

SCHOOL DROPOUT IN VASLUI COUNTY – CAUSES, RISK SITUATIONS

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Abstract. *Our country is facing serious problems related to school dropout and social exclusion, especially in rural areas. In some Romanian counties, these aspects have reached a worrying level, being necessary to take urgent measures, carry out useful activities and develop an action plan for social and educational integration. Vaslui is a disadvantaged county mainly in rural areas, where school dropout, difficulty in accessing education and social exclusion are alarming, being a case of extreme poverty, in last place in the European Union. What are the determining causes of this reality and the risk situations faced by people in this county? are essential questions of this research. Poverty, lack of jobs and ensuring a decent family living determine massive departures to work abroad, which negatively influences the education of children, who do not attend mandatory courses to complete eight grades. Due to real causes, these children are guided towards other existential priorities that contribute to dropping out of school for household activities, marriage at the age of 13-14, going abroad to their parents, etc. This ascertaining research was carried out over 6 months and used documentation, survey (conversation), statistical and mathematical and graphical methods. The research included a significant number of middle-school students (grades 5-8) from urban and rural areas in Vaslui County. The research highlights the reality of school dropout in a poor area of our country, delimiting its causes and risk situations in order to find out viable solutions to reduce in the future this extremely important social phenomenon.*

Keywords: *school dropout, students, social exclusion, risk factors, disadvantaged area.*

Introduction

Early school leaving has become a priority in all countries. Society is interested in this phenomenon for security and economic reasons, because dropping out of school is often linked to a security problem, the reason being that absenteeism and delinquency are correlated.

School dropout, as an extreme form of school non-participation, is a serious problem of the education system in Romania. Romania is one of the leading countries of the European Union (EU) in terms of school dropout rate. School dropout has detrimental consequences for unemployment, economic growth and the well-being of society at large. One of the indicators measured at European level on school dropout captures the rate of early school leaving. According to the data reported to Eurostat by Romania in 2014, the early school leaving rate in our country was 18.1 percent. This removes Romania from the target assumed in the 2020 Strategy to reach an early school leaving rate of less than 10 percent by 2020 as part of the sustainable development process. (Ivan & Rostaş, 2015)

According to the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), the risk of becoming unemployed is twice as high for those who do not complete their studies. The social consequences are also important; mental and physical health, associated with abandonment, have a high cost: inappropriate behaviour, early pregnancy, violence, suicide, etc. Moreover, there is some social reproduction (similarity): a person whose parents

abandoned school is more likely to have a descendant who will not complete their own studies. (Blaya, 2010)

Unfortunately, young people need to manage high levels of stress. Students in secondary and tertiary education settings experience a wide range of ongoing normative stressors, which can be described as normal everyday hassles such as constant academic demands. Accordingly, secondary/high-school (defined here as junior/lower secondary education and senior/upper secondary education) and tertiary (defined here as post-secondary education) (UNESCO, 2012) students commonly self-report experiencing ongoing stress related to their activity that takes place in the educational environment, which we refer to as academic-related stress, such as pressure to achieve school success. For them, “success” often means obtaining high grades. Also, the concerns about receiving poor grades is another example of academic-related stress. (Pascoe et al., 2020)

The dropout problem becomes once again a serious condition in large-city school systems; in suburban school systems, it may or may not be a serious problem (Berston, 2015).

Children from disadvantaged social backgrounds are more exposed to the risks of external factors and do not benefit from a support system in case they may face risk factors such as maladaptation or learning disabilities.

According to a teacher from a rural area, absenteeism is a problem in their school but also in most schools. It is an alarm signal. Trying to find out why so many children are missing school, that teacher has noticed that the major problem is the parents who go abroad and leave them alone at home uncontrolled. The second problem is the precarious financial situation and there are many cases in which children have nothing to wear or packs on them. (Ilisei, 2016)

School dropout is the end of repeated failures in school adjustment. Thus, school failure has a very high risk of manifestation through school dropout. Therefore, in order to minimise discrimination, early school leaving and social exclusion, action must be taken to address/reduce the causes of school failure.

