

SOME MODALITIES REGARDING WAYS OF SPENDING FREE-TIME – AS A PREDICTOR OF SCHOLAR DROPOUT RISK

© Valentin Cosmin BLÂNDUL
(University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania)

bvali73@yahoo.com

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The importance of spending free-time wisely is highlighted because it represents a strong resource in life's quality. The ways in which people decide to spend their free-time (according to their needs, possibilities and preferences) are influenced by the concrete situation of the country itself and by the specific orientation of contemporary society. Different categories of population can build their own life styles, including the modalities of spending free-time according to their level of instruction, socio-economic status, their possibilities and interests. Unfortunately, for some pupils, the modalities in which they decide to spend their free-time represent a strong predictor of the risk of scholar dropout. This is the main reason I intend to analyze some of these factors which can conduct to the risk of early school leaving.

The sample is composed of 250 pupils, who study in the secondary level, from 5 schools from Bihor county, Romania. The instrument is represented by a questionnaire composed of 37 items and the period of research is the present academic year (2011 / 2012). The results show that the most relevant modalities for Romanian pupils to spend their free-time are represented by socialization (meeting with others, sports, talking on messenger and so on), administrative activities which involve their families (housework, helping parents to complete their financial resources, taking care of their little brothers / sisters), and intellectual activities (reading books or magazines). In the present papers these factors are analyzed because the missing of intellectual preoccupation represents a potential danger for pupils' scholar progress.

Keywords: early school leaving, free-time, scholar progress.

The problem

One of the most serious problems faced by Romania's education system is school dropout. According to *Cristina Neamțu* (2003:199), school dropout is described as the phenomenon of quitting school, that is, early leaving of the formal learning system, regardless the level that has been achieved, before obtaining a qualification confirmed by a certificate (which means the education has been started, but not completed). The pupils who drop out of school are not re-enrolled by their former educational institution and are not enrolled in alternative schooling programme either. As far as the legislation

is concerned, school dropout is an issue up to the 10th grade (that is, about the age of 16), which is the last year of compulsory education in Romania.

Scholar dropout is a very complex phenomenon with multiple causes which can determine it, and which act in interdependent manners (Neamțu, 2003).

Economic causes. The traditional view of the scholar dropout considers the poor economic situation as the main cause of producing this phenomenon, both at a macro or micro scale. The first category includes the countries that could be considered as “third world” ones, where even the scholar dropout rate for primary school can get up to 40%. However, neither the countries with better economic development aren't excluded, where the scholar dropout rate is lower in primary education, but increases in the secondary one or in the higher education. Specifically, it is appreciated that the most exposed ones are the children who come from families with low economic incomes, in direct proportion to the level of education, socio-professional status of the parents, or the family's life standard. Although education is tax free, the education of a child needs a series of financial investments (the purchase of supplies, clothing and food, various fees for some extracurricular activities and other unpredictable costs) that not everyone can afford because of the lack of money or because of the fact that this allocation to education would produce significant budget imbalance. Moreover, one can easily perceive the frustration that these children who can not afford the same things as their classmates experience. Having extended the formal education to 10-12 years complicates the situation of these young people who, because of economic reasons, are forced to focus on finding a job: for example children whose parents are temporarily working abroad to secure their family a decent lifestyle, children who remain in the care of their grandparents or other relatives and seem more vulnerable to drop out of school than their classmates who come from organized families.

Socio-cultural and religious causes. This includes the membership of a particular social class, ethnicity or race, area of origin etc. However, one of the variables that can influence school dropout is the person's gender. Thus, some researchers believe girls are more exposed to scholar dropout, because in poor communities they are targeted to domestic activities, while in wealthier communities they are easily attracted to the opposite gender, which could lead to marriage or pregnancy. Boys can assume prematurely the role of “the head of the family”, getting a job and even more responsibilities leads to early school leaving. This phenomenon seems more frequent for pupils who belong to different ethnic minorities and for those who live in rural areas. The causes for the ones who live in the rural areas are represented by the big distance between home and school, by the transport to school which is sometimes difficult, by the lack of flexibility of the academic year's structure (which does not take into account the agricultural work), by the low diversity of the curricular offer and so on.

