Early School Leavers: A Pressing Social Issue in Romania

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Romania faces a multitude of social problems that affect individual, family, and community functioning, including illicit drug use, child abandonment, poverty, and social exclusion. Another critical social issue that is a consequence of these problems and also contributes to them is a high rate of early leaving from education. Romania has one of the highest school dropout rates and among the lowest higher education rates of European Union (EU) member states (Eurostat, 2016).

Some key elements of the early leaving phenomenon in Romania include the following facts:

- About 18% of children leave school before graduating (European Commission, 2015).
- Among children aged 7–10, 8% do not attend school; 5% of children between 11–14 years old do not attend school (Varly, Iosifescu, Fartusnic, & Costache, 2014).
- Of those who complete the 8th grade, 19% do not continue on to high school (Varly et al., 2014).

Two key populations are particularly affected by early leaving from education: those living in rural areas and those of Roma descent. Rural children are three times more likely to leave school than are urban children (European Commission, 2015), and more than 20% of school-aged Roma children are not in school (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights & United Nations Programme for Development, 2012).

These data hide some harsh realities: Many young people cannot afford to continue school and are needed to work or provide childcare to help support their families; many of the children's parents did not complete primary or secondary school; and children in rural areas, particularly in mountain regions, have no means of transportation to and from school. The situation produces a vicious cycle: The material and financial situations of families do not support school attendance, which leads to higher unemployment, lower wages, and higher rates of poverty as adults. The effects of lower educational levels are likely to worsen, because employment opportunities are increasingly suitable only for those with postsecondary training (Eurostat, 2016).

Although a number of national strategies have been implemented to address the problem (e.g., National Reform Programme of 2006; the National Strategic Reference Framework of 2007; Ministry of Education, 2014), these have fallen short of their goals, rates of early leavers have actually increased in recent years, and the role of social work has been minimal. Of particular note is that, at this time, school social work is not a widely available practice in Romania. To the extent that children at risk of leaving school early receive social work services, they are likely to be from workers in child protection and welfare whose focus is often on other family issues. Where school-based services do exist, workers are spread thin by serving multiple schools.

Like other social problems, this issue presents a challenge to schools of social work. As many university programs in social work are relatively young (with most developing in the past 20 years), it has taken some time to respond to the changing needs in society. And schools are responding. The social work faculty of Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, in partnership with the University of Oradea, are examining their curricula, seeking to reorganize and improve their methods and techniques of teaching and adjust content in a way that better trains and prepares social workers for specialized areas of practice. Faculty members in these programs are increasing their efforts to foreground the key role that social workers and the social work profession can have in ameliorating social problems and supporting healthy individuals and communities.

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Additional Resources

Association of Schools of Social Work in Romania: http://www.asswr.ro/

Gavrila-Ardelean, M. (2015). Master's degree curriculum development for discipline: Career development in socio-medical services. *Agora Psycho-Pragmatic*, *9*(2), 93–98. Available at http://uav.ro/jour/index.php/app/index

National College of Social Workers: http://www.cnasr.ro/