

DISTINGUISHABLE HARDSHIPS FOR A SAMPLE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM VRANCEA COUNTY

Dan BADEA^{1*}, Doina CROITORU¹, Sorin CIOLCĂ¹, Gheorghe GRIGORE¹,
Virgil TUDOR¹, Paul DONICI², Ana GAVRILESCU³

¹ National University of Physical Education and Sports, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, Bucharest, Romania

² Nănești Secondary School, Vrancea, Romania

³ Tâmboești-Slimnic Secondary School, Vrancea, Romania

*Corresponding author: dan_badea14@yahoo.com

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Abstract. *The present research is part of the project “Sustainable social and educational integration by sport activities”. The project aims to lower truancy rates and enhance educational attainment up to ISCED3 levels. Vrancea county is characterised by a prominent level of impoverishment (below the national level) and a notable rate of school dropout during the middle school years (above the national level). Our study aims to outline the multifaceted difficulties experienced by middle school students in Vrancea County, which can be categorized into eight distinct groups. These categories include Roma students, students with one or both parents working abroad, remigrated students, students from disorganized or single-parent families, students from child protection institutions, student coming from a family of immigrants/refugees in Romania, students with disabilities, and students at risk of early school dropout. This research is of an applied nature and was carried out over a period of 3 years, focusing on students enrolled in two schools with a moderate ISCED3 transition level, comprising a total of 204 students, including 124 boys and 80 girls. It is worth noting that specific difficulties and vulnerabilities differ between genders. The risk of early school leaving, mainly due to poverty, is more prevalent among g, while belonging to the Roma ethnicity poses a greater challenge for boys. The findings from this study serve as a foundational resource for guiding the counselling activities within the project.*

Keywords: *student; risk; difficulty; structure.*

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Introduction

Education as a phenomenon is a desideratum for any natural human society. How to achieve an effective education? There are various means, with schools being a prominent one. Schools, as complex and efficient educational systems, primarily aim to nurture the physical and mental development of children.

The adequate space and ambience, the scientific, practical (including physical education and sports) and artistic contents, as well as the specific methods, make the teaching-learning-evaluation processes to contribute to the assimilation of a well-defined value system. But

before the structured educational process begins, the first decision-maker in the children's lives, the parents, are those who play a very important role in the realization of the educational foundation. Bastos & Machado (2018) found that „children constitute the age group experiencing the worst poverty and social exclusion trajectories”.

Parents play a crucial role in supporting children's transition to school and are acknowledged as their child's first and foremost important teacher. If they have problems (the reasons being of a very different nature: economic, social, religious, cultural, etc.) the first steps can turn into a perpetual failure. Tarusha (2014) underline that „reasons for school dropout are not found in the educational institution. Most of the researchers see the causes for school dropout as, educational, social, familiar, and individual as well in the mutual interaction of these factors”

Students from disadvantaged social categories are in a higher risk of truancy and dropping out of school. External factors of socio-economic nature - such as the economic and financial situation of the family, the lack of clothing and footwear, the housing conditions, the disaggregation of the family, the lack of help in education - play an important role in terms of participation in education. Along with them are the internal factors - such the student's inadequacy regarding the learning activity performed in the school environment (Gyönös, 2011). At the same time, in the context of secondary education, we highlight a constant erosion of the value of most of the mentioned indicators, for children from families at risk of marginalization in rural areas. Thus, at the age of 14, only 60% of the children from rural areas still attend secondary education (Horga et al., 2017). This phenomenon is not specific to our country, and it is in the interest of specialists from other areas of the world.

The high rates of school dropout worldwide and their relevance highlight the need for a close study of its causes and consequences. Literature has suggested that school dropout might be explained by multiple causes, at different levels (individual, family, school, and neighbourhood). Thus, the purpose of some studies in this area is to examine the relationship between the individual (defiant attitude, irresponsibility, alcohol abuse, and illegal drugs use), family (educational figure absent and parental monitoring), school-related factors (truancy and school conflict), and school dropout (Fernández-Suárez et al., 2016)

The investigation carried out by Fernandez-Haddad & Gonzalez (2021) focused on a population segment of young people of low socio-economic status, residing in highly marginalized urban areas in Mexico City: “Students dropping out of school in Mexico is a social problem at the national level, as the number of children and young students who decide to abandon their academic preparation is increasing”.

