School factors related to dropout from primary and secondary education in Serbia: A qualitative research

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School factors related to dropout from primary and secondary education in Serbia – a qualitative research[1]

Nataša Simić[2]
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy

Ksenija Krstić
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy

Dropping out of educational system is a serious individual, familial, educational and social problem. It is a complex process influenced by a large number of factors. Nevertheless, it is a phenomenon that takes place in school, and different school factors can serve as risk or protective factors. Dropout rates in Serbia are still high. One way to improve the educational system and ensure equal education for every child is to reduce dropout rates from primary and secondary education. As part of a larger study, the goal of this research was to investigate and identify key school factors related to dropout from primary and secondary schools in Serbia. The research was conducted in 8 primary and 13 secondary schools from 17 municipalities with high dropout rates. In order to hear voices from different actors in the educational system, qualitative research was conducted, involving interviews and focus groups with teachers, school principals, school psychologists, counsellors, pedagogical assistants, parents and students. Following the analysis, several school factors highly related to dropout were singled out. Low quality (individualisation) of teaching, lack of learning and emotional support and lack of positive teacher-student relationships proved to have the greatest influence on student dropout. On the other hand, our results indicate that student and parent participation in school life is underused as a resource

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for dropout prevention. These factors are described and their impact in Serbian context explained. The results are discussed in the light of similar findings from previous research.

Keywords: dropout, school factors, teacher-student relationship, learning support; qualitative analysis

A decrease in the number of young people dropping out of education represents one of the five key objectives stated in the *European Strategy for Jobs and Growth* (European Commission, 2010). Hence, all European countries, including the Republic of Serbia, strive to establish a system and define certain measures for the prevention of dropping out at different educational levels.

In recent years, Serbia has carried out numerous reforms in order to provide improved quality and fairness of the educational system. However, dropout rates are still high – according to the *Strategy for Development of Education in Serbia 2020* (2012), between 6,000 to 9,000 children from one generation drop out of compulsory primary education. One way to improve educational system and ensure equal education for every child is to reduce dropout rates from primary and secondary education.

Although school is not solely responsible for the dropout phenomenon, it is *de facto* where dropping out takes place. Members of the school staff are the ones with a direct contact with children and, as such, they are the first to notice the risk of dropping out in a child. Therefore, we deemed it relevant to explore all the factors at school level related to early school leaving.

Dropping out of school

Dropping out of educational system is a serious individual, familial, educational and social problem. Substantial research has been focused on the factors leading to it. Based on rich empirical data, most researchers agree that it is a complex process influenced not by a single factor, but rather by a combination of factors (Janosz et al., 2000; Lamot et al., 2013; Lyche, 2010; Rumberger, 2011).

Discussing the reasons for dropping out, some authors draw a distinction between pull-out and push-out theories. As per the former, the student is the one who, having assessed gains and losses, decides to leave school early since other important activities await outside, e.g. job opportunities or familial duties. When it comes to the latter, these authors believe it is school that, due to its structure and practices, rejects students, i.e. has a negative impact on their experience of it and the state of wellbeing in school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Yet, most theoretical models lay more emphasis on school factors

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compared to familial ones, demonstrating their crucial importance for early
school leaving (Lessard, Poirier & Fortin, 2010). Dropping out is a process
that takes place in school, and different school factors can assume the role of
risk or protective factors.

Numerous studies have pointed to the factors at school level which can be
significant for the dropout phenomenon. Although there is no single factor
(or event) leading to dropping out, the risk increases if several factors coexist
for a longer period of time (Charmaraman & Hall, 2011). Reference works
list various characteristics of schools that can be decisive for the occurrence
of dropping out: school size and type, school equipment and resources, and
so on; however, findings regarding the importance of these factors are not
consistent (De Witte et al., 2013). On the other hand, there is an agreement in
a vast number of studies on the significance of social and academic climate,
teachers' practices and the quality of teaching (Blue & Cook, 2004; De Witte
et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2004). For example, research shows that student-
teacher relationship has a considerable impact on students being satisfied with
school, on their wellbeing, and even academic achievement; hence, it comes
as no surprise that unsatisfactory relationships with teachers and negative
climate in the classroom are amongst the main causes of early school leaving
(Fortin et al., 2013). Studies indicate that students (particularly boys) who
perceive relationships with teachers as negative are at a significantly greater
risk of dropping out (Lessard et al., 2004). Additionally, positive relationships
with peers, the feeling of belonging, absence of peer violence, as well as
participation in extracurricular activities and different kinds of dialogue in
the classroom and school are related to lower incidence of dropping out of
educational system (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007; Erktin, Okcabol &
Ural, 2010; European Commission, 2015; Fortin et al., 2013; Pooley et al.,
2008). Furthermore, it has been shown that strict measures for punishing
students with disciplinary problems or poor attendance represent a significant
factor connected to dropping out. Schools with higher dropout rates do not
focus on the needs of individual students and thus do not provide adequate
learning support for students with additional support needs (European
Commission, 2013; Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Still, schools which successfully retain their students have fair disciplinary
procedures, attentive teachers, high expectations and numerous opportunities
for meaningful participation. Successful schools do not focus on deficits
but on their students' strength, and continually carry out student support
programmes, which involve parents and local community representatives
(Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). They apply the "whole school approach",
which implies that all members of the school community feel responsible
for dropout prevention and that school cooperates with a wide range of
stakeholders (European Commission, 2015).