Knesting (2010) states that research on high school dropout that goes beyond individual student characteristics to address the influence of school factors on students’ educational decisions is needed. The author summarises the findings of a qualitative case study of a group of high school students at risk for dropping out but still going to school and getting involved in its activities. Analysis focused on understanding the students’ persistence taking into account the context of their school. Four factors appeared as critical to supporting students’ persistence in the educational environment: (a) listening to students, (b) communicating caring, (c) the school’s role in dropout prevention, and (d) students’ role in dropout prevention.

Almost all young Swedish (98%) enrol in an academic or vocational programme at the upper secondary level; the proportion of Swedish students who complete their upper secondary education before the age of 25 years is slightly below 75%, which is comparable to the graduation rates in countries such as Norway (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014).

“High risk behaviour is gender-specific in its effect on young women whose pregnancies often result in high rates of poverty when they do give birth while still in their teens. Adolescent mothers are more likely to drop out of school, earn low wages and are less likely to find stable employment compared to mothers who bear children during their 20’s.” (Brunswick & Cidala, 1995, cited in Kissman, 1998, p. 179)

“In order to develop individual or systems-wide interventions for the primary prevention of school dropout, it would be helpful to have a conceptual model that focuses on the interaction between the school and those pupils considered at risk. By analysing the interaction patterns that lead up to early school leaving, dropout can be seen as a behaviour, not a predetermined characteristic of certain students. Four broad “pathways” are proposed; these are not causal explanations, but types of developmental progression for which school dropout is a likely eventual outcome. The model discussed herein has implications for generating practical strategies to prevent school failure in individual pupils and offers special services providers a rationale support better defined programmatic school reforms and policies.” (Evans & Dibenedetto, 2008, p. 63)

To reduce discrimination, school dropout and social exclusion, we must take into account the following essential variables: students and their families, teachers and school.

School avoidance has gradually become a severe adolescent issue (Wilkins, 2008) and an interdisciplinary public health problem, which can have detrimental outcomes (Sobba, 2019). School avoidance refers to adolescents who intentionally skip classes or school altogether (Brookmeyer et al., 2006), a situation that can be studied using sociological techniques.

Krane and Klevan (2019) present the following fact: most young people aged between 16 and 19 years attend upper secondary school; a large majority of these adolescents live with their parents. During upper secondary school, an increased effort in academic complexity and achievement is requested, therefore many students face problems while trying to deal with these demands as well as motivation, achievement and mental health issues. Teacher-student relationship is an important element that has a visible impact on student achievement, motivation and learning (Roorda et al., 2011).

A range of different concepts are used to describe and define students' absence from school, such as unauthorised absence, truancy, absenteeism, unexcused absence, and dropout, which differ by the form and extent of absence (Ramberg et al., 2019). Truancy can be defined as any unexcused or undocumented absence from school taking into account the attendance rules of the specific country (Claes et al., 2009) and can take different forms, ranging from repeated late arrivals to absence from a whole or several school day(s) (Ramberg et al., 2019).

Schools are a predominant learning environment for social conduct, social skill development and of important social understandings that begin in early childhood (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Vaslui County joins other counties in the country, being an area of extreme poverty, the poorest in the European Union, in which social exclusion and early school leaving in lower secondary education have high percentages. There, numerous disadvantaged families are facing serious socio-economic problems, especially in rural areas.

The reality shows a county with potential, but that fails, due to specific factors in the area (agriculture is the main field), to offer people a decent living – profitable offers on the labour market, encouraging children and young people for education, increasing birth rates, etc. A significant number of children drop out of high school due to delicate situations in this area:

- lack of financial support to go to school, help given to parents in the household, existence of siblings, younger sisters (2-3) who need care;
- parents who went abroad to work (usually in England, Sweden, Italy, Spain), the children being in the care of relatives (grandparents, uncles);
- their departure to work abroad, together with their parents;

- girls (especially of Roma ethnicity) get married from 13-14 years old;
- parents' misunderstanding of the role and importance of education in their children's lives;
- lack of motivation for some children who work for money, providing unskilled and modest services that are poorly paid;
- the problem of transport to more distant schools and the improper conditions in some schools, which take children away from the phenomenon of education;
- lack of motivation for disadvantaged children - the problem of food (some eat only at school - hot meals are required every day) and not being attracted through pleasant activities, sports, competitions, trips, hiking, etc.