At the same time, in Australia, Tayler et al. (2015) underline that “family contexts and children's childhood education and care (ECEC) program pathways are diverse, and processes for addressing learning and development difficulties are at the discretion of the early educators who support children within typical everyday programs”. In this direction, “The agenda for sustainable development 2030” has been established and approved by the general assembly of the United Nations in 2015. This agenda includes 17 goals, adopted by several countries in order to promote the development of local communities by tackling and reducing the consequences of school dropout (Wedjou, 2020).

Early school leaving among children is a phenomenon that directly leads to social exclusion and has an impact both at the individual level and at the level of the community. Social exclusion is coupled with adverse effects on the physical and mental health of an individual;

for instance, ostracism or exclusion from society or a group “is a ubiquitous phenomenon across the lifespan that threatens the fundamental human need to belong to a group” (Pollatos et al., 2015).

To prevent early school leaving, programs carried out outside the school are being developed internationally. Sport, a human activity that aims to produce aesthetic values and uses means of expression with a specific character, is an option for such programs, determining “recruitment and retention of target populations with multiple risk factors; long-term skill development that engages youth behaviourally, emotionally, and academically rather than a drop-in culture; an emphasis on the critical ingredient of real-world applications through performance; staff development and mentoring; a strategic community-level plan for dropout prevention and program content reframed toward competencies that underlie better school performance and prosocial behaviour, such as communication, initiative, problem solving, motivation, and self-efficacy” (Charmaraman & Hall, 2011).

The study of Yassin (2020) clarifies the factors that contribute to the increasing dropout rate of children, particularly among girls, by interviewing research participants, and making a detailed review of available literature. The author analysed the factors contributing to the dropout of girls and concluded that “the major factors are (1) economic factors (e.g. poverty and migration to foreign countries to earn a living) (2) household level factors (e.g. child labour) (3) school level factors (e.g. distance), and (4) cultural factors (e.g. early marriage)”. So “a sociodemographic profile of dropout for the study group shows how dropout rates vary across different configurations of background risk factors including family socioeconomic status (SES), family type, and family stress level” (Alexander et al., 2021)

Choi and Calero (2018) summarized that „early school leavers are at a high risk of social exclusion. Early school leaving is directly linked to unemployment, social exclusion, poverty, and poor health”. Material deprivation and poverty are perceived as predominant in most of the communities, especially in rural areas, with a population of over 30-40% of Roma ethnicity, located more than 20 km from a city that offers increased work opportunities” (Ilisei, 2016). Among the EU countries, in 2020, Romania recorded the highest rate of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (41.5%), followed by Bulgaria (36.2%), Spain (31.8%) and Greece (31.5%)” (Eurostat, 2020). This will lead to social pain, anxiety, sadness, and loneliness (Hawkey et al., 2011), as the need to belong is an essential, strong, and persistent motivation in the life of any human being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The current study

Vrancea County is one of the counties with the highest level of poverty in Romania. At the same time, it has a high number of early school leaving at the secondary level and, consequently, presents a structure of specific vulnerabilities for this segment of the school population. This research depicts the structure of difficulties that are specific to the secondary school population in this county. The data we have gathered will serve as the foundation for the counselling sessions integrates into our project. While the categorization of students into risk groups guided the selection of schools, it is important to recognize that each generation is different, and therefore, the approach of the counsellor must be tailored to their specific needs.

Methodology

Participants

The subjects participating in the research are 204 students of two schools: Nănești Secondary School, and Slimnic-Tâmboiești Secondary School (Vrancea county, Romania). Both schools are from rural areas, had a low cumulative accession to the next ISCED level (51.87% in 2019), and a total of 12471 absences in the school year 2018-2019.

Procedure

The research was carried out over a period of 3 years, between 2019 and 2022. To involve these two schools in our project, all parents/guardians provided their consent for participation and completed a declaration indicating their status as part of a vulnerable category and for avoidance of double funding. This declaration is presented below (Project PNP001 “Sustainable social and educational integration through sports activities”).