Research topic and objective

This study represents a part of a comprehensive mixed-method research that addressed contextual and personal factors related to dropout (for more see Krstić, Videnović, Stepanović Ilić, Lazarević & Simić, 2015; Stepanović Ilić, Lazarević & Simić, 2017; Videnović & Lazarević, 2017). It builds on data collected through the qualitative part of that more comprehensive research, but focuses more deeply on the issues at the school level[3].

The objective of the current study is to establish which school factors contribute to a higher dropout rate from primary and secondary education. We focused on those factors that might be improved at the school level (e.g. teacher-related, organizational, relational), without significant financial or system support We also strived to define certain recommendations for school practice improvement in order to prevent dropout.

Methodological framework

Sample

Since the focus of our research was on identifying the variety of school factors significantly influencing student dropout, we selected 8 primary and 13 secondary schools[4] (the list of schools, described by the defined criteria, is provided in the Appendix) from 17 municipalities that were selected on the basis of the previously defined criteria (poor municipalities, with high dropout rates, with poor children's attendance at preparatory preschool program, etc.), while maintaining uniform geographical distribution. Schools were chosen in such a way that, based on the analysis of reference works, they all had high dropout rates, but differed on several predefined criteria relevant for the dropout problem: size (number of enrolled children), percentage of Roma children, milieu (urban/rural), the number of outlying school classes in remote areas, and similar. The sample of secondary schools included high schools and three– and four-year vocational schools.

In order to approach the dropout phenomenon from the point of view of all relevant actors, we also included school principals, counsellors, teachers, pedagogical assistants, parents and students from the selected schools in our research. Table 1 shows the sample of respondents who took part in interviews and focus groups.

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3   For a brief overview of the school related factors, determined through both the qualitative and quantitative part of the research, and the examination of both successful schools and school with high dropout rates, see Simić & Krstić, 2014.

4   According to ISCED 2011 classification, 6 schools are ISCED 344 level, 3 schools ISCED 354, and 4 schools 353 level. http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-2011-en.pdf

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Table 1. Number of respondents in 8 primary and 13 secondary schools

Technique	Respondents	Primary school: number of respondents	Secondary school: number of respondents	Total: number of respondents
Interview				
	Principals	8	13	**21**
	School counsellors	12*	13	**25**
	Pedagogical assistants	2		2
Focus group				
	Teachers	25	27	**52**
	Parents	22**	25**	**47**
	Students	43	44**	**87**

* One primary school has a psychologist and a pedagogue, and another a pedagogue, a psychologist and a social worker, and they all participated in interviews.

** Focus groups with parents were not carried out in two primary schools; in one secondary school, we did not hold a focus group with students and in two others with parents.

In primary school, we talked to both class and subject teachers of the students who had dropped out. The children who participated in the focus groups attended 7th and 8th grade of primary school (14 years old, on the average). The students from secondary schools that participated in the research attended different grades – the main criterion for the selection of participants was that they attended the class with someone who had already dropped out. We strived to achieve gender balance and to have students of different GPAs in our focus groups. The parents who participated were mostly members of the school parents' committees. Where it was possible, we organised interviews with the students who dropped out (12 of them) and their parents (four parents).[5]

Data gathering and analysis techniques

In this research, we opted for qualitative methodology, based on interpretative paradigm, which implies the importance of understanding the meaning built into the respondents' experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Eivers, Ryan & Brinkley, 2000). We conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with different actors in the educational process.

