

# MINIMIZING EDUCATIONAL DISRUPTIONS IN DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS THROUGH EU-FUNDED PROJECTS

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of exploratory research carried out to identify the main benefits of EU-funded education projects for disadvantaged schools.

In order to carry out this study, two focus groups were organized with the participation of managers and teachers of disadvantaged schools in Romania that had participated in the implementation of projects funded by the European Union. The main objectives of the research were: O1. To identify the main benefits that the implemented educational projects have brought to the educational system; O2. To generate ideas for future projects so that they can further contribute to improving access to education for disadvantaged pupils.

The results show that the funded educational projects have acted on three fronts: 1. Socio-economic aspects directly targeting the learner (reducing social inequalities, ensuring healthy nutrition, reducing discrimination, increasing quality of life, improving health, etc.); 2. Aspects related to improving education (increasing learning achievement, increasing school enrolment, reducing absenteeism, reducing drop-out, increasing pupil satisfaction, increasing pupil engagement, etc.) 3. Aspects related to the improvement of infrastructure and the educational offer (improvement of infrastructure, improvement of facilities, strengthening of family-school relationship, improvement of teaching staff competences, etc.). At the same time, specific activities have been proposed for educational projects aimed at removing barriers that hinder disadvantaged pupils' access to education. The results have been structured in such a way that the expected benefits are highlighted at both individual and societal level.

Keywords: Educational disruptions, disadvantaged schools, EU-funded projects, disadvantaged students, improving education.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

At European level, education is considered one of the main means of raising living standards, having an important mission in the process of training and development of skills, of integration into the labour market as well as in reducing and preventing various phenomena with a negative impact on children and young people (school abandonment, juvenile delinquency, corruption, delinquency) being essential for the formation of human dignity and development [2]. Education also offers alternatives for resolving difficult situations such as discrimination, poverty, social exclusion, reduced access to information, and is decisive for personal destiny and the destiny of a nation, the lack of education having serious consequences for human well-being [3]. Official European Union (EU) reports [3] present worrying data on the situation in disadvantaged schools, with children, mostly from poor communities, at risk of dropping out or having dropped out before completing compulsory education. Schools in disadvantaged areas do not offer pupils sufficient opportunities for personal development, while the families of these pupils, in most cases, large and socio-economically disadvantaged, cooperate only formally and passively with the school. The issue of education of people in disadvantaged school groups or at risk is still one of the politically, socio-economically, culturally or civically challenging issues for EU countries. Significantly reducing the number of children or young people who leave school early or are in danger of expulsion, is a key objective for achieving future EU prosperity and social cohesion. Reducing the percentage of early school leavers also influences the achievement of the other targets of the European strategy. The pandemic has worsened the level of child poverty across Europe [4]. The implications of this disruption are being addressed by researchers around the world and most studies report that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to fail to acquire the necessary skills and competences. The European Commission is working closely with governments, experts and international organisations to adapt its policies to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic, including on education. At a time when the global economy is being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, people are more aware than ever of the importance of sustainable public finances [5].

The EU prioritises strengthening education systems [6] through partnerships at regional, national or global level, believing that this contributes to improving educational outcomes over time. Important measures considered by European education policy aimed at equity in education include: increasing public spending, especially in primary education, increasing participation of disadvantaged children in high quality early education and care, placing pupils in different or more advanced educational programmes, eliminating differences in schools and admission regulations, reducing the number of pupils repeating a year of study [7].

The most complex form of expression of solidarity between EU regions [8] geared towards the progress of poorer regions and the mitigation of disparities between regions is the European Regional Policy. The EU has a strong commitment to support the development of education in partner countries and supports education actions through a range of funding mechanisms.

EU support is designed to respond to specific national or regional needs and corresponds to country-led priorities and policies. The budget allocated to EU education funding is substantial and EU funding programmes cover a wide range of beneficiaries and actions. A large proportion of EU-funded projects for education have aimed to reduce the gap in achievement between pupils with socio-economic difficulties and those with higher socio-economic resources. These projects are seen as promising ways of reducing this attainment gap.

Interventions in education through funding programmes have generated improvements but not enough to neutralise the effects of migration and social hardship. The positive effects have been largely limited to the direct beneficiaries and the schools supported, with limited sustainability of the interventions and no significant impact on the education system [9].