Declaration of Vulnerable Category status and Prevention of Double Funding:

The undersigned (family name, first name) _____,
residing in the locality _____, county _____, street
_____, no. ___ building ____, apartment ____, phone number _____,
holder of ID series ____ number _____, issued by _____, on _____, Social Security
Number _____, parent/guardian of the minor _____,
Social Security Number _____, student at school _____,
grade _____, in the locality _____,

I declare, under my own responsibility, that the minor is not currently participating in any projects, whether in their implementation phase or during the sustainability period, aimed at delivering educational services that require the engagement of at-risk children in integrated sports activities, such as those provided by the National University of Physical Education and Sport in Bucharest within the “Sustainable social and educational integration through sports activities” project, PNP001, as part of the “Local development, poverty reduction and increasing Roma inclusion” programme for 2014-2021.

Furthermore, I hereby provide the following declaration regarding the minor’s eligibility for inclusion in one or more vulnerability categories:

- the minor is at risk of early school dropout;
- the minor belongs to Roma ethnicity;
- the minor has one or both parents working abroad;
- the minor has re-migrated and needs support for school and social reintegration after coming back from abroad;
- the minor is from a disorganised or single-parent family;
- the minor is from a child protection institution or benefits from another protection measure;

- the minor belongs to a family of immigrants/refugees in Romania;
- the minor is classified as a person with special educational needs;
- the minor is classified as a disabled person.

I have acknowledged that my false statement leads to the following consequences:

- exclusion of the minor from the activities carried out within the project until the discovery of the false statement;
- legal responsibility for any possible prejudice caused to the National University of Physical Education and Sport in Bucharest.

Date _____

Clear full name of the parent/legal guardian _____

Signature of the parent/legal guardian _____

Thus, the ethical principles were respected, and by filling in the questionnaire, the parents agreed to the participation and classification of the minor in one or more vulnerabilities. Anonymity and confidentiality of the data were ensured (documents related to the PNP001 project). Participation was voluntary and the subjects could withdraw from the project at any time.

The research methods used were scientific documentation, survey, statistical-mathematical method, and graphical method.

Results

Data were collected related to the students' classification into one or more categories of specific difficulties. After the parents/guardians of the students completed the declaration regarding their status as belonging to a vulnerable category, we proceeded to analyse the data. Subsequently, we grouped the data into 2 categories: 5th and 6th grades (representing level I of middle school), and 7th and 8th grades (representing level II of middle school).

The specific difficulties targeted in the research were: the student is of Roma ethnicity; the student is at risk of early school leaving for reasons other than those listed below, such as coming from a socially-assisted family, cohabitation with other students at risk of early school leaving, other forms of poverty, etc.; the student is from a disorganized or single-parent family; the student is enrolled as a student with special educational needs; one or both parents are abroad.

Following the completion of the declaration on belonging to a vulnerable category filled by the students' parents, we processed the data, and we obtained the following results at the level of the rural secondary school, in Vrancea County.

In three years, we recorded a total of 204 students in the secondary school, of which 80 are girls (39.21%) and 124 are male (60.78%). The predominant specific declared challenge is represented by the segment of students who are at risk of early school leaving, 94 students (46.07%) respectively. The second specific difficulty, by a small difference, is represented by the Roma segment of the school population, 91 students (44.60%). This result is in line with the data provided by the national statistics on school dropout in rural areas (15%), and school losses (18.7%). The next specific difficulty identified at the level of secondary school students is represented by the segment of students with one or both parents working abroad, 9 students

(4.41%), and students coming from broken families or single-parent families - 6 students (2.94%). The smallest share among specific difficulties is represented by the school population with special educational needs - 4 students (1.96%). Thus, we found that the structure of the specific difficulties at the level of the middle school, for our sample from Vrancea County, with a difference of less than 1.5 percentage points, is dominated by the risk of early school leaving and belonging to the Roma ethnicity.

Among boys, the most prevalent specific difficulty is associated with students belonging to the Roma ethnicity, accounting for 63 students (50.80%) of the total. The second most significant challenge is posed by the group of students at risk of early school leaving, comprising 51 students (41.12%). Following this, we have a specific difficulty observed among boys, represented by students with one or both parents working abroad, which includes 6 students (4.83%). A smaller group consists of students with special educational needs, totalling 3 boys (2.41%). The lowest representation among specific difficulties pertains to students originating from disorganized or single-parent families, with just 1 student (0.80%). For girls, the predominant specific challenge is linked to the population of students at risk of early school leaving, with 43 students (53.75%) of the total students falling into this category. The second most substantial difficulty encountered among female students relates to their belonging to the Roma ethnicity, encompassing 28 girls (35%). Following this, we observe a specific difficulty among the female sample, which consists of students coming from broken or single-parent families, comprising 5 girls (6.25%). Additionally, there is a population of schoolgirls with one or both parents working abroad, consisting of 3 students (3.75%). The smallest representation among specific difficulties is attributed to students with special educational needs, which includes only 1 student (1.25%).