Having examined relevant reference works (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007; Erktin, Okcabol & Ural, 2010; Fortin et al., 2013; Lessard et al., 2004; Lyche, 2010; Pooley et al., 2008), we identified the areas of school life and work which can be associated with dropping out of educational system. Therefore, interview and focus group guidelines covered the following topics: (1) Physical conditions in school, (2) Teacher-student relationship and emotional

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5   The results of case studies are shown and discussed in Videnovic & Lazarevic, 2017.

support for students, (3) Student learning support, (4) Promoting positive values in school, (5) School staff relationships, (6) Student relationships, and (7) Student and parent participation (Anderson, 1982; Hoy & Feldman, 1999; Keiser & Schulte, 2007; Zullig et al., 2010). The interviews and focus groups with different interlocutors included all these topics, and depending on a particular target group, the number of questions and specific focus differed.

Before each interview, the respondents were familiarised with the interview topic and research aims and granted their consent for the interviews to be recorded. Data were analysed through qualitative content analysis, i.e. thematic analysis (Kuckartz, 2014). We opted for a combination of an inductive and deductive approach – although we had an idea of the factors that might be related to dropout (reflected in the broad topics selected for the interview and focus group guidelines), we strived not to impose our meanings, but stick to the raw data. We investigated how various actors described their school practices, how they assessed the role of individual factors in student dropout from their school, as well as how similar or different various perspectives were (teachers, students, parents). Hence, in the following section, we will present only the factors that were singled out as key school factors related to the dropout phenomenon.

Results

The analysis and comparison of answers from different actors in education, the representatives of students and parents, teachers, support staff and the principals in schools with high dropout rate revealed that the key school factors that increase the risk of early school leaving are the quality of teaching and learning support and the quality of relevant actors' relationship. These two broad factors involve several sub-factors that will be presented in the following lines.

Quality of teaching and learning support

Teaching methods and assessment strategies

Based on our interlocutors' answers, primarily from school counsellors and students, it can be concluded that the quality of teaching in schools with a high dropout rate is not adequate for knowledge acquisition in all students and dropout prevention. A significant number of teachers still use traditional teaching methods; they do not use multimedia and other available teaching resources and contents which would make the teaching material more approachable to students, thus motivating them to learn. Teachers do not make sure that all students have a grasp of what is being done in a particular lesson and they do not adjust the dynamics and their teaching

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approach to students' needs. As positive examples, students listed certain teachers who have an innovative approach to teaching and work hard to make lesson content more attractive to students, using numerous examples and illustrations.

Even though in all schools the staff members are acquainted with individualised educational plans, in school counsellors' words, this often does not mean individualised teaching, but just lowered criteria, even at the level of the entire class. Such practice is most common in the first few years of primary education. Hence some students, according to teachers, can even reach the seventh grade without knowing how to read or write, which significantly increases the risk of dropping out of school at that point. As reasons for difficulties in carrying out individualised tuition and better adjustment of teaching to students' needs, teachers state overpopulated classes and inability to cover the overloaded syllabus.

Lowered criteria can also be observed in some secondary schools. They are one of the strategies for keeping children at school, which is of high importance for teachers who would, in the case of a massive dropout, have fewer classes and, consequently, lower salaries, or would even lose their jobs. On the other hand, one high school adopted an implicit motto of "keeping high standards, regardless of the consequences", which has resulted in insufficient adjustment of teaching to students' needs, leading to demotivation and dropping out of most vulnerable students.

Additionally, the students from schools characterised by a high dropout rate claim that most teachers do not elaborate on the marks they give to students and do not draw students' attention to the mistakes they have made, i.e. do not advise students what else they need to learn in order to get a better mark. It is important to emphasise that in a considerable number of cases students say that marks do not reflect only their knowledge, but also their relationship with the teacher, their family status within the local community, family acquaintances, financial status, and gender. In no school did students know anything about different learning strategies, the ways of solving problems or relating current lessons to earlier ones, claiming that teachers have not mentioned these to them.