School teachers and principals in the communes mentioned, with whom we collaborate in our project, make special efforts to prevent and reduce problems related to discrimination, social exclusion and school dropout, constantly communicating with students, parents, local authorities, so that the importance of education in children's lives can be correctly perceived.

We also notice a positive change in attitude towards school of some children who dropped out of school. Some of them want to go back to school after a year or even a break. They have probably realised how important their preparation for life and profession is (skills in an occupation, higher qualification, better salary) both in our country and abroad.

Regarding parents, we notice that many needy families strongly encourage their children to complete secondary school, continue with a high school or vocational school (qualification in an occupational profession). There is also the involvement of local authorities (Town Hall) to attract and support children to attend school by providing social assistance, renovating buildings and school annexes, repairing access roads (some of them in deplorable condition).

Thus, at the middle school in Gârceni commune, Gârceni village, a synthetic mini-football field with a lighting system adapted for night games was completed. The Gârceni middle school in the same commune, but from Racova village, has no ground for sports activities, and the middle school in Cozmești commune, Fâstâci village, currently operates in a forest canton, where more than 50 children learn in a building that is about to fall. Nobody remembers when it was built. It was once the forest district but, for years, it has been a school with unsuitable conditions for the teaching process (a small room used as a classroom, toilets in the yard, without water or field for sports activities represented by the inner courtyard - soil, grass, with a certain inclination, uneven, without handball or mini-football goalposts, etc.). In June 2020 (according to the mayor's promises), the school will be moved in the building erected 12 years ago, which is 100 meters away, but has not been used so far.

In this context, in Vaslui County, as well as in other areas of the country, it is recommended to develop a viable and effective strategy to prevent and reduce discrimination, social exclusion and school dropout among children through sports, by unifying the efforts of local authorities – City Halls, County Council, Prefecture, School Inspectorate, teachers, parents, foundations, NGOs – and all those who want to support the recovery of education, even to save education and attract children to this phenomenon that is a national priority for the Romanian society.

The research hypothesis is that, if the causes and risk situations are known in detail, they can be managed with the help of specific measures, methods, activities, in order to reduce school dropout in Vaslui County as much as possible.

Methodology

To conduct a relevant, viable and objective research, we used the methods of documentation, conversation, social dialogue (discussion with teachers and local authorities in Vaslui County that operate in urban and rural areas) and questionnaire (we distributed a significant number of questionnaires with 10 open- and closed-ended questions).

We mention that we also took part in two work trips in Vaslui County within the activities of the PNP001 project “Sustainable Social and Educational Integration through Sports Activities”, in September 2019 and February 2020. In a further research, we aim to make a detailed analysis of the dominant aspects of the social phenomenon of school dropout in rural areas compared to urban areas and to highlight the significant gaps between them.

Results

Analysis of the responses from the questionnaires allowed extracting extremely important data that mainly expressed the opinions of teachers regarding the phenomenon of school dropout in secondary education specific to Vaslui County, but which is also valid for other Romanian counties with a very low standard of living, accentuated by poverty.

To question 1, “What are the causes of high school dropout of students in Vaslui County?” (Figure 1), most responses (52%) referred to the following causes: precarious education of parents, students with one or both parents gone abroad, engaging children in household chores/seasonal work, precarious financial situation, early marriage of Roma girls; a percentage of 21% took into account the economic and social conditions in certain localities, single-parent families and lack of motivation for school, and 27% listed disinterest in school, early marriage, precarious financial situation, parents abroad, children left in the care of grandparents or other relatives not interested in school.