Psychological causes. These causes appear especially when the student has different school failures. The pupil's reaction depends on the ability to mobilize the psycho-emotional and psycho-intellectual resources in order to overcome these failures, and, also, on the level of self-affirmation. The student might be motivated to overcome a difficult situation, but the persistence of such circumstances can lead to the “strategy of incompetence” – the pupil is simply incapable of comprehending the subject/subjects. Once labeled a “loser”, it is only a matter of time until the pupil becomes a “school leaver” (Messerlian & Derevensky, 2006).

Pedagogical causes. The quality of the scholar life, the relevance of content taught in relation to the students' needs, the teaching methods and the professors' styles according to the students' cognitive styles, the school's capacity of understanding the local community's problems, the scholar discipline management and so on are some pedagogical causes.

It is important to mention that all these factors do not act in isolation, but in a highly interdependence, the influence of any of them can have serious consequences in terms of scholar dropout (Nelson et al., 2009).

In many cases, the scholar dropout is related to the modality the students spend their free time. Contemporary society has progressed enormously and has diversified the leisure offer. There are a lot of situations in which, for many students, the spending of their leisure time is not a personal choice, but a necessity imposed by the conditions in which they live. For them, the options are quite limited and include, in particular, activities that can improve their family lifestyle by attracting financial incoming. There are pupils who are required to carry out the household activities, the productive activities, the commercial ones and the agricultural work in their free time. In such circumstances, one can appreciate that the duration and the manner in which pupils spend their free time is an accurate predictor of the risk of school dropout. Equally true is the fact that "free choice" activities can also lead to scholar evasion behaviors such as: truancy, scholar absenteeism and, finally, abandonment of formal education.

On the other hand, one of the most important predictor of scholar dropout could be represented by the problem of pupils' absenteeism from school. In this case, the issue of scholar absenteeism not represents the leaving school by pupils to do some extra-curricular activities, but the number of school absences recorded in scholar grade book when these ones are more than 80 per an academic year.

A transnational study conducted in 2000 and published in 2005 (the YOUNG project, p. 59) shows that the highest rate of school absenteeism was recorded in Denmark (24%), Austria was placed at the middle of the list with 14%, while the lowest values were recorded in Belgium (9%) and in Luxembourg (8%). The least punctual pupils are those from Finland and Sweden, while the Austrians and Germans are the strictest ones about observing the school timetable. Nearly 56% of the Italian pupils skip school with their parents' consent, while Austrian pupils take again a position at the middle of the list. The study also showed that in France school absenteeism increases together with the pupils' age, with values of 2% for those at the age of 13.7 for those at the age of 17 and 9% for those at the age of 19. In Italy, the minimum of compulsory school days is 200, and school attendance is mandatory in percentage of 50-70%. Finally, in England, data for the 2001-2002 school year showed that the minimum of school absenteeism rate was approximately 7.3%, with 5.9% for primary school and 8.7% for secondary school (Splevins et al., 2010). It is possible, of course, to have differences between official statistics and the real ones (the reasons could be both objective and subjective) and thus question the above figures (Chen, 2008).

As a preliminary conclusion for Romania and according those mentioned causes, we may add some more situations of pupils in extending their free time for solving some personal or familial needs imposed by their economic, social or cultural status. Therefore, the early school leaving is strong related with pupils lifestyle to solve all kind of personal / familial problems which means that spending free time by pupils is not a free option for them.

The objectives

This paper is a small part of a national project intituled “*School. My chance!*”, conducted by University of Oradea, Romania, co-financed by the *European Social Fund*, through the *Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013* (POSDRU). The main objective of the project was preventing and correcting school dropout in villages with pupils at high risk in this respect, by facilitating their access to quality formal education. The implementation period of this project was between 2010-2012 and the target group was represented by 500 pupils identified with high school dropout risk (Blandul et al., 2010).

The present study aims to identify the risk of school dropout among pupils in the rural areas, based on their favorite ways of spending their leisure time. The objectives are: (1) to establish activities that are preferred by pupils for their leisure time and (2) to determine the duration of these activities. These two indicators can provide a true image of the activities in which pupils are involved in their free time, and of their attitude towards education.