Remedial classes

Schools are required to organise remedial classes and they formally exist in all examined primary and secondary schools. Our respondents' opinions differ when it comes to how regular, useful and attended these classes are. In four out of eight primary schools, as well as in five out of thirteen secondary schools, remedial classes are held regularly in all the subjects where there is a need for that. In other schools remedial classes exist only formally. According to their staff, remedial classes are regularly organised when necessary, i.e.

when students get unsatisfactory marks, but students are often not motivated to attend. In students' opinion, on the other hand, remedial classes are not always available, they are not organised for all the subjects where there is a need for them, teachers use the same teaching methods they usually apply at regular classes, their timetable often overlaps with other activities and is not adjusted to school transportation schedules. The issue of synchronising transportation timetables with remedial classes is especially pronounced in outlying school classes in remote areas.

The failure to organise remedial classes (and to apply appropriate teaching methods at these classes) is recognised by the respondents as a factor that significantly contributes to dropout risk.

Extracurricular activities and programmes

According to school counsellors, three primary and nine secondary schools organise extracurricular activities. They most commonly involve sports or dancing lessons. In one primary and two secondary schools there are no organised extracurricular activities. Based on the same data, we discovered that in two primary and three secondary schools extracurricular activities are sometimes organised as educational workshops or lectures and programmes aimed at children and the young.

Different institutions from the local community (health centres, the police, cultural institutions, sports clubs) coordinate debates, lectures and workshops in schools, with topics relevant and appealing to youth. Teachers, students and parents believe such educational programmes (about violence, discrimination, tolerance, multiculturality) are of great significance for improving various aspects of school life or education, as well as raising students' awareness about important topics (substance abuse, road traffic safety, healthy lifestyle habits). However, these extracurricular activities remain mostly unrecognised as a resource for dropout prevention, the potential for which is implied by one psychologist: "*By organising workshops, competitions, school clubs and free recreational activities, the school aims to attract students so that they would spend even more time in school, get to know their peers better and socialise.*"

Teacher motivation and locus of control

Teachers claim to be motivated to work in school. They like working and interacting with students, but do complain about external factors – systematic, such as low salaries and poor status of the profession within society, and school factors, e.g. ignoring teaching regulations and discipline requirements (by both teachers and students), unsatisfactory cooperation with the principal, insufficient school equipment, interpersonal relationships, and so on.

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Still, taking into consideration the statements from other respondents (school counsellors and students), we obtain a different view of teacher motivation. In all primary and secondary schools with the dropout problem teacher motivation was regarded as moderate – there are a few motivated, enthusiastic teachers who introduce innovations, make an effort to familiarise all the students with lesson content, maintain their interest, but in majority of teachers the motivation has dwindled and they are not open to changes and innovations.

Teachers perceive themselves as powerless and insufficiently influential in relation to family or peers. They believe the causes for dropping out lie exclusively outside of school: in students, who are lazy, unmotivated, "*interested in everything else*", peers, bad company that draws students away from school and learning, the family, which does not promote "real" values, does not teach children about the importance of school and education and has no influence on the child, hence cannot prevent him/her from dropping out. The tendency to shift the entire responsibility for attaining education onto others can be clearly seen in one teacher's statement: "... *Secondary school is not compulsory, we cannot keep them if they want to leave*", as well as the statements common for many respondents, such as: "*Our hands are tied by the Ministry by giving too many rights to children, and too few to teachers.*" The teachers themselves do not recognise their own responsibility and role in some students' early school leaving. Still, some of our respondents think that the teachers can and should be proactive: one school principal said that "*part of the justification for insufficient motivation can lie in the lack of funds, but that surely cannot be the sole justification*", and one pedagogue claimed that "*those who love their job and have a creative attitude towards it, will find a way.*"

Relevant actors' relationship

Teacher-student relationship

The analysis of all respondents' answers indicates that a positive relationship and good interaction between teachers and students is not typical for schools with a high dropout rate. In this research, there has been a significant discrepancy between teachers' assessment on the one hand, and students', school counsellors' and principals' assessment, on the other. As a rule, teachers provide more a positive assessment of their relationships with students. They believe they are doing everything they can, show understanding for students' problems and readiness to test them at a later date, give them a second chance and so on. As the most notable problems in their relationship with students, the teachers list laziness, lack of motivation, and often rudeness, i.e. no respect for their authority, and behaviour inappropriate for school. Yet, according to students, in most teachers the understanding equals leniency, lower criteria and expectations. In all examined schools, students

give examples of discrimination, inconsistent marking criteria, belittling and insulting students. For example, one student said: "*I was angry with the teacher who had inappropriate comments on my essay, whose topic was love. He said I was a coward and that it would be better to share my feeling with the boy I liked than to write such stupid things.*" Teachers often use bad marks as a disciplinary measure, which most commonly happens to the same students. In two primary schools, students also complained about the existence of corporal punishments. In secondary schools, there are no such practices, but teachers often convey messages such as: "*You are not smart enough*", "*You will never achieve that!*", thus discouraging students who are already at the risk of dropping out. According to our respondents' words, teachers do not think these practices are inappropriate because secondary school is not obligatory and because "*secondary school is not for everyone.*"