The comparative analysis reveals a higher prevalence of the challenge related to the risk of early school leaving among girls compared to boys. Conversely, when considering the students as a whole, a notable portion of the challenges is attributed to belonging to the Roma ethnicity. The remaining specific difficulties constitute smaller proportions within the overall vulnerability structure, accounting for 8.04% among boys and 11.25% among girls.

Table 1. *General results at the middle school cycle (5th to 8th grade)*

	GIRLS - 80		BOYS - 124		TOTAL - 204	
ROMA	28	35,00%	63	50,80%	91	44,60%
OTHER	43	53,75%	51	41,12%	94	46,07%
DSF	5	6,25%	1	0,80%	6	2,94%
PWA	3	3,75%	6	4,83%	9	4,41%
SER	1	1,25%	3	2,41%	4	1,96%

Note: Legend: ROMA - the student is of Roma ethnicity; PWA - the student has one or both parents working abroad; DSF - the student is from disorganized or single parent family; OTHER – the student is at risk of early school leaving due to causes other than those listed below such as coming from a socially-assisted family, cohabitation with other students at risk of early school leaving, other forms of poverty, etc., SER – special educational requirements.

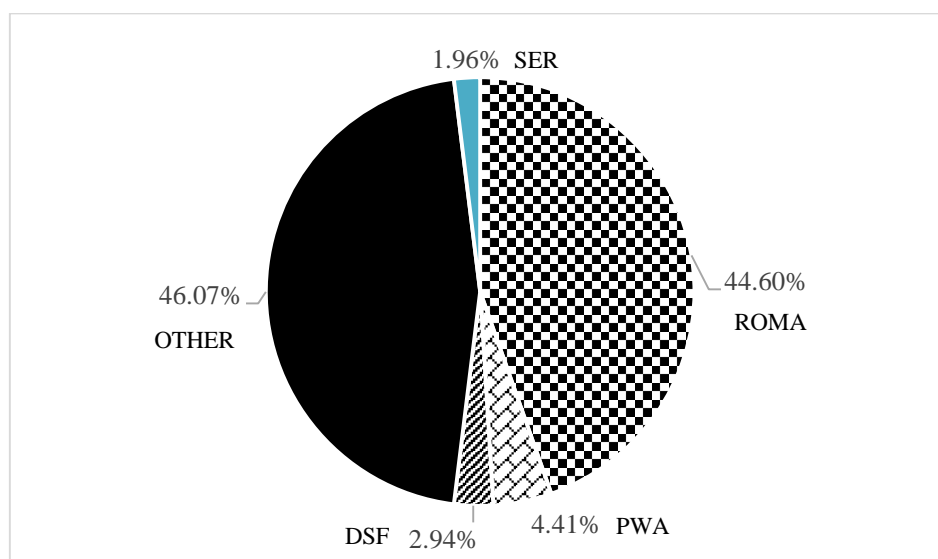


Figure 1. Distinguishable challenges – General results

For a comprehensive understanding of the specific challenges, we have processed and interpreted the data at the level of middle school grades as follows: the 5th and 6th grade, representing school segment I, the 7th and 8th grades, representing school segment II.

