community. But in this case, more important is another, namely the extremely high percentage of those who have expressed their agreement to the pro-

posed version of the answer. This means that *respondents are in no way inclined to underestimate or diminish the importance of factors directly related to their learning activity, whose successful implementation correlates with the level of their sense of inner satisfaction and emotional well-being.*

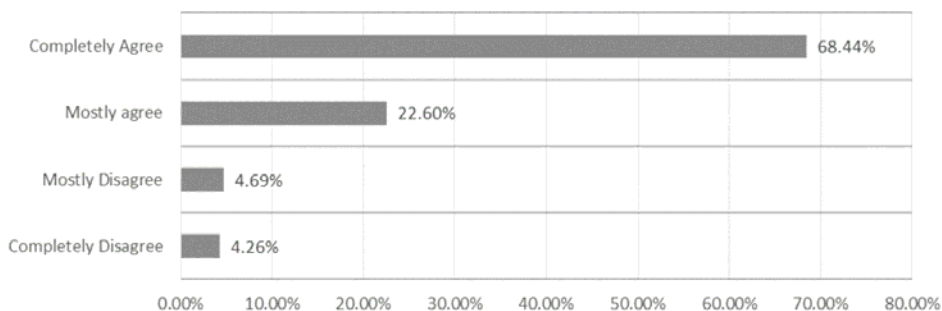


Fig. 5. I enjoy coming to school when: [I have my favorite class]

15.3. I enjoy coming to school when: [My favorite teacher has a class]

The same relationship outlines the distribution of respondents' answers to their assessment of the next factor – conducting the classes of the preferred pedagogue. Here, more than 86 % (405 people in total) are obviously of the opinion that the high professional and personal qualities of the teacher, leading to his positive «favoritism» in the eyes of the students, definitely contribute to increasing their level of interest and satisfaction with the education and training activities carried out in the school.

15.4. I enjoy coming to school when: [My friends are at school]

Almost 89 % of respondents agree that their positive attitudes towards a school visit are directly influenced by the presence of their friends in the school institution. In view of the age profile of the respondents, allowing them to be qualified as teenagers, such an assessment is totally understandable. The significance of peers, the friendly environment here definitely comes to the fore and openly states itself both in out-of-school relationships and within the school community.

15.5. I enjoy coming to school when: [My boy/girl friend is at school]

However, things are different when it comes to more intimate relationships, that is, when the positive attitude towards the school visit is tied to the presence of the boy or girl friend. Here, opinions clearly split, with almost half of the respondents (221) believing that there is such a conditionality, while the others (248 people) agree to the opposite view.

15.6. I enjoy coming to school when: [When I am well dressed]

Taking into account the consumer and out-of-representation nature of modern society, it is not surprising that two-thirds of the respondents (75 %) are delighted to visit the school when they are well dressed. But this also shows how seriously students are referring to their appearance, and the corresponding lack of proper clothing can lead to a lasting sense of social deprivation and rejection

and, respectively, affect the child's desire to attend the school institution. This problem is particularly acute for children from vulnerable and low-status groups, often forced to live on the verge of poverty.

15.7. I enjoy coming to school when: [When extracurricular activities are taking place: art, music, sport etc.]

More than two-thirds of respondents (77 %) are of the opinion that extra extracurricular activities contribute to raising their satisfaction with school stay. Taking into account such students' interest, it is necessary to step up this side of school life. In recent years, there has been some improvement in Bulgaria in the outlined direction, but the number of extracurricular forms is still quite limited and directly dependent on the leadership of the school and the enthusiasm of the concrete teachers.

15.8. Others

Most commonly seen answer in this section is the participation in a *sport activity, the use of ICT in class and their favorite subjects*. It is indicative that a very common response from the respondents (5 times) refers to such a situation that contributes to their positive perception of the school institution when the lessons have a reduced duration. This is not a characteristic manifestation of lazy behavior, but rather a reaction of children to their systematic overload in the context of the modern educational process. *Curriculums with regard to content are overloaded on most subjects and implicitly contain orientation to high academic achievements, which not only seriously impedes, but sometimes totally discourages learners, negatively influencing their motivation*. In a particularly difficult situation, these students are found here (often by minority communities or with specific needs), which are slowly achieving results. But it should not be forgotten that this category of students, in accordance with the fundamental democratic principle of education policy, also have the right to quality education that will allow them to develop their personal potential to the maximum. This is one of the many reasons why dropping out of school is so often seen in the context of the problem of «equality of opportunity» [Coleman, 1968; Coleman, 1990].