One vocational secondary school principal stated that poor relationships with teachers and consequent truancy can lead to a student accumulating a substantial number of unjustified absences, developing aversion towards school, and thus the likelihood of them dropping out increases. On the other hand, another vocational secondary school principal indicated that a decline in dropout rates at their school was mostly influenced by teacher training on non-violent solutions to conflicts, as part of the project carried out at school. Since then, problems and conflicts in teacher-student relationships have been significantly reduced, which, according to him, has led to a notable decline in the number of students not completing a particular academic year.

School counsellors also point out that some teachers do not like their jobs and cannot establish rapport with students, but they do not mention attempts at solving this, or examples of successful solutions to such situations. One secondary school principal says: "*Another reason* [for dropping out] *can also lie in youth being under so much pressure to complete their education that they start to resist it, which teachers can be blamed for due to their lack of training or ability to make lesson content more interesting to students, to motivate them... Teachers' competence is questionable – the consistency of their criteria, ability to understand students....*"

Student relationships and peer violence

When it comes to socio-emotional relationships between peers, there is agreement amongst respondents regarding peer violence as a risk factor. The cases where a student who dropped out of school had been a victim or perpetrator have also been identified. This paper shall not further elaborate on the issue of violence in the examined schools because this issue exceeds its scope. Early school leaving caused by peer violence is a specific case, but it can be assumed that the dropout risk for perpetrators or victims would be lower if schools could prevent violence or respond to it in an adequate

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manner. What is characteristic for schools with a high dropout rate is that the peer violence team does not operate, and students are not involved in violence problem solving. As we shall see later, in these schools peer interaction and participation have not been utilised as a resource and a protective factor for reducing the dropout risk.

Student and parent participation

Generally speaking, in the examined schools with a high dropout rate, student and parent participation is at an extremely low level.

Schools differ greatly when it comes to the Student parliament activities and its functionality. In most schools the parliament exists only formally and often does not convene at all. Only in two primary and three secondary schools was the parliament very active and participated in creating, organising and carrying out various activities within school, but no activities dealing with dropout prevention were organised. Regardless of that, in both primary and secondary schools with a high dropout rate students are not familiar with the problem of early school leaving (except at a personal level, if they know somebody who dropped out of school), or with the ways of solving that issue They most often mention familial and personal circumstances as the causes due to which some students leave school early. Our student interlocutors had no idea how they could contribute to a decrease in student dropout via the Student parliament; they saw possibilities solely in personal contacts with students at risk, with whom they could talk and help them continue their education.

The situation is similar regarding parents' participation and involvement. The Parents' committee exists in all schools, but its functionality differs. In the majority of schools, according to parents themselves, the Parents' committee has a more or less active role and is included in various aspects of school life and functioning. However, not in a single case was the Parents' committee informed about the problem of dropping out of school, and hence did not participate in its solving. The interviewed parents assume that the school is doing all it can about this and that the Parents' committee or its individual members cannot contribute to the solution.

School counsellors in the examined schools emphasise that their cooperation with families mostly consists of advising and educating parents. In some cases when a child dropped out of school, school counsellors and teachers identified inadequate cooperation with parents as a crucial factor.

There are different reasons why cooperation between parents and school is not appropriately conducted, but three main ones can be singled out. From the staff point of view, a number of parents have objective reasons for not being able to make it: because of their work they do not have time to come to school, or the school is far from where they live so they cannot visit. In

a number of parents, according to staff, the lack of cooperation with school shows that they are not interested in the child and his/her education. Finally, some parents do not come to school because they are not educated enough, hence the lack knowledge about the possibilities and the importance of cooperating with school. In schools with a pedagogical assistant (only two in the sample) this problem is reduced by their active insistence on cooperation and by paying visits to their students' families.

