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## **Actors and key resources in facilitating the transition of students from one school cycle to another**

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**Abstract.** Currently, many researchers are focusing on the educational environment to assess the impact of the pandemic on the educational success of pre-university or even university students. Most of the hypotheses are related to the influence of the alternative teaching methods used during the pandemic on the school results, on the socio-emotional situation and on the resources available to students and teachers to respond better to the new format of teaching and assessment in times of crisis. In this context, it is highly unlikely that the results of such studies will be interpreted in light of the challenges already existing in a pre-pandemic education system. The paper we propose brings into question exactly this general context, offering researchers a benchmark in their analysis regarding the impact of the pandemic on the Romanian educational environment. We base our approach on the results of a qualitative research undertaken in educational institutions in the North-East Region of Romania. The research included interviewing 60 teachers, using the in-depth interview to capture the difficulties that students and teachers face in successfully ensuring the school transition. The results of our study highlight aspects related to key actors that can support the successful implementation of the school transition, existing barriers and resources needed to facilitate the school transition.

**Keywords.** School transition, COVID-19, pandemic, family-school partnership, sociological research

### **1. Introduction**

Throughout the world, numerous surveys and papers at European and international level highlight education as a sustainable solution to global, regional and national difficulties, from social or economic to cultural or political.

Some landmarks of the current education system viewed from a dynamic perspective were the starting points in conducting this research.

In a summary article on the transition from one school year to another, van Rens, Haelermans, Groot (2018) emphasize that all students are affected by accessing a new stage of their schooling, but the development of positive relationships and good Communication between all stakeholders is essential for a successful transition. Călin, Rus and Sandu (2021, p. 60) point out “school starts with the family”. Moreover, Vogler, P., Crivello, G., Woodhead,

M. (2008) and Elder (1998) point out that the education deficit accumulated in the first years of life is transmitted in the later stages of development and initial training of the student.

Recent research draws our attention to the importance of understanding the barriers to the transition from one school year to another. In general, the analysed studies indicate that the transition from primary to secondary school "may illicit social and emotional challenges for the students" (Spernes, 2020, p. 13).

However, Romania has many challenges in terms of its education system: high early school leaving rates (16.6% in 2020), a high proportion of 15-year-olds with poor reading, science and maths (approximately 47%), and low investment in education (3.2% of gross domestic product [GDP]) (European Commission, 2020). Existing challenges in education have influenced the process of transitioning students from one school year to another and have raised ongoing issues regarding education reform: educational inequalities, future competencies, adapted curriculum, school infrastructure and quality of education etc.

Research in the field has shown that the current education system in Romania has many "serious intrinsic issues of efficiency, equity, quality and relevance to the knowledge economy" (Stanef, Manole, 2013).

Vlăsceanu (2020, p. 14) mentions that the failure of the personal development of most students is "a failure of the organization of schools and of the ways of transmitting scientific knowledge".

## **2. Research methodology**

This research aims to identify the difficulties encountered in the successful implementation of the school transition of students from one school cycle to another, the main resources needed and the key actors who could support this initiative, from the desire to discover solutions and subsequently, to be used in specific contexts.

The qualitative study aims to assess the perception of teachers (educators, teachers, school principals) in three communities in Northeastern Romania in relation to a number of issues relevant to the impact that these aspects have on the successful implementation of the students' school transition. The research was conducted between May 2020 and June 2020.

The methodological approach is of a qualitative type. The information was obtained through 60 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with educators, teachers and professors from the mentioned communities. The interview guide was structured on several topics/subtopics/codes that closely followed the purpose and achievement of the research objectives. Topics covered include:

- a. Actors who can support the process of successful implementation of the school transition;
- b. Barriers identified in solving the problems related to the school transition;
- c. Resources needed to facilitate a good school transition.

We have chosen to use the interview for several reasons: it is flexible and exploratory; certain situations force the researcher to choose this type of interview because the environment, the context do not allow the use of the structured interview (Roman, 2009, p, 83); the researcher has the opportunity to use his knowledge and skills to explore unexpected topics and ideas; at the same time, it gives us a detailed picture of the experiences of people in the community, with the participants in the interview being able to describe in their own words what is significant or important to them; allows the researcher to examine more details, to ensure that participants interpret the questions in the way he intended (Nils, Rime, 2007, p. 213).

### **3. Thematic analysis of data**

#### **3.1. Actors who can support the process of successful implementation of the school transition**

Research participants agree that the key people who can support the process of successful implementation of the school transition are: parents, teachers, school counsellor, school management, school principal, decision makers; each teacher and his desire to do everything right.