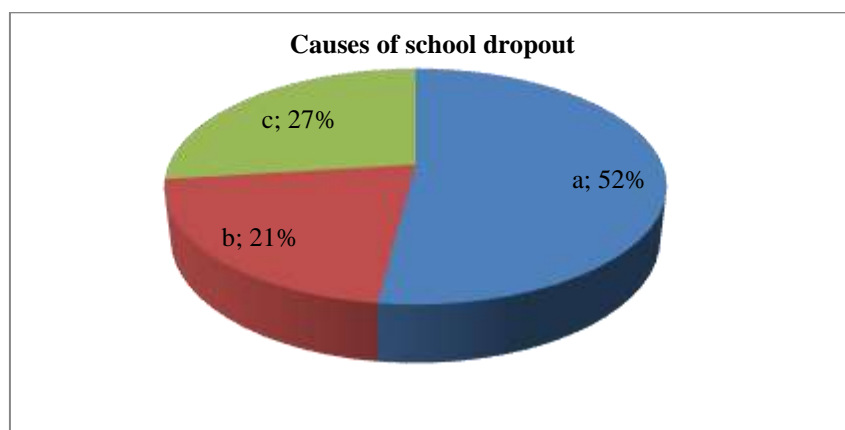


Figure 1. (a) precarious education of parents, students with one or both parents gone abroad, engaging children in household chores/seasonal work, precarious financial situation, early marriage of Roma girls; (b) the economic and social conditions in certain localities, single-parent families and lack of motivation for school; (c) disinterest in school, early marriage, precarious financial situation, parents abroad, children left in the care of grandparents or other relatives not interested in school

Responses to item 2, “Present these causes in descending order (from very important to least important)” (Figure 2), highlight in first place the precarious education of parents, the economic and social conditions in certain localities, the early marriage of Roma girls (37%), in second place, the precarious material situation, single-parent families, disinterest in school (20%), in third place, students with one or both parents abroad, lack of motivation for school (18%), in fourth place, the early marriage of Roma girls, the precarious financial situation (15%) and, in fifth place, the involvement of children in household/seasonal work (10%).

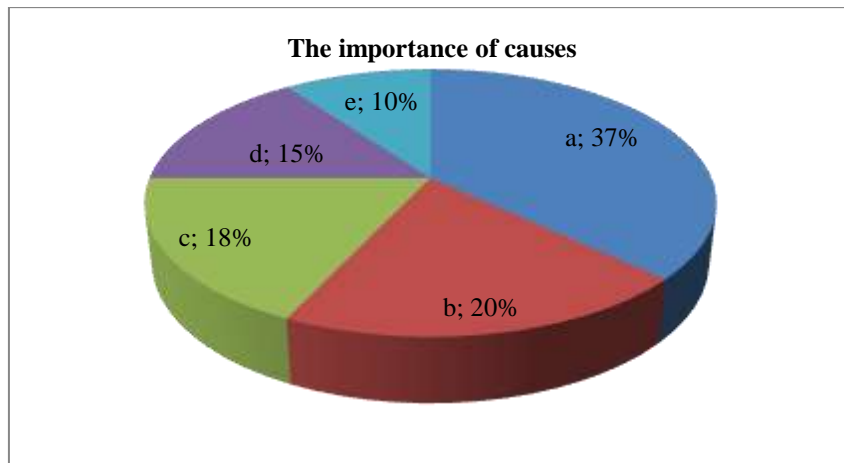


Figure 2. (a). precarious education of parents, economic and social conditions in certain localities, early marriage of Roma girls; (b). precarious material situation, single-parent families, disinterest in school; (c). students with one or both parents abroad, lack of motivation for school; (d). early marriage of Roma girls, precarious financial situation; (e). the involvement of children in household chores/seasonal work

To question 3, “What measures can be taken to eliminate or reduce early school leaving?” (Figure 3), the opinions of respondents were expressed in almost equal percentages, in first place being the school preparation of parents for their re-education and awareness of the importance of education, improving socio-economic conditions, counselling programmes for girls (35%), in second place, involving students at risk of school dropout in extracurricular activities, creating student motivation for school, introducing scholarships (33%), and in third place, implementing the “School after school” project with hot meals included, being supervised and assisted by teachers to recover/acquire knowledge, attracting projects/NGOs in order to eliminate school dropout, reimbursing transportation costs from home to school (there are also situations of children living away from school) (32%).