A number of examined factors in our research proved not to be relevant for student dropout. Physical conditions in school, its neat layout and equipment can have an impact on the quality of teaching but are not directly related to the dropout risk. Similarly, management type, although important for the general atmosphere and the quality of school activities, has no direct influence on dropout incidence.

Discussion

The data obtained in our research support the main findings from reference works that the vital factor related to student academic achievement and dropout is the quality of teaching (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Hattie & Yates, 2014; Lessard, Poirier & Fortin, 2010; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). The lack of individualised support in both regular and remedial classes for students with learning difficulties and/or those who are less motivated to learn is one of the main school factors for dropping out of school. The analysis of students' answers led us to the conclusion that students' inability to learn the content of lessons from a particular subject, i.e. do their homework individually or with their family, without the compensatory role of remedial classes, results in lower achievement, repeating a year, the feeling of failure, lower self-esteem, which all increases the risk of dropping out. Negative effects of unfair grading and lack of useful feedback on students' wellbeing and achievement have also been observed. Inadequate use of assessment, with formative grading being rarely present among Serbian teachers, has already been demonstrated in previous studies (Jeremić et al., 2012). Since achieving pedagogical competencies has only recently been included in initial teacher training[6], we can assume that the teachers had no opportunity to reassess their implicit beliefs on teaching and learning and to improve their teaching practices in accordance with contemporary approaches to education.

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6   Before 2012, it was not obligatory for prospective subject teachers to have passed exams dealing with educational psychology, didactics, or subject didactics. Many faculties that, inter alia, "produce" future vocational school teachers (e.g. Law, Economics, Technology, etc.) did not offer this type of courses, nor adequate school practice to their students, so many teachers entered schools with poorly developed teaching competences.

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It has also been established that teachers tend to lower their criteria, thus enabling students to pass the grades. In primary schools, they lower the criteria because they believe particular students are not able to attain certain knowledge, whereas in secondary schools, which are not obligatory, they do it because it is in school's interest to keep a high number of students (even only formally) and thus to preserve all teachers' jobs.

Teacher-student relationships also represent a very important, albeit in our schools often neglected aspect of educational process. There is an ever-increasing number of empirical findings which in no uncertain terms confirm the significant role of emotions and socio-emotional teacher-student relationships, the importance of emotional support for students, not only in terms of their academic achievement, but also when it comes to their self-respect, self-efficacy, positive attitude to learning, the feeling of belonging to school etc. (Hamre et al., 2013; Hattie & Yates, 2014; Krstić, 2015; Krstić, 2016; Pekrun, 2006; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). The teachers in schools with a high dropout rate rarely establish good relationships with students – the relationships of emotional support and trust, which would serve to students as a basis for learning and development in school milieu. The majority of teachers have no understanding, do not recognise students' specific problems and needs and do not want to tackle them, or they express their understanding and empathy for students' problems by being lenient towards them. They also belittle and discourage students, thereby deepening their personal insecurities and lack of interest in education, which consequently leads to dropping out, this being in line with previous studies (Lessard et al., 2004). Physical violence is only present in primary schools, whereas in secondary schools, verbal violence predominates. We may say that such a negative teacher-student relationship is not regularly observed in typical Serbian schools which do not have problems with early school leaving (Krstić, 2015; Simić, Vukelić & Marković Rosić, 2017).

School staff members often shift the responsibility on the child and the family without realising their own responsibility for student dropout, which is the finding of earlier studies in our context (Friedman, Pavlović Babić & Simić, 2015; Jovanović, Simić & Rajović, 2013; Plut & Krnjaić, 2004). A good teacher-student relationship, reflected in a mentoring role and provision of aimed, adequate and timely support in individual child's learning and development, is not perceived as a resource in the prevention of dropping out of educational system. Amongst our respondents, the mentoring role was only assumed by pedagogical assistants, whilst most teachers do not regard it as part of their duties. The introduction of the pedagogical assistant proved to be an exceptionally useful and efficient measure in many ways, as shown in previous analyses (Daiute, Kovacs-Cerovic, Todorova, Jokic & Ataman, 2013; Duvnjak, Mihajlović, Skarep, Stojanović & Trikic, 2010).