Improving education could change the path of European economic development and personal well-being of citizens. This can be achieved through the support of properly and efficiently implemented funding programmes.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The aim of this research is to identify the main benefits of EU-funded educational projects for schools in Romania. Thus, the research methodology was designed with the following main objectives in mind: O1. To identify the main benefits that the implemented educational projects have brought to the educational system; O2. To generate ideas for future projects so that they can further contribute to improving access to education for disadvantaged pupils.

In order to achieve the targeted research objectives, a marketing study was conducted based on qualitative research which consisted in conducting focus group discussions. The research was conducted between June and July 2022. Two focus groups were organized with managers and teachers from disadvantaged schools in Romania who had participated in the implementation of EU funded projects. During these focus groups, issues that would provide comprehensive and detailed information to achieve the research objectives were discussed. A total of 18 people participated, 10 people in the first focus group, 8 people in the second focus group, with a relatively homogeneous distribution.

The selection of research participants was based on criteria such as experience in implementing EU funded projects in the field of education and the seniority in the field.

This research method was chosen because the participants could express their opinions freely, without restrictions, so that the respondents could express their own beliefs and opinions on the topics discussed, topics familiar to them. It was also possible to observe the interaction between the participants and the mutual influence in expressing opinions on the discussed topics.

The use of the focus group method led, within the group, to the creation of qualitative information, opinions and ideas, as well as the possibility to compare points of view between groups ([10], [11]).

The research was based on an interview guide designed to answer the main research questions.

In the two focus groups, the discussions started with a brief presentation of the research aims, the topic and subtopics considered and the participants. The main phases and stages of the research method were presented, consent to participate in the research was sought and specific information related to ensuring confidentiality was provided. Also at this stage, participants were given information about the conduct and specific rules during the discussions and were provided with working materials.

To achieve the first objective, O1. To identify the main benefits that the implemented educational projects have brought to the educational system, the research began with a stage of individual reflection in which the participants were asked to fill in on sheets prepared for this purpose the positive aspects, generating satisfaction and the negative aspects, generating dissatisfaction in the schools they represent. The completed sheets were taken by one of the moderators who centralised the information and drew up a common sheet with two columns, one for the aspects of satisfaction and the other for the aspects of dissatisfaction, in order of frequency of occurrence of each aspect mentioned by the subjects in their individual sheets, with the frequency of occurrence being mentioned. Each aspect was then discussed in the group in order of frequency of occurrence.

Participants were then asked to talk about how the educational projects implemented in the schools they know have affected the educational services provided and the pupils. They were also asked to identify and highlight the benefits brought by these projects, as well as the negative aspects.

Also in this phase, participants who had been directly involved in the implementation of some projects were asked to detail moments when they found themselves in difficulties and to explain the causes of these situations. In order to identify solutions to mitigate problems and risks of failure during project implementation, participants were asked to describe the factors and actions that had helped them to overcome the limiting situations in which they had found themselves, if any, the support they had received, or would have liked to receive.

To achieve objective two, O2. Generating ideas for future projects so that it can further contribute to improving access to education for disadvantaged students, the projective technique "sentence completion technique" was used, a research method that has proven particularly useful in qualitative marketing research due to the richness and accuracy of the information obtained ([12], [13]). Sentence completion is a semi-structured research method that facilitates the outlining of repressed or withheld thoughts by allowing participants to respond in ways they might not otherwise feel able to [14], in our case by stimulating respondents to express their ideas about actions that could improve the situation of students in disadvantaged schools. Respondents were given sentence starters and were directed to complete them in ways meaningful to them. In this way, they were prompted to identify and report on factors and actions that they felt would improve educational provision and help disadvantaged pupils overcome the social, economic and emotional barriers that make them absent or drop out of school.

The sentence stems used in the research were: "In our school things could improve if..."; "Activities that could help improve our disadvantaged students "access to education are..."; "In the school I represent, dropout could be decreased if..."; "More students in our school would continue their studies if..."; "Future educational projects implemented in our school should target activities such as...". After the participants had filled in the sheets, all the themes reached were taken up in the group discussions.