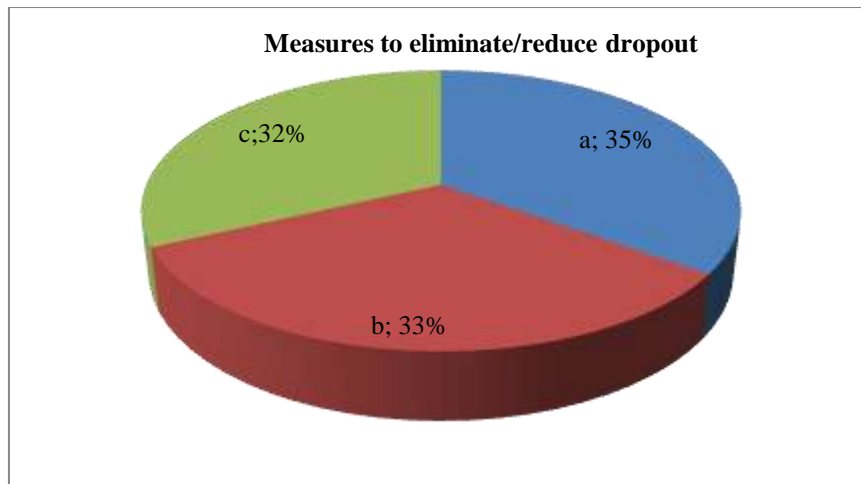


Figure 3. (a) preparation of parents for their re-education and awareness of the importance of education, improving socio-economic conditions, counselling programmes; (b) student involvement in extracurricular activities, creating student motivation for school, introducing scholarships (c). implementing the “School after school” project with hot meals included, being supervised and assisted by teachers to recover/acquire knowledge, attract projects/ NGOs in order to eliminate school dropout, reimbursing transportation costs from home to school (there are also situations of children living away from school)

Responses to question 4, “What score would you give on a scale of 1 to 5 to the following factors regarding the role they play in eliminating or reducing school dropout?” (Figure 4), highlight that the most important role is played by the family, with 5 points (56%), then the school and state or private institutions, with 4 points (24%), and the student, with 3 points (20%).

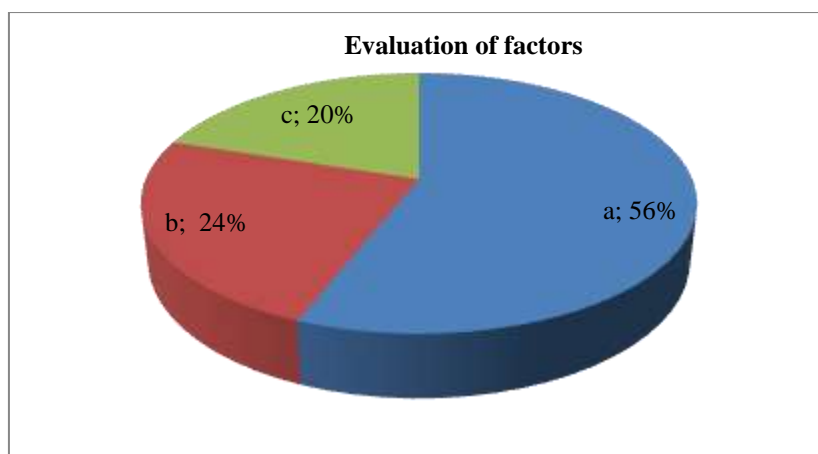


Figure 4. (a) the family; (b) the school and state or private institutions; (c). the student

To question 5, “What is the share of Roma students in the total number of children who are subjected to the phenomenon of school dropout in secondary education?” (Figure 5), most respondents (65%) believe that the specific share of Roma students is 100% of the total number

of children who drop out of school in grades 5-8, 30% think that the share is 60%, and 5% say they do not know.