*Teachers, students, parents and the community should be involved to ensure a successful school transition (PG3).*

All the actors who can support the process of successful implementation of the school transition mentioned by the respondents, not only consider in their action decisions the relationship between their resources, costs and benefits involved, but are usually able to choose the optimal path for successful implementation of the students' school transition.

According to the respondents, first of all, *the parents are the ones who should talk to the child (PG4) and explain to him what changes take place when he goes to school, after he has finished kindergarten.*

Then, *the teacher* is the one who should prepare the child in the fourth grade, for the transition from primary to secondary school. Explain to him everything he needs to know (about the large number of teachers, about the grading system, timetable, etc.) so that he is familiar with the changes that will occur (PG4).

An important role, in the opinion of the respondents, is played by the *class leader* who can answer and transmit the information necessary for the school transition.

Another actor who could be involved in providing advice is the school counselor in the schools where he exists. He can give advice to children (especially when it comes to 7th and 8th grade) about the school transition and its "challenges". Students *should be encouraged to manage their own entry into another schooling cycle and to develop autonomous and (self) reflective learning skills (PG3).*

Actors who can support the successful implementation of the school transition work in a closed circuit where everyone depends on everyone (I11).

*In vain the teachers would struggle for the students, if the parents at home do not follow the same principles, they even influence him negatively, telling him all kinds of stories. A little girl in the preparatory class, who has a newborn sibling at home, said to me, "I don't want to go to school in first grade because my brother will tear and scribble all my notebooks and books, and the teacher will scold me ... my brother will always bother me when I start learning" (I11).*

As a way of involvement, the I11 respondent first suggests that teachers focus on gentle education, and then organize small school meetings with high school students, small schoolchildren, as guests, to participate in the lessons given by teachers in older classes, to address, during the teaching hours, specific topics of self-knowledge, development and consolidation of self-esteem etc. and organize tutorials with parents or even counselling and guidance activities, together with the school psychologist etc.

### **3.2. Barriers identified in solving the problems related to the school transition**

The research highlighted the following types of barriers that can hinder a student's transition from one school year to another:

- *situational* (health problems, family problems, lack of money or time spent on school activities, etc.)
- *dispositional*, correlated with the variables: level of school cycle, age of the child and the child's attitude towards school activities,
- *institutional* (those practices that may discourage the student in his formative approach).

Respondents cite teacher's subjectivism as a factor that can influence students' schooling. Sympathies or dislikes, without foundation (I5) or the negative attitude of the teacher towards the student (I9). *I was always compared to a few colleagues. "Look how well Olguta is learning. Here's Marian getting ready for today. These are children of the Olympics. Bravo! You, will not even take the BAC" (I11).*

In a more detailed version, these are:

- *Physical, psychological, semantic barriers (I2).*

Health, physical or mental problems influence the child's ability and motivation to learn. Not infrequently, teachers mentioned that: the curriculum is difficult, teaching is done at an average level, and we cannot put very high requirements. Why? Because we have no one to work with (I1).

- *Structural barriers*

These include issues such as the difficulty of accessing education due to the socio-economic level; lack of money to get to school by minibus or to buy a laptop / tablet needed for online education or internet access; the remaining time available for homework, the lack of learning opportunities due to repeated absences from school, due to the lack of school counselors in certain schools.

*Internet access, especially in rural areas, lack of tablets, laptops or other modern technologies to facilitate access to information and help them in the learning process (PG12)*

- *Problems related to subjective barriers*

Some of them are a subjective reflection of the structural ones, they concern especially the student's attitude towards learning, his perception of what learning means, the motivation to get involved in school activities, the feeling of his own value. Low confidence and self-esteem can lead to some restraint or reserve in the class.

*I believe that the barriers in solving the problems related to the school transition are: insecurity and shyness of students (PG11).*

- Deficiencies in communication between students-teachers-class leaders, limited time for communication and dialogue; communication only in crisis situations.

*First of all, there are communication barriers. Human resources do not discuss and are not organized enough. There should be some very clear protocols / sessions / debates on school transition issues and identifying solutions that can be eliminated (PG4).*

- *Barriers related to the family environment*

Some barriers appear in the family, others are derived from the neighborhood and the community, while others are related to the functioning of society as a whole. Stimulating environments and life experiences in early childhood accelerate learning and have lasting effects on later performance during schooling: There are children who did not attend kindergarten, so there are cases of school failure in early grades (I15). In addition, it often happens that parents criticize school, teachers, conservatism without argument (I8).

Respondents also pointed out that there are parents who do not want to accept that they have a child with certain disabilities and that it could be better for them in a special school (L1). There are situations in which children with SEN integrated into mainstream education do not benefit from adapted programs, and some teachers do not pay much attention to them and do not know how to manage the activity with them because there are no support teachers (L1).