For the data analysis, the specific steps of qualitative research were followed. Content analysis was carried out by sorting, structuring and classifying the data ([15], [16]). An analysis of non-verbal behaviours was also carried out [17]. The results are presented to illustrate all the areas investigated ([18], [19]). For easier understanding, interpretation of the information obtained and for a friendly illustration of the results, the qualitative research software ATLAS was used in the data analysis process.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The results obtained provided a thorough understanding of the problem under investigation. The findings and discussions are presented grouped according to the two main objectives of the research.

*O1. To identify the main benefits that the implemented educational projects have brought to the educational system.*

In order to achieve this objective the research started by identifying the positive and negative parts of the schools that the research participants represent.

The participants' opinions on the positive sides focused on two aspects: 1) teachers - with a particular emphasis on the good teacher-student relationship and the teachers' good knowledge of students. Research participants appreciated teachers as qualified, experienced, tenured. 2) Infrastructure - considered adequate, welcoming, friendly and good access to technology.

These results outline an image of schools in the areas researched, schools classified as disadvantaged, different from the general image of schools in disadvantaged environments, known for problems related to poorly developed school infrastructure and insufficient material resources ([20], [21], [22]) and with the human resources situation characterized by a high proportion of unqualified teachers. Considering that the research participants came from schools where various EU-funded educational projects were implemented, it can be concluded that these projects had positive effects on these two levels.

On the negative side, the most frequently mentioned problems were related to the lack of parental involvement and problems within the families of most of the children. A significant proportion of the children come from families with a poor socio-economic situation that cannot provide a learning environment for their children at home. Moreover, a proportion of pupils are involved in household and other activities from a very early age, with education taking second place in their concerns. Research participants believe that a large part of the problems related to education are generated by the culture of Roma families, which are also families with a very low level of education. Especially for the female population, the age of marriage is particularly low, leading to a very high drop-out rate. Also in this category of families there is often migration, which often leads to the interruption of schooling for children. The precarious school-family-community relationship was also brought up several times during the interviews, as it does not provide a framework to protect children from exposure to a large number of vulnerabilities. Also frequently mentioned problems included underfunding of schools, lack of school transport, pupils' performance in national tests and lower pass rates in final exams.

Analysis of the data using the ATLAS qualitative research software led to the graphical illustration of positive and negative aspects as shown in Figure 1.

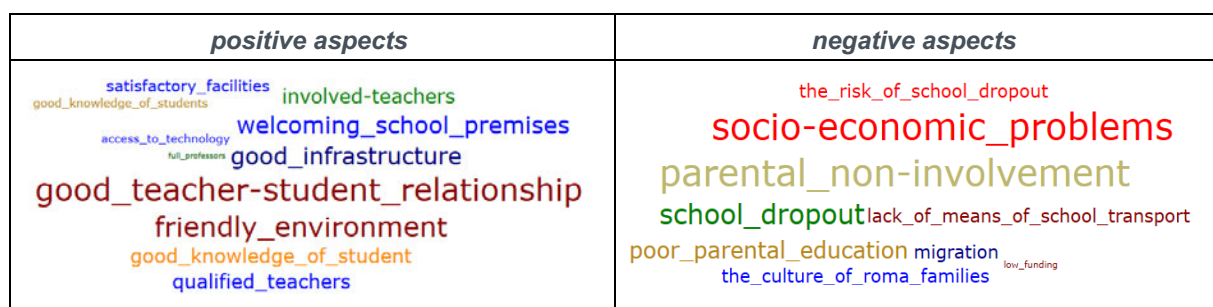


Figure 1. Graphic illustration of positive and negative aspects

With regard to the results obtained as a result of the implementation of EU-funded education projects in the schools from which the research participants were selected, the data analysis led to the conclusion that they acted on three levels (socio-economic aspects directly targeting the pupil, aspects related to improving education and aspects related to improving infrastructure and educational provision) with different results on each of these levels. In terms of improving the infrastructure and the skills of the teaching staff, the results have been good, and as a result of the implementation of the projects the educational offer of the schools has been greatly improved. Socio-economic issues directly affecting the learner have been addressed partially and only during the period of the projects. For example, the issue of providing healthy food was raised, but only partially solved during the projects where pupils were offered a hot meal every school day. However, research participants expressed concern about the period after the end of the projects providing hot meals to pupils, when they would revert to their former eating habits. On issues related to improving education (increasing learning outcomes, increasing enrolment, reducing absenteeism, reducing drop-out, increasing pupil satisfaction, increasing pupil engagement, etc.), research participants felt that little progress had been made, indicating the need to step up efforts in this area. Table 1 shows the issues discussed in the interviews with a "✓" symbol associated with them according to the number of positive links associated with them by the research participants.