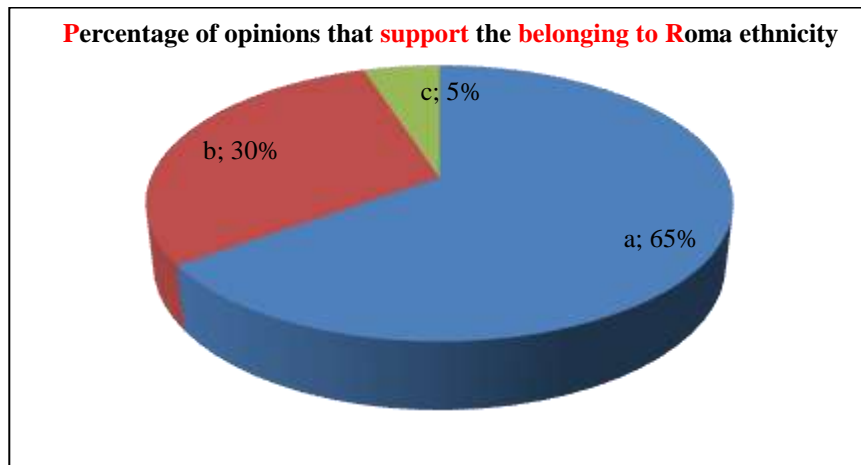


Figure 5. (a). 65% believe that 100% belong to Roma ethnicity; (b). 30% believe that 60% are Roma students; (c). 5% do not know

From the responses to question 6, “What is the importance of risk situations (vulnerability) in triggering school dropout? (Underline your rating for each situation)” (Figure 6), the following are noted as very important (55%): the risk situations (vulnerability) represented by Roma families, a parent or both working abroad, the situation of children at risk of early school leaving, at risk in the development of personal skills and with learning difficulties, development or school adaptation difficulties; as important (35%): disorganized or single-parent families, originating from child protection institutions or benefiting from another protection measure, the problem of enrolled children with a degree of disability (who have simultaneously disabilities and special educational needs); of medium importance (10%): social remigration (school and social reintegration after returning from abroad), origin, situation of immigrants/ refugees in Romania.

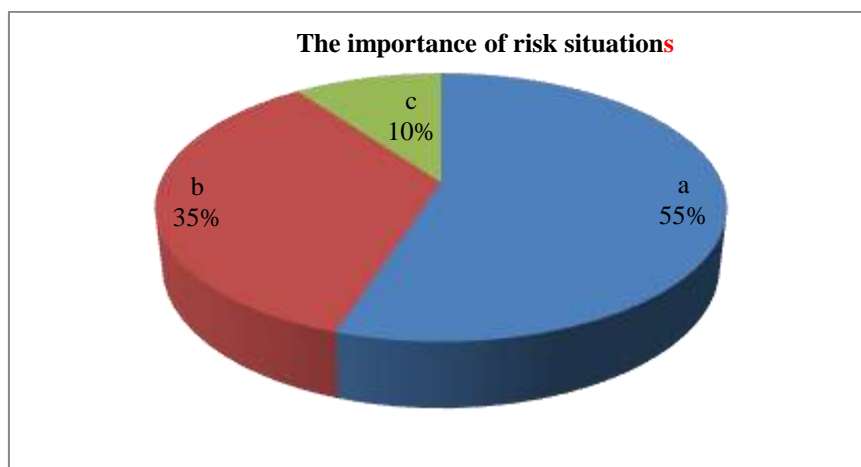


Figure 6. (a). very important; (b). important; (c). medium importance

To question 7, “Do you know any dropout situations in which children have returned to school after a certain period? Detail” (Figure 7). Very few (20%) but very interesting affirmative responses were received, such as: Yes, in our school, an 8th grade student chose to drop out of school to go abroad to take care of a relative’s child. Once there, it seems that the family wanted to exploit her and she decided to return to the country and re-enrol to complete middle school. It is a happy and very rare case!, the rest of the responses being negative (80%).