Families from poor backgrounds, migration, parental disinterest, lower education or lack of parental education, single parenting or isolation of children in primary socialization are risk factors that, cumulatively or in combination, are more likely to cause cognitive, emotional delays and in terms of children's vocabulary. According to respondents, children from higher-income families have substantial family investments. Overcoming these barriers related to the family environment requires, in the opinion of one respondent, a change of mentality (L1).

*The family situation of the student, the lack of involvement and lack of emotional support from the parents, the disadvantaged environment from which he comes, the disinterest in school shown by parents and passed on to children, the precarious economic situation (E1).*

*Apart from emotional suffering, another consequence of parents leaving for work abroad is the increase in the vulnerability of students to harmful influences from the social environment, marginalized groups or even criminal groups (I10).*

*The family environment of the students that stands out through the disinterest of some parents and the child's automaticity towards everything that means involvement and school (PG15).*

- *Communication between children and parents*

In most cases, in the opinion of the respondents, *the adults have the impression that they cannot approach certain topics with the children, because "they are too small", which is as false as possible (PG4)*. Any topic can be discussed with a child as long as it is tailored to their level of understanding. This is actually the real problem. Lack of communication between parent and child. He arrives at school unprepared, in a whole new environment, where *he has to listen to a lady who tells him that he has to sit on the bench for 45-50 minutes, that he has to answer all the requests, that he is no longer allowed to walk and not even move when he wants .... and the list goes on (PG4)*.

- Resistance to change - according to respondents, our education system has *remained anchored in traditional practices and seems too little open to innovation (PG7)*.

Teachers often face the need to change attitudes, as they prevent students from adapting to the school transition. Although several variables have been identified that affect attitude change, three general variables stand out: trust in the issuer (educator, teacher, teacher, etc.), message, context.

If the parents of the students do not trust the teacher, they will not accept his message, respectively they will not change their attitude. Similarly, if the message is not convincing, the attitude will not change. Attempts to change the attitudes of those involved in the educational act also depend on the situation and the context.

- *Lack of skills*

According to the respondents, there is a set of skills related to coordination, time management and stress management that if not developed over time by teachers, by participating in various courses, training can turn into real barriers.

- *Insufficient resources*

Minimum financial resources are a setback for the student. They feel complexed, inhibited, lose their desire to communicate. Communication appetite is reduced, students become apathetic, thoughtful, no longer self-motivated to achieve school performance. *Inequality of opportunity stems from social inequalities. A positive school career requires investment, so the financial factor will always guide the balance on the path of success of adaptation (I2)*.

### **3.3.Resources needed to facilitate a smooth school transition**

Resources are the tool that facilitates the transition of students from one school year to another and through which actions find their expression. At the same time, their presence contributes decisively to the good development of the activities, being the defining ones within the schools in which the teachers and the students evolve and plan their daily actions.

All kinds of resources (human, technological, financial, time) are needed for success. Starting from well-trained teachers, school psycho-pedagogues present in all schools, money allocated for the needs of students, appropriate facilities and up to the availability of each actor (teacher, family, etc.) to support the student in this whole process.

- *Human resources*

The number of teachers today who believe that human resources should be approached in an investment manner is growing, and the arguments they make are becoming more convincing.

Respondents believe that the resources needed to facilitate a successful school transition are, in particular, human resources, which aim to establish a positive relationship between students and teachers, participation in extracurricular activities, a pleasant school environment (positive climate in the classroom and outside ei), *school institutions to promote the partnership between the primary school and the gymnasium: reciprocal visits, joint activities, Open Days (I9)*.

*... human resources, especially by knowing the conditions that determine the success or failure of the school transition to guide both the activities of teachers and children (PG1).*

*... human resources are needed: a well-connected team between teachers and school-family (E4), school counsellor (I1).*

*... patient teachers, psychologists, school counsellors, psychological office (E2).*

- *Technical resources*

In the current conditions in which we live, the respondents state that the introduction of new educational environments, the existence of pedagogical auxiliaries would fully justify their presence.

As the computerization of education is a priority, the educational software, the computer programs specially dimensioned in the perspective of teaching, especially online, is an obvious necessity. According to respondents, *the computer program can become an important medium for effective teaching (PG1)*. One of the purposes of education should be for students to learn to use today's tools. This means to experiment with tablets, to try activities on the phone and to understand these tools *in order to create interactive and topical activities so as to attract the students' attention to the pleasure of participating in that activity / discipline (PG10)*.