Until then, while there is still a significant gap between the high standards for student achievements laid down in the normative documents and the low quality of student learning, partly as a consequence of the inadequate assessment forms and procedures, a situation in modern education, and the problem of dropping out of school, could hardly be optimized.

16. Please write down three things that help you when you feel overwhelmed at school?

Most students say that their friends are the people who help them the most when it comes to being overwhelmed at school. Considering that, it would be nice to have more flexible procedures for peering and other forms of systematically planned and organized help where students can help and support each other. The next in line was «the teachers» and their various forms and ways of consulting on the relevant subjects and learning content, that in turn shows the necessary direction in which much more work should be done, both at the level of «educational policies» on a national scale, and at the level of a «concrete school institution» to

overcome the emerging educational deficits of the students. The third factor is «the telephone» and everything that is attached to it – internet, social networks, Facebook. Only two students say that reading books helps: such a circumstance unequivocally indicates how to increase the attractiveness of learning – through more active implementation and use of modern ICT tools and technical devices in the process of learning. Some students depend on the emotional support of their parents, others use music and sport activities to decrease the pressure from school and there are those who take up on private lessons in order to be better prepared in school.

However, quite specific trends can be captured in the consideration of certain, less common answers. A few students mention that their way of dealing with being overwhelmed is to «skip class». Obviously, this is one of the reactions that speaks about the inability to find an adequate way to tackle the problem (with help of friends, teachers, counselors, etc.), and at the same time one of the first steps to distancing the student from the school institution, which, under certain conditions, can easily lead to early school leaving.

Another sign for the dysfunctional system is the fact that some of the respondents perceive sweets, chocolate, food as an efficient means of to «calm themselves» when being overwhelmed. Such a circumstance obviously testifies that it is precisely the overloaded curriculum, not just the lack of enough physical activities, which ultimately appears to be one of the leading reasons for the sharp increase in the number of overweight students these days.

The third point that comes to the fore in analyzing the answers concerns the functional support of school counselor. It turns out that the students are much more likely to seek help from the headmaster than to go to such a school professional. Of all the respondents, only the two mentioned this answer.

This undoubtedly points to the low level of trust that children display with regard to pedagogical counselors at school and, respectively, the low level of effectiveness of their activities. This may be due to a number of reasons such as insufficient level of qualification, restricted authority, limited communication in interaction with classroom teachers, and others. However, the reasons for the difficulties in their work and the ways to overcome them must be carefully considered.

17. What are the three things you like about your school?

The most common answer to the question what are the three things you like in school is «*the teachers*» or rather good, preferred teachers, incl. and classroom teachers who demonstrate high professional competency and attentive and respectful behavior toward students; next are the «favorite subjects» which students find interesting and attractive; «friends and classmates» with whom any life issue can be shared and whose support can be relied upon, are third in line.

This is a very positive overview of the teachers (or at least those of them who are appreciated) and expresses the important part they have in the minds of the students when it comes to staying in school. It is the teachers with their knowledge, skills, experience and professionalism which are perceived by the children as such an attractive force that very seriously contributes to their better

integration into the school institution and creates in their minds a positive image of the school as a welcoming, comfortable and preferred place.

Many students say that the «vocational training classes» are extremely interesting and attractive to them. This is a clear sign of the direction which the educational system has yet to take more seriously – which is to provide a clear connection between jobs, the labor market and schooling. *Such a focus on practice would undoubtedly enhance the attractiveness of the school, especially in the eyes of certain public segments such as representatives of the Roma community who are in the most need of vocational training and are vulnerable to ESL.* There are number of research data on the early drop-out of Roma children carried out in Bulgaria that show a high degree of attitudes and preferences by Roma parents for this kind of training with a more outlined practical focus, of certain professional-oriented habits and competences and related to the introduction of an early profiling system [Roma Dropping out ... , 2009].

Participating in different extra curriculum activities such as school trips, sporting events, and school clubs is another important factor which contributes to the interest of students toward going to school. Rarely but still present is the answer related to *better equipped schools – gyms, computer laboratories, libraries* and others. Here, too, a number of additional reserves are clearly outlined for the optimization of the educational process and the educational environment as a whole, which would have a serious impact on the interest, motivation and desire of the students to visit the school.

About 19 of all the students said they don't like anything about school. Such an example of extreme negative attitude is a clear sign of unfavorable process and lack of healthy adaptation and is very much related to the risk of ESL. When we add to this the lack of respectful authority of school counselors (it is indicative that they are not mentioned in any of the proposed answers), we see a much more worrisome picture.