The sample

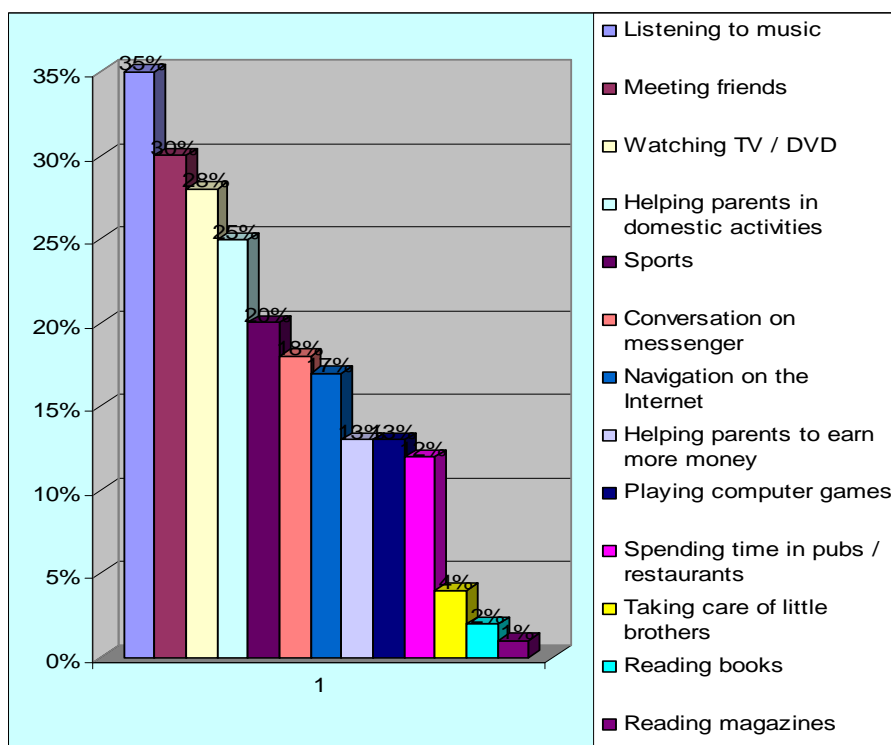
The present research is conducted in the mainstream education from the rural area Avram Iancu, Bogei, Carasau, Les and Șuncuiuș (Bihar county, Romania). The sample consisted in 500 pupils, 72% girls and 28% boys. All pupils are between 11 and 14 years old, and are enrolled in the inferior secondary school cycle. The number of subjects is divided almost equally between those 5 schools. Thus, at Avram Iancu 97 students were interviewed, at Bogei – 84 students, at Carasau – 102 students, at Les – 114 students and at Șuncuiuș – 106 students.

The instrument and procedure

In order to conduct this research, a questionnaire is administrated to the lot of subjects, which consists of 37 items grouped into the following categories: causes and consequences of early school leaving, frequency of this phenomenon, particularities of the didactic disciplines that pupils use to skip from, places where pupils agree to spend their "free time" etc. The interpretation of the results is done by calculating the frequency of the responses as it is shown by the charts.

The results

The obtained data from the quantitative interpretation is extremely interesting and relevant to the academic and the social situation of the Romanian rural environment.

Figure 1. *The hierarchy of leisure activities preferred by pupils*

Analyzing Picture 1, we can observe that socializing activities represent priorities for pupils (meeting with friends, sports, conversation on Messenger and so on). We can also observe that a relatively high percentage of subjects spend a large number of hours doing family activities or household ones, helping raise their financial income or taking care of younger brothers. Reading books or magazines are the less preferred activities, which is explained by the behavioral patterns transmitted in the family, the level of education of their parents and their living standards.