For level I we have the following findings:

- ✓ Throughout the research we registered a total of 128 students in the first secondary school, comprising 58 females (45.31%) and 70 males (54.68%). The predominant specific difficulty is associated with students at risk of early school leaving, totalling 59 students (46.09%). The second most prominent difficulty, with a minor difference, is related to the Roma segment of students, encompassing 57 students (44.53%). Additionally, we identified specific difficulties among secondary school students I, including students with one or both parents working abroad, involving 5 students (3.90%), and students originating from disorganized or single-parent families, comprising 4 students (3.12%). The least represented group among specific difficulties pertains to students with special educational needs, amounting to 3 students (2.34%). In summary, it is evident that the structure of the specific difficulties at the level of the secondary cycle I in Vrancea County is primarily characterized by the challenges of *early school leaving and belonging to the Roma ethnicity*.
- ✓ For boys, the prevailing specific difficulty is the status of belonging to the Roma ethnicity, comprising 36 students (51.42%) of the total secondary school I students. The second big difficulty is revealed by the segment of students at risk of early school leaving, namely 29 students, (41.42%). The next specific difficulty identified among male students is represented by the population of students who have one or both parents working abroad, respectively 3 students (4.28%). Students with special educational needs were 2 (2.85%). The segment of pupils coming from disorganized or single-parent families is not represented in secondary school I students.
- ✓ For girls, the predominant specific difficulty is represented by the population of students who are at risk of early school leaving, with 30 students (51.72%) from total students in

secondary school I. The second greatest difficulty identified among female students is the affiliation to the Roma ethnicity, namely 21 girls, 36.20%. The next challenge identified at the level of the female population is represented by the segment of students coming from disorganized or single-parent families, respectively 4 girls (6.89%), and the population of schoolgirls with one or both parents working abroad, comprising 2 girls, 3.44%. The group with the lowest representation among specific difficulties comprises girls with special educational needs, consisting of only 1 student (1.72%).

- ✓ A comparative analysis reveals a higher risk of early school leaving among girls compared to boys, with a difference of over 15%. Instead, when considering the entire student population, the most significant difficulty is attributed to belonging to the Roma ethnicity, with a difference of 10% from the next most prevalent difficulty. The remaining specific difficulties hold relatively small shares within the vulnerability structure for both girls and boys.

Table 2. Results of middle school segment I

	GIRLS - 58		BOYS - 70		TOTAL - 128	
ROMA	21	36,20%	36	51,42%	57	44,53%
OTHER	30	51,72%	29	41,42%	59	46,09%
DSF	4	6,89%	0	0%	4	3,12%
PWA	2	3,44%	3	4,28%	5	3,90%
SER	1	1,72%	2	2,85%	3	2,34%

Legend: ROMA - the student is of Roma ethnicity; PWA - the student has one or both parents working abroad; DSF - the student is from disorganized or single parent family; OTHER – the student is at risk of early school leaving due to causes other than those listed below such as coming from a socially assisted family, cohabitation with other students at risk of early school leaving, other forms of poverty, etc., SER – special educational requirements.

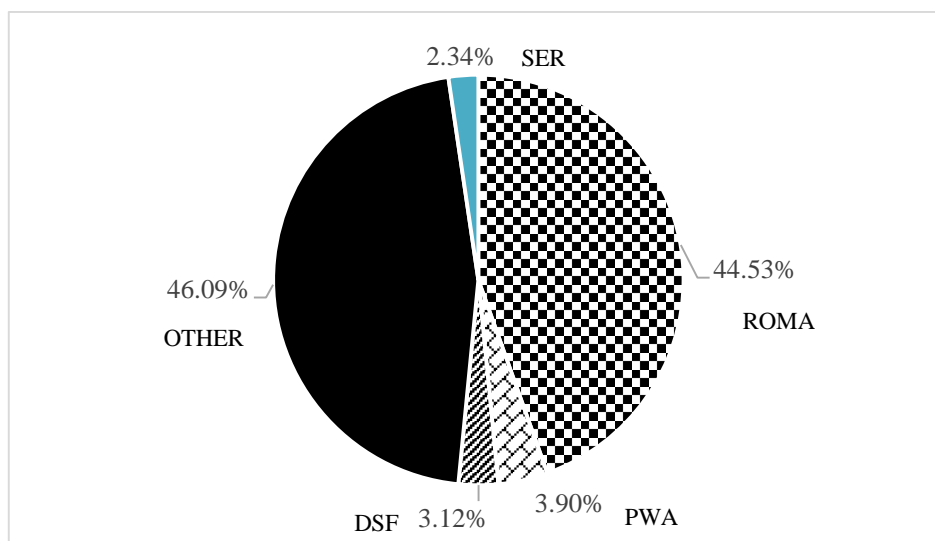


Figure 2. Distinguishable difficulties – middle school segment I

At the secondary level II we have the following findings:

- ✓ out of the total of 76 students in secondary school segment II we registered 22 females (28.94%), and 54 male (71.05%). The specific difficulty that occupies the first place is

represented by the segment of students who are at risk of early school leaving, comprising 35 students (46.05%). The second specific difficulty in terms of share, with a very small difference, is represented by the Roma segment of the school population, with 34 students (44.73%). The next specific difficulty identified at the level of secondary school students II is represented by the segment of students who have one or both parents working abroad, respectively 4 students (5.26%), and students coming from disorganized or single-parent families, comprising 2 students (2.63%). The lowest share among specific difficulties is represented by the school population with special educational needs, with just 1 student (1.31%). Thus, we note that the structure of the specific difficulties at the level of the secondary cycle II, Vrancea County, like the results presented above, is *dominated by the risk of early school leaving and belonging to the Roma ethnicity*.

- ✓ For boys, the specific difficulty with the highest share is represented by students belonging to the Roma ethnicity, accounting for 27 pupils (50.00%) of the total from the secondary segment II. The second most significant difficulty is related to students at risk of early school leaving, comprising 22 students (40.74%). Following that, we have the segment of students who have one or both parents working abroad, comprising 3 students (5.55%), and students with special educational needs, with only 1 student (1.85%). The smallest share of students coming from broken or single-parent families is represented by 1 student (1.85%).
- ✓ For girls, the predominant specific difficulty is represented by the population of students who are at risk of early school leaving, accounting for 13 students, which is 59.09% of the total in the secondary segment II. The second most significant difficulty is found in students belonging to the Roma ethnicity, comprising 7 students (31.81%). The next difficulty identified among the female population is related to students from disorganized or single-parent families, involving 1 student (4.54%), and the population of female students with one or both parents working abroad, also consisting of 1 student (4.54%). It's worth noting that the segment of students with special educational needs is not represented in our secondary school level II.
- ✓ A comparative analysis reveals a higher share of the risk of early school leaving among girls compared to boys, with a significant difference of over 27%. Conversely, for boys, the main difficulty is attributed to belonging to the Roma ethnicity, with a significant difference of almost 10% from the next prevalent difficulty. The remaining specific difficulties hold relatively small shares within the structure of vulnerabilities for both girls and boys.

Table 3. Results for middle school segment II

	GIRLS - 22		BOYS - 54		TOTAL - 76	
ROMA	7	31,81%	27	50,00%	34	44,73%
OTHER	13	59,09%	22	40,74%	35	46,05%
DSF	1	4,54%	1	1,85%	2	2,63%
PWA	1	4,54%	3	5,55%	4	5,26%
SER	0	0%	1	1,85%	1	1,31%

Legend: ROMA - the student is of Roma ethnicity; PWA - the student has one or both parents working abroad; DSF - the student is from disorganized or single parent family; OTHER – the student is at risk of early school leaving due to causes other than those listed below such as coming from a socially assisted family, cohabitation with other students at risk of early school leaving, other forms of poverty, etc., SER – special educational requirements.