18. At school I am involved in:

Regarding the forms and ways of engaging in some or other extracurricular activities, respondents' opinions are distributed as follows: most often their participation *in school clubs and excursions* is indicated. A good part of the students say that they participate *in different type of competitions* and a few of them go to *consultations for specific topics of the subjects* they study. Very rarely do they participate in environmental activities, which could be a sign of the underestimation of this issue by teachers in organizing and conducting relevant forms of educational work with students. Equally rarely (only 16 registered answers), the interviewed students have participated in activities with the school counselor, which barely reflects a real lack of need on their part, but rather as evidence of insufficient satisfaction of their respective needs for counseling and support when solving a number of school and personal problems.

The analysis of the collected data clearly outlines another extremely worrying trend – and that is *about one fourth of all students say they do not participate in any extra curriculum activities. This is a very high number which testifies to serious deficiencies in building a healthy and effective educational environment*

in the modern Bulgarian school when it comes to being able to retain the students engaged in the schools and the educational process. Recent research shows that some of the most simple and adequate measures which could be taken to prevent ESL are to – *change the hours of the school day* to begin at 9.00 and end at 3.30 with universally available after school sports practice and other activities... Most risky behavior occurs between 2.30 and dinner time [Handbook of Adolescent Behavioral ... , 2005].

VI. Reasons for a sense of belonging at school

19.1. I feel that I belong in school because of (Friends):

In answering this question, the absolute majority of respondents 96 % (448 people) completely or mostly agree with the proposed option and consider that their integration into the school community is of great added value to their friends. With a view to identify the preventive factors that help to keep children in school and creating their positive perception of the school environment, it is important to look for adequate forms and ways of involving students themselves in helping their classmates which experience certain difficulties and are at risk of dropping out. *Such peer help, in a peculiarity of friendship through mentoring, coaching, tutoring* or any other acceptable format, would be much more readily perceived and willing, and would probably be even more effective than the outside interventions by teachers and other adults, in some sense deprived of absolute equality and intimacy.

19.2. I feel that I belong in school because of (Teachers):

Interestingly, not only are the friends seen by the respondents as a serious force that stops the centrifugal mechanisms of dropping out, but also the teachers. Thus, about 85 % of respondents express the opinion that *teachers, through the prism of their professionalism, enthusiasm, careful attitude towards pupils' problems, also significantly contribute to strengthening their sense of belonging to the school community*. And here it is of utmost importance that these expectations, which are quite heterogeneous and divergent, will continue to come true and that the representatives of the teaching profession will really be able to find an adequate response to new challenges in the conditions of the contemporary, increasingly complicated pedagogical situation.

In addition, even 15 % of respondents, who do not believe that teachers are actively helping the process of their full incorporation into the school community, remain within the survey (Fig. 6). This finding shows that *the supportive role of teachers needs to be further enhanced. This requires much greater flexibility on their part, continuous improvement of the methods and forms of the educational work and improvement of their professional competences through participation in various qualification forms*.

19.3. I feel that I belong in school because of (School counselor):

A curious picture, however, emerges when considering the distribution of the answers received on the role and importance of the school counselor in promoting the good integration of pupils into the school community. About 40 % (183 people) of the respondents believe that the educational and counseling activity provided by counselors has a beneficial impact on their behavior, motivation

and attitudes towards the school institution, which strengthens their relationship with the school. At the same time, the majorities of respondents – just over 60 % (286 people) completely or mostly disagreed with the proposed version of the answer, and consider that the school counselor only has little influence on the processes of in-school integration (Fig. 7).

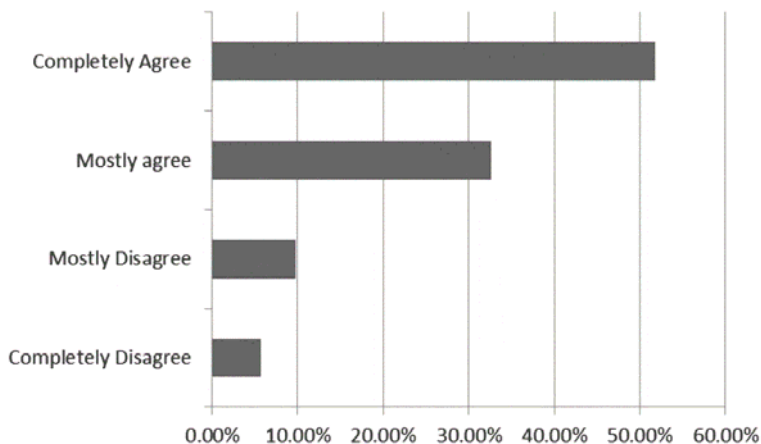


Fig. 6. I feel that I belong in school because of (Teachers)