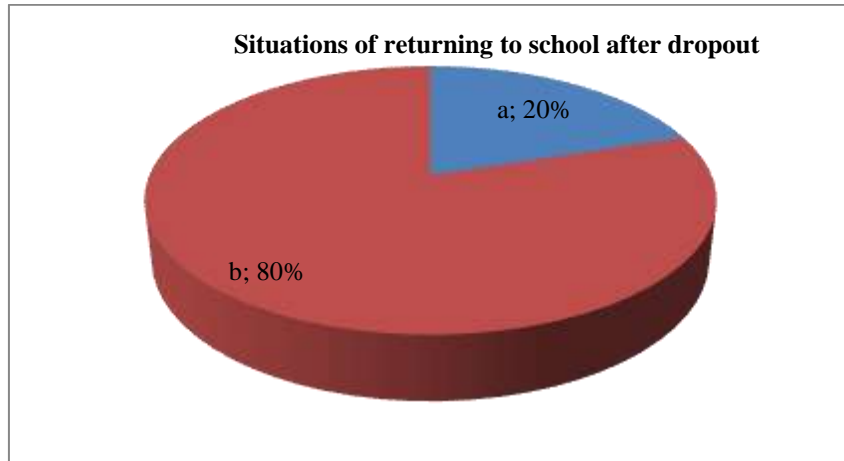


Figure 7. (a). affirmative responses; (b). negative responses

From the responses to question 8, “How do you appreciate the school-student-parent collaboration in the management of school dropout? (Underline your response)” (Figure 8), we can see that this collaboration is very important (67%) and important (33%).

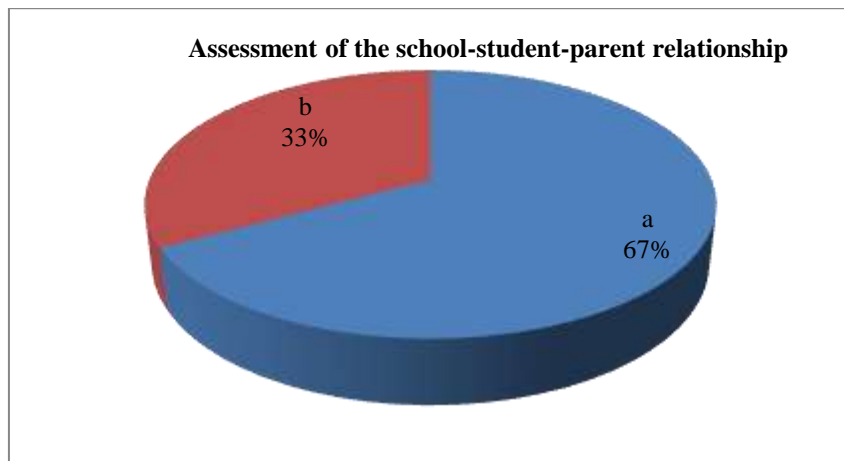


Figure 8. (a) very important; (b) important

To question 9, “Are most of the children who drop out of school boys or girls? What would be the percentages? Why?” (Figure 9), the percentages are 45% in favour of boys, 35% for girls, and 20% mention equal ratios between genders. The main reason for boys is to go to work abroad, and for girls, to marry at an early age (13-14 years).