Table 1. *Number of hours allocated for the favorite activity*

No.	Activities	Not at all	< 1h	1 h	2 h	3 h	4 h and > 4 h
1	Listening to music	5%	14%	22%	12%	12%	35%
2	Meeting friends	8%	11%	16%	21%	14%	30%
3	Watching TV / DVD	4%	8%	12%	25%	23%	29%
4	Helping parents in domestic activities	8%	16%	15%	22%	14%	25%
5	Sports	13%	20%	24%	13%	10%	20%
6	Conversation on Messenger	32%	15%	15%	11%	9%	18%
7	Navigation on the Internet	27%	15%	15%	19%	7%	17%
8	Helping parents to earn more money	54%	10%	9%	6%	6%	15%
9	Playing computer games	24%	20%	20%	16%	7%	13%
10	Spending time in pubs / restaurants	59%	10%	7%	5%	6%	13%
11	Taking care of little brothers	65%	5%	6%	4%	8%	12%
12	Reading books	32%	23%	25%	10%	6%	4%
13	Reading magazines	32%	41%	17%	5%	3%	2%

Looking at Table 1, we can see that for the first four leisure activities pupils spend at least 4 hours daily. The majority of pupils allocate one hour per day for different sports, and less than one hour for virtual socializing, surfing the Internet, engaging in online games or reading books / magazines. The motivation of such options could be given by the lack of logistics (computer, Internet connection, software etc.) and limited access to printed information. Also, many pupils affirm they are very little involved in the care of younger brothers, low attendance at bars or restaurants, are not involved in helping their parents earn more money and so on. These options are also explained by taking into consideration the pupils' age, which keeps them away from such activities. However, there is a large percentage of students who spend their free time in this way, and who determine us to focus on these activities, because they can "steal" from the pupils' time allocated for school and for learning, which can lead to school dropout.

Discussion

Thus, the first factor considered a potential cause of scholar dropout is helping parents in the household activities. According to our data, 25% of pupils surveyed admitted that they do so at least 4 hours per day. Moreover, 10% of the pupils leave school because it is mandatory to help their parents solve their financial issues. The problems occur when parents know their children's scholar situation and decide not to encourage them into completing their educational development (Fullerton et al., 2010).

There are cases in which parents require their children to attend school, but only to avoid the risk of losing the allowance provided by the Romanian state - the only certain source of income for that family. Otherwise, children would be held home by parents for various works. Some children are put at work in different manners (begging, street trading, prostitution, agriculture work etc.), which are activities held together with their family, with other relatives or with their neighbors. Here are included some household activities (ex. sweeping the yard, preparing the meals for the entire family, taking care of younger siblings, doing the laundry, shopping, cleaning the house etc.), namely some leisure activities (watching TV, reading, playing computer games, and so on). The circumstances that facilitate child labor in Romania are related to other social problems such as alcohol, drugs, child abuse, the presence of physical or mental disabilities, domestic violence, a low level of education, unemployment, lack of information about children's rights etc. Most often such events occur in the rural areas where the economic and the social reality require the whole family to engage in productive activities. In addition, because the rural community is small one, its members know each other better (which causes severe social control over the individual) and possible temptations are relatively few, pupils cannot afford skipping from classes without the parental acceptance (Kempes et al., 2005).

To prevent early leaving of formal education, school plays a fundamental role, due to its position, which can initiate relationships in local community. The pupils' presence at courses is closely monitored and any failure at this level is reported promptly to those who are entitled to take decisions (Kerbs & Jolley, 2007). In the rural school, bullying and misconduct cases are quite rare, the teachers are exemplary both in school and outside it (are objective, punctual, motivated by what they do, able to mobilize others interested in problems of their pupils etc.), their communication with pupils is assertive (use first person pronouns, focus on facts and feelings), the teaching style is democratic, interactive, and so on. Such a school respects its own values and traditions, trying to engage pupils in different curricular and extracurricular activities and creating a strong organizational culture in which everyone can find themselves (Nelson et al., 2009).

Conclusion

As a conclusion, one can appreciate that the way in which pupils who are living in Romanian rural area spend their free time may be an indicator with predictive value for early school leaving. Most pupils spend their free time listening to music or watching various TV programs, but only few are those who prefer different intellectual activities (such as reading of books / magazines etc.). However, some of the surveyed pupils are involved in domestic or income generating activities to ensure a decent material standard for the whole family. In the rural area is quite natural for children to help their parents into various domestic activities, but problems can arise when it prevents them to attend the school schedule. The causes and the solutions for this negative situations are economically ones, because when the families from the rural areas - and not only them - will be able to live a decent material life, the risk of early school leaving will be considerably lower. Therefore, the school and local authorities have the duty to assist pupils who need any material support and to try helping all of them to remain in the educational system until they have graduated and have got their certificates.

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