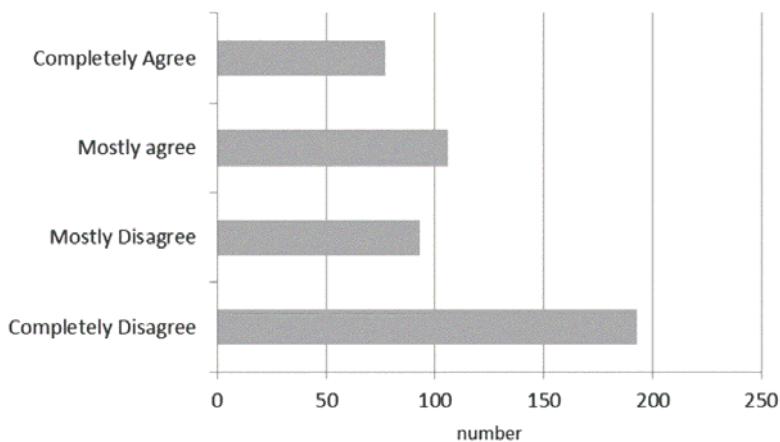


Fig. 7. I feel that I belong in school because of (School counselor)

These data are quite indicative and highlight a very important situation: *the school counselor in Bulgaria in his specific professional and role position has not yet established himself as an effective educational mediator, facilitating various processes, related to interrelations and interactions within the school community.*

19.4. I feel that I belong in school because of (Family):

The majority of the surveyed students – 82 % perceive their family as a community that helps their normal entry into school life and definitely contributes to the development of the significant identification mechanisms providing a last-

ing, sustainable and positive relationship with the school. Their assessment of the key role of the family in the process fully coincides with the data and results of numerous sociological studies on the issue undertaken in different countries [Kumpfer, Alvorado, 2003]. At the same time, a large number of respondents – 85 people or about 18 % of respondents – are of the opinion that their families virtually do not contribute to their better integration into the school institution. This fact obviously testifies to the existence of some or other forms of distancing, parental absence from the interests and needs of the child, sometimes reaching his/her negligence in the family. *When establishing such a risk factor, children from such families need to receive additional personalized assistance and support from teachers, counselors or psychologists in the school, and perhaps from specialized social centers or structures.*

19.5. I feel that I belong in school because of (Other persons at community level):

More than 60 % of respondents (297) fully or partially agree with the proposed answer. And despite the possible ambiguity about who they perceive as people in the community they themselves belong to (because it does not specify what are the main signs of community – age, ethnic, religious, cultural, etc.), yet comparatively meaningful is the fact that they *feel much more assisted in their relationship with the school by a given category of persons than by school counselors.*

19.6. I feel that I belong in school because of (Academically doing well at school):

In analyzing the answers to this question, one very important fact is that a *majority of respondents (90 %) have a close connection between good school achievement and their desire to attend school. The fixed correlation here is obviously determined by the deep inherit need of each child to feel accepted, appreciated and evaluated well within a particular social community, to believe in his/her strengths and strong features, and in the ability to achieve significant results in his/her activities.*

That is why it is often accepted that the term «academic success» includes not only the effectiveness of the learning activity and the effectiveness of the ways to achieve the learning objectives. It also implies experiencing its success, in other words the subjective satisfaction of the student with the processes and learning outcomes. It is this subjective-personal satisfaction, saturated with positive emotional-psychic experiences, making success so significant from both psychological and pedagogical point of view. By experiencing the success, the student acquires a sense of self-esteem; success leads the student to become aware of his/her own capacity. On the basis new, stronger motivations in the activity are formed, the levels of self-esteem, self-respect change. All of these positive personal transformations, in their turn, undoubtedly reinforce the sense of belonging to the school community, which the pupils themselves feel so well.

19.7. I feel that I belong in school because of (the fact that there are some/a lot of children with the same ethnic/religious/class background):

The majority of the students which took part in the survey definitely report as a positive moment, strengthening their relationship with the school community, the presence in the class or the school where they are trained, of other children with similar ethnic, religious or cultural background. This is clearly understandable, because in the adaptation plan the construction of the necessary integration

component of the students (through the absorption of the respective cultural-institutional patterns within the dominant culture) is closely connected to their involvement in various groups and communities, included in the field of school relations. If these communities are characterized by relative ethno-cultural and religious homogeneity and are thus formed on the basis of the dominant ethnicity and respectively the dominant type of culture, the pupils involved usually demonstrate a sufficiently high degree of psychological comfort.