Table 1. Positive associations indicating the improvement of the mentioned aspect as a result of the project implementation.

CATEGORIES OF ISSUES	ASPECTS DISCUSSED	POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS INDICATING IMPROVEMENT OF THE MENTIONED ASPECT AS A RESULT OF PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION
1. Socio-economic aspects directly relevant to the learner	reduction of discrimination	✓ ✓ ✓
	reducing social inequalities	✓
	ensuring healthy nutrition	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
	increase quality of life	✓ ✓
	improving health	✓ ✓ ✓
2. Issues related to improving education	increasing learning outcomes	✓
	increasing school enrolment	✓ ✓ ✓
	reducing absenteeism	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
	reducing early school leaving	✓ ✓
	increasing student satisfaction	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
	increasing student involvement	✓ ✓ ✓
3. Issues related to improving infrastructure and educational provision	infrastructure improvement	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
	improvement of facilities	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
	strengthening the family-school relationship	✓
	improving the skills of teaching staff	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓

O2. The generation of ideas for future projects so that they can further contribute to improving access to education for disadvantaged students.

Research participants sought to find viable solutions that would continue the process of reducing the vulnerabilities faced by pupils in schools from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to prevent dropout and ensure equal access to quality education. They believe that future education projects should provide: social support packages, hot meals and psychological counselling focused on raising self-esteem; educational support materials such as magazines, games, computer platforms; differentiated curriculum tailored to local needs.

In order to adapt learning styles to the changes brought about by information technology, modern styles with increased attractiveness for pupils, activities have been proposed to continue equipping schools with IT equipment (laptops, video projector, interactive whiteboards, audio-video system, educational software, digital kits) and high-speed Wi-Fi internet network as well as adapting the curriculum to the digital context. Participants also raised the need for digital teaching materials with content that can be easily adapted by teachers according to the specific needs of different categories of pupils.

In order to stimulate the return of early school leavers, research participants consider it essential to organise awareness-raising events on the importance of education and social inclusion and to further implement 'second chance' programmes.

Participants also paid particular attention to activities aimed at improving the parent-school relationship. They believe that future projects should provide training and counselling programmes for parents so that they can support and help their children in the educational process. At the same time, research participants consider it particularly valuable for schools from disadvantaged backgrounds to maintain constructive relations with the media, which can become an ally in promoting the interests of their disadvantaged pupils, and to develop partnerships with the private sector in order to organise practical activities and facilitate the transition of older pupils to the labour market.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

In the opinion of some researchers [20], to improve education in disadvantaged backgrounds strategic directions of intervention, must take into account: • personnel issues such as professional training of teachers, keeping qualified staff in the area, motivating staff to attend training courses; • equipment issues such as reorganizing libraries and equipping them with recent books and teaching and educational materials; setting up school laboratories and equipping schools with computer systems; • strengthening the link between school, the community and the local public authorities; involving teachers in the life of the community; • attention on the peculiarities of the area: Adapting the educational curriculum to the specific educational needs of the area; Introducing new optional subjects such as: local customs and traditions, intercultural education, etc.

The results obtained in this research confirm most of the already existing speciality literature. The research participants, experienced individuals representing schools where EU-funded educational projects have been implemented, proposed specific activities for educational projects aimed at removing barriers that prevent disadvantaged pupils from accessing education.

The modernisation of the Romanian education system and its harmonisation with the main characteristics of education in the European area is a long-term process, which is cultural, social and economic [23] and in which politicians, specialists and the general public must participate.

Although the main limitation of the research method is that it does not allow us to obtain statistically representative data, we believe that the results obtained in this research are scientifically valuable, relevant for the population studied and for policy makers. The results of our research constitute important recommendations for public authorities at national and local level (Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Local Public Administration), which can support the improvement of educational services in disadvantaged schools through the implementation of projects that include the activities identified in this research.

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