*The use of new technologies in the classroom as teaching aids with support function for the development of thematic educational software, but more often for watching movies /documentaries/videos for educational purposes, to familiarize and facilitate the understanding of a topic to be studied, either to supplement and deepen the knowledge in a certain field in a more attractive form, or as a basis for discussion to address some topics (I10).*

To the extent that the teaching content is also associated with intelligent devices for transmitting knowledge to students, they have a great power to attract children. All respondents noted the students' appetite for *new technology (PG14)*, which should be exploited from a didactic point of view.

At the same time, the virtually infinite openness to unique information resources on the Internet can be harnessed at the level of school instruction by:

- Themes such as audio-visual media in education;
- Organizing video conferences;
- Virtual learning environments;
- Identifying information on the web;
- Web teaching technologies;
- Web evaluation strategies, etc.

Respondents also explain the courses of action that should be followed, through concrete examples, to facilitate the transition of students from one school year to another.

*You don't necessarily need financial resources to pass on information, but you certainly need technology. A laptop, a video projector, a printer and internet access should each have (PG4).*

*... qualified and competent staff, diversified teaching materials, state-of-the-art technology, easy access to information sources and the Internet (I13).*

- *Financial resources*

According to the respondents, financial resources could solve many problems related to the transition by contributing to *the proper endowment of the education halls (I6)*, in order to be able to *procure the materials necessary for the development of a modern educational act (PG10)*.

- *Family resources*

A resource often invoked by respondents is the family, *the active presence of a close-knit family group*, family relationships based on guidance and instructional-educational requirements, cooperation, understanding, respect and mutual help, *constant concern of parents for the high education of children, for a dignified, civilized behavior in the family and outside it* (I11).

The student must have *parents who must support him morally and materially* (I7), favourable living conditions, food, clothing, footwear, hygiene, health, etc.; favourable conditions for learning and culture - place of study, providing sources of information - textbooks, guidance, problem solving, including the necessary supplies; support in solving learning difficulties, including through meditations, without overloading; guidance in choosing the entourage of children, to protect them from negative influences and deviations from dignified, civilized conduct, and from neglecting school; direct relationships and contacts of parents with the school, with teachers, with the teacher in particular, in order to know their requirements and contribute to their fulfilment, especially those related to education, leisure, school and professional guidance, etc. knowledge of the child's universe; establishing relationships with the family in order to know the child's past, his behaviour outside school, the way he tells what happens in school, etc. and its involvement in the education of children; creating a safe environment for learning; ensuring an appropriate emotional climate.

#### 4. Conclusions

Although the Romanian education system has made significant progress in recent decades, “especially in terms of student learning outcomes and institutional capacity building” (OECD, 2017, p. 3), however, there “is a long distance from achieving international performance and delivering qualitative results” (Guțu, Manolescu, 2017, p.220). The reasons are diverse, and from a socio-economic point of view, some schools lack an advantage than others; the lack of resources at national and local level reflects their performance, and the fear is that the public schools “still foster cultural, social, psychological, and barriers that block the collaboration between school, family, and community” (Rădoi, 2016, p.44), to the detriment of children’s best interests.

Barriers to successfully facilitating the school transition appear in the family, others are derived from the community, while others are related to the functioning of the wider society.

In successfully completing the school transition, our research shows that family background and social context are factors in students' school performance.

Our research has shown that regardless of the education cycle, students and their families assisted by teachers can develop partnerships on parameters that meet the various types of demands and standards of each school community they belong to. By generating strategies for creating shared responsibility, they can be partners in the education of students and promoters of the child's well-being. Teachers want students’ parents to be involved. Their involvement depends on the extent to which they are informed and involved in their children's school life. Unfortunately, in some communities, families are not invited to actively participate in various activities. In this sense, the actions must focus on creating a climate of trust (Irimescu, 2010), communication with all actors involved, in order to involve parents and teachers in educational partnerships.

The research highlighted several resources that can be used to improve the transition of students from one learning cycle to another and also the key people that are needed to implement

all solutions. However, every situation that teachers face is unique in terms of causes and forms of manifestation.

Our research has shown that regardless of resources, there are also cultural constructs shaped by the dominant images of parents and teachers about what childhood means, what it means to learn and personal development.

The results of this research will benefit schools as well as school principals who could identify, by comparison, the strengths and weaknesses of their own schools and develop, on this basis, development projects and programs; parents who can make informed choices about the future of their children's education; teachers who could have an overview of their role in providing quality education, as well as the school results they can expect, depending on different risk factors; researchers who could deepen the results obtained regarding the influence of different factors regarding the school transition from one educational cycle to another in Romania.

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