In the case of significant ethno-cultural heterogeneity, the presence of representatives of minority communities is often accompanied by a growing confluence of class relations. Here again, the opportunity for minority children to remain in deep isolation due to the mechanisms of group exclusion (which would seriously reduce their motivation to visit the school) could be easier if they were not in a situation of absolute minority. The presence of other students, similar to their ethno-cultural or religious background, usually gives them more confidence and even courage – the courage to defend their differences and to seek acceptance and respect on the part of others. Since tolerance itself is not given, especially when it comes to the student environment. It should be developed and developed gradually. It is therefore important for the child who belongs to a minority group, to acquire sufficient psycho-emotional resistance against one or other manifestations of distancing and neglect to avoid the situation of total exclusion and self-closing.

At the same time, the presence of an impressive number of respondents (more than 20 %) strongly disagreed with the proposed statement shows that in the eyes of many students these markers – ethnic, cultural or religious – are gradually starting to lose their strong differentiating power either as a result of increasing the level of tolerance of the environment as a whole, or because of the increasing importance of other stratification characteristics such as lifestyle or consumption patterns.

As a generalized summary, it is necessarily to note that understanding of the ESL phenomenon and its various causes and determinants necessarily implies an active use of the multifactorial approach and different levels of analysis – from a micro-level, related to the peculiarities of the child's inner world, his/her psycho-emotional states and behavioral reactions, his micro-social environment, which manifests immediate surroundings of the child (parents and relatives, other significant adults and friendly circle) to a mezzo-level referring to the institutionalized factors and mechanisms that reflect not only the child's academic success, but also a whole set of his relationships with teachers, counselors, classmates within the school community; and finally to a macro-level that encompasses the most global dimensions of the society in its dynamic perspective and their projections on human existence.

In order to develop effective education strategies and policies to prevent dropping out, it is particularly important to focus on the mezzo-level and the relevant constraints arising from the school context and the functioning of educational institutions. Here, a number of reasons for early school leaving should be highlighted, based on the survey, mainly related to:

1. *The general institutional conditions* (non-flexibility of the education system, shortage of funding, insufficient qualification of the pedagogical staff – especially for work with children from the vulnerable groups, poor effectiveness of the existing forms of psychological-pedagogical support, etc.);

2. *The school environment and the relationships with teachers and classmates* (lack of close relationships with representatives of the pedagogical community, school staff – teachers, psychologists, counselors, insufficient attention to the compensatory mechanism and interventions, aimed to overcome students' educational deficits, low concern for the students' social and psycho-emotional well-being, limited supply of extracurricular forms of training and low involvement of the students in such types of activities, not particularly predisposing, child-friendly school ethos, weak students voice at school, etc.);

3. *Curriculum and teaching methods* (complex and overloaded school curriculum, lack of specialized programs and teaching materials for children in need of compensatory forms of education or absent from school for a longer period, use of unattractive forms and ways of teaching, etc.);

4. *Facilities and technical equipment* for the realization of an optimal training process (lack or acute shortage of halls, equipment, specialized technical devices, etc.).

Overall, the school today is poorly motivated to work with children at risk of dropping out. Therefore, it is necessary to develop and implement comprehensive, complex programs at the state and school level, including preventive, systemic measures, such as building an attractive, friendly learning environment, changing the «teacher-student», «student-student», «student-counselor» relationships, opening compensatory classes and introducing specialized compensatory training programs, improving the qualification of teachers, offering effective consultative assistance and free individual classes, especially for children in risk groups, setting up targeted socio-pedagogical services or structures.

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Феномен отказа от школьного обучения в Болгарии: тенденции и детерминанты. Часть 1

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Аннотация. Данное исследование, осуществленное в рамках международного проекта по программе ЕС Erasmus+ на тему «Учителя, проявляющие эмпатию и поддержку, – ключ к качеству и эффективности образования», посвящено проблеме отказа от школьного обучения и фокусируется на изучении характеристик и профиля индивида, коррелирующих с мотивацией к непосещению школы. В статье анализируются тенденции и детерминанты, которые приводят к отвержению учеником школы или ученика – школой в Болгарии. Широко дискутируются результаты эмпирического исследования мнения учащихся по поводу феномена, связанного с отказом от школы. Акцент при этом ставится на механизмах инклюзии и разнообразных формах поддержки учащихся, находящихся в группе риска, которые помогают им приобрести к жизни школьного сообщества.

Ключевые слова: образование, школьное сообщество, ранний отказ от школы, инклюзия, образовательная интеграция, дети группы риска, дети низкостатусных социальных групп.

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