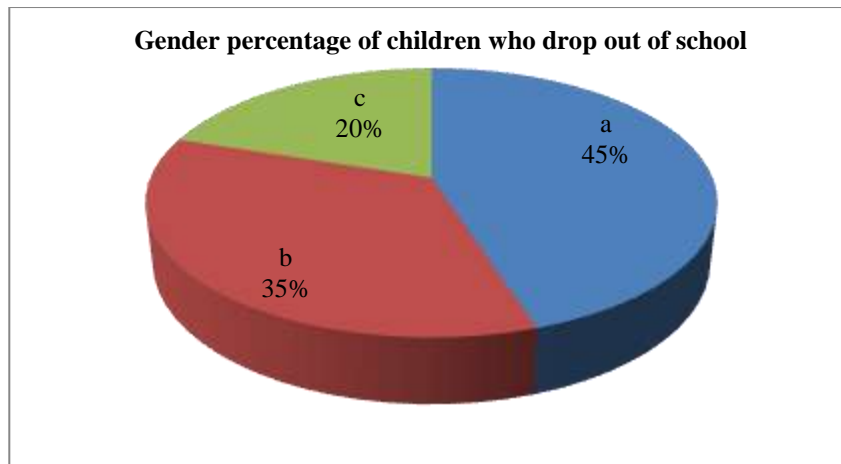


Figure 9. (a). boys; (b). girls; (c). equal ratios between genders

Responses to question 10, “What are the perspectives for students who complete the middle-school education level? Exemplify” (Figure 10), highlight the chances that students have in our society after completing eight classes. Students want to continue their studies in a percentage of 50% as follows: vocational schools 30%, high schools 17% and faculties 3%; however, a percentage of 34% do not want to continue school (boys go to work abroad, and girls get married), and 16% want to drop out of school to help their larger families (with 3-4 children).

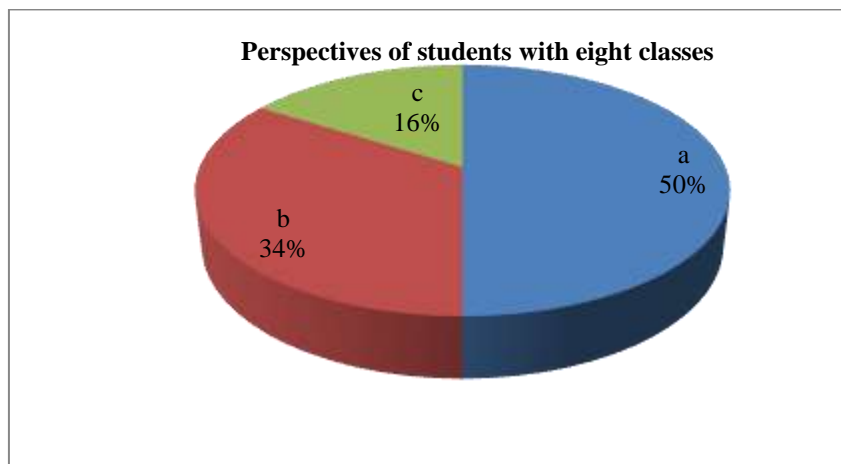


Figure 10. (a). to continue their studies; (b). not to continue school; (c). to drop out of school to help their larger families

Conclusion

In Vaslui County, school dropout is a social phenomenon that needs to be treated seriously because it has negative effects on children’s lives. The study highlighted the main causes of school dropout in this county, most of the responses (52%) mentioning the precarious education of parents, students with one or both parents abroad, children’s involvement in household chores/seasonal work, precarious financial situation, early marriage of Roma girls.

The most important measures to eliminate or reduce school dropout, which are highlighted by 78% of respondents, are the school preparation of parents for their re-education and awareness of the importance of education, improving socio-economic conditions, counselling programmes for girls, involving students at risk school dropout in extracurricular activities, creating student motivation for school and introducing scholarships.

In the prevention/reduction/elimination of school dropout, the very important role of the family is noticed (maximum score, 52% of responses), as well as the school and state or private institutions appreciated with 4 points by 24% of respondents.

Risk situations (vulnerability) represented by Roma families, a parent or both working abroad, the situation of children at risk of early school leaving, at risk in the development of personal skills and with learning difficulties, development or school adaptation difficulties (55% of responses) are noted as very important and noteworthy.

There have been fewer situations in which those who dropped out of school returned to classes after a while. Most of those who no longer choose to participate in the education process are represented by Roma children. We have also noticed that the number of boys who no longer come to school is higher than the number of girls, and the chances that students have in our society after completing eight grades are not encouraging. However, students want to continue their studies in a percentage of 50% as follows: vocational schools 30%, high school 17% and faculties 3%. Another aspect is related to the desire, ambition of some children (a small percentage of 3%) to have access to further education - high school and even university.

It is recommended to implement strategies and action plans to involve children in various enjoyable and useful activities in order to motivate them and change their attitude towards education.

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