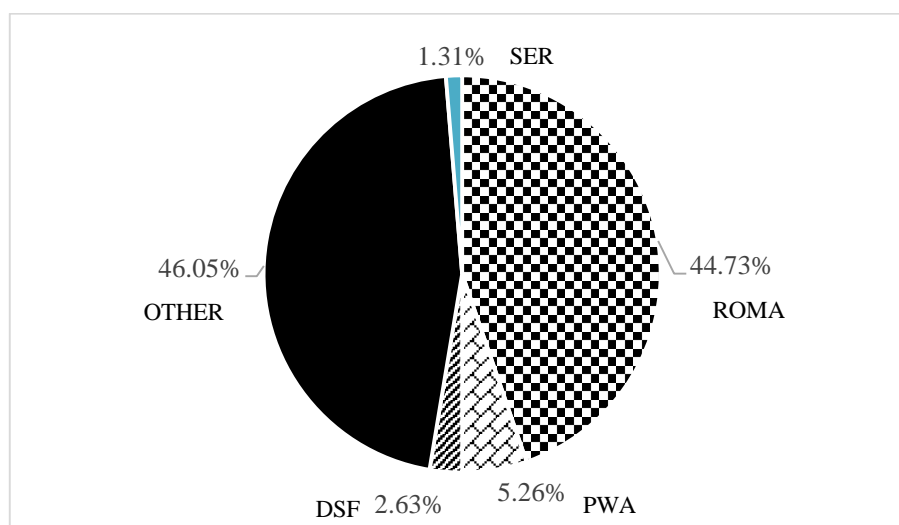


Figure 3. Distinguishable difficulties – middle school segment II

Using the Spearman correlation, we verified if there is a link between the number of students experiencing certain difficulties/ vulnerabilities in the secondary school I segment, separately for boys and girls, and the number of students in the middle school segment II. The resulting correlation coefficient was determined as $r_s = 0.89$, $p < 0.01$. The effect size value (indicated by the coefficient of determination r^2) is 0.79, emphasizing a very strong association between variables (for effect size index interpretation see, for example, Predoiu, 2020). Therefore, there is a relatively similar distribution of students with difficulties / vulnerabilities between the two segments of secondary school.

Discussions and Conclusions

The evolution in the composition of the student group by gender, as observed in this study, has been previously documented by other authors in Romania – "the gender disparities in the rate of school dropout per cohort reveal that more boys than girls tend to discontinue their education during secondary education" (Horga et al., 2017).

Previous studies carried out in the northeastern region of the country have indicated that the predominant vulnerability at the secondary school level is the risk of early school leaving, accounting for 46.31% (Badea et al., 2020), which also constitutes the main vulnerability among girls in the Vrancea region. In contrast, for boys in the Vrancea region, the main vulnerability pertains to their belonging to the Roma ethnicity, with a share of 50.80%.

Aligned with these concerns is the project "Equal opportunities in education for an inclusive society", within the Sectoral Operational Program for Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013 (POS DRU/91/2.2/S/60443). The findings from this project underscore that Roma children face a sixfold higher likelihood of dropping out of school compared to non-Roma children.

In our research, we have identified a general percentage of students at risk of early school leaving of 46.07%. Findings from the POS DRU/91/2.2/S/60443 project, mentioned above, emphasized that the most significant indicator contributing to the risk of school dropout among

students was the perception of the school as an unfriendly or unfamiliar environment. Specifically, 64.1% of students who regarded school as a “place where they do not like to go” ended up dropping out, while only 12.3% of those who perceived school as a “friendly environment where they enjoy going”, discontinued their education.

The present study highlights the structure of the student group, by gender, at the level of middle school level in Vrancea County, as follows. Overall, there is a noticeable male majority, with a dominant proportion, particularly regarding school dropout rates during secondary education. Regarding the predominant vulnerabilities at the secondary school level, two specific vulnerabilities stand out: firstly, the risk of early school leaving linked to factors such as coming from a socially assisted family, cohabitating with other students at risk of early school leaving, and other forms of poverty; secondly, belonging to the Roma ethnicity.

While there is a marginal difference in favour of the risk of early school leaving within the general sample between these two specific difficulties, the gender breakdown reveals distinct patterns. For girls, the structure of vulnerabilities is similar to the general structure of specific difficulties, but with a higher proportion of the risk of early school leaving. Other specific difficulties carry lesser weight within the vulnerability structure. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the primary specific difficulty differs by gender; the risk of early school leaving, for girls, and belonging to the Roma ethnicity, for boys.

The comparative analysis between the secondary school segments I and II reveals a similarity in the structure of vulnerabilities. It underscores a significant difference between genders, with a higher prevalence of the risk of early school leaving among girls compared to boys. We note that for boys, the main specific difficulty predominantly stems from belonging to the Roma ethnicity, whereas the other specific difficulties have limited impact within the vulnerability structure, both for girls and boys.

Furthermore, there is a relatively even distribution of students (both boys and girls) facing difficulties / vulnerabilities across the examined segments of secondary school: the 5th and 6th grades, representing school segment I, and the 7th and 8th grades, representing segment II.

These findings offer valuable insights for specialists working with pre-teens who participated in our research, enabling them to maximize the effectiveness of their interventions by considering the specific vulnerabilities of the participants. The results were used as a starting point to substantiate the counselling activity carried out in our project.

Author Contribution: All authors contributed equally to this study and are recognized as main contributors.

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Data Availability Statement: Data are available upon request to the contact author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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