Limited students' and parents' participation in the school life, lack of their engagement in the problem of dropping out, and their beliefs that the main cause of leaving the school lies outside of school, were observed in our schools. This constellation of risk factors is dominant in secondary schools. These findings are in accordance with the results from the study of parent participation in schools in Southeast Europe (Kovacs-Cerovic, Vizek-Vidović & Powell, 2010). This study pointed out that the parents perceived they were not invited or expected to cooperate with schools, especially the parents from minority (Roma) groups, who needed this kind of cooperation the most. Empirical findings and experiences from other educational systems indicate that readiness for cooperation, support for proactivity and participation, promoting tolerance, mutual respect and initiative can serve as a strong mechanism for dropout prevention (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Immediate reasons for students' dropout are most frequently personal and individual (poor academic achievement, lack of motivation and low educational aspirations, pregnancy, poverty, employment and supporting family[7]), but these conditions lead to early school leaving only when the school does not recognise the problems and difficulties a student is faced with and does not provide a well-timed and adequate support in their learning and development (Lazarević et al., 2014; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2015). Teachers do not realise their own responsibility for motivating the students, i.e. fail to see that their attitude and behaviour influences the extent to which the students will be (dis)satisfied with school and possibly drop out of it. They are unaware that it is their role to motivate children and familiarise them with the importance of education, but instead refer to students as unmotivated, uninterested, lazy, and so on (Kovač Cerović & Radišić, 2015; Krnjaić, 2004).

Reference works list various school resources which can play a preventative role and reduce dropout risk (Lyche, 2010; Kerka, 2006), but they have not been recognised or utilised in our schools. Extracurricular activities taking place in schools as a means of attracting students and encouraging them to feel they belong to the school, where activities are aimed at their interests and needs, were not identified as a way of cooperating with children by our interlocutors. A particular flaw of extracurricular activities in the form of various sports or courses (of music, drawing, dancing, arts and crafts) organised in schools lies in the fact that they are not focused on attracting the children from the most vulnerable groups, who are at the greatest risk of dropping out but cannot afford to pay for such activities.

Peer interaction and different manifestations of a mentoring role are also resources available in all schools, but they are not recognised in our schools and thus are not used for improving work quality. The student parliament and parents' committee, as well as other students and parents, are not included

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7   For more, see Videnović & Lazarević, 2017.

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in school life and in solving different problems schools face, not even the problem of a high dropout rate in the examined schools

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the interviews and focus groups with different actors in the educational process, on a sample of 8 primary and 13 secondary schools in Serbia, we established that school factors with the greatest impact on student dropout include the following: the quality of teaching, support in learning and development, and student-teacher relationships. Each individual case of a student dropping out of school is specific, and so are working conditions in every school.

There is not a single measure which would directly lead to a decrease in dropout numbers, but it is necessary to recreate the entire school climate and culture so as to provide good quality of education for every child, and thus prevent dropping out. Since regular and adequately planned remedial classes are one of the main factors in the prevention and reduction of student dropout from primary and secondary schools, it is recommendable for both primary and secondary schools to organise remedial classes regularly, to apply various teaching methods and to provide adequate and timely feedback to students. It should be emphasised that organising student-oriented teaching, which would engage all students during regular lessons, and promoting cooperation between peers and teachers themselves, serves as a preventative measure that should be administered first if we aim to create an inclusive, successful school. School leadership has a key role in the promotion of inclusive values and supporting its staff in the professional development, particularly in the domains of contemporary teaching methods and aids, assessment, individualisation, communication, and socio-emotional development support.

The introduction of a pedagogical assistant is one of the measures that our participants considered exceptionally useful and efficient. However, even though all examined schools expressed the need for one, such request has been approved for only two schools. Since the role of a pedagogical assistant is significant for the progress and academic achievement of students they work with and for the cooperation with their parents, all schools with high dropout rates should be provided this kind of support.

Although our interlocutors recognised extracurricular activities as a means of attracting students and encouraging them to feel they belong to the school, they are not perceived as a means of dropout prevention. Therefore, schools should, in cooperation with local organisations, initiate free extracurricular activities that would gather all students and even their parents. School leadership should pay special attention to involving students and parents

in the planning and implementation of measures to reduce dropout, for example, through regular activities of the Student parliament and the Parents' committee.

Finally, the limitations of this study should be taken into account. Some of them stem from the methodological approach: longitudinal studies that combine quantitative and qualitative approaches would provide more reliable and valid results. Furthermore, the research was conducted on a relatively small sample of schools. The participation of a greater number of schools would lead to a more thorough understanding of the impact of individual factors, as well as the conditions in which they do or do not contribute to an increase in dropout risk. Further research is crucial in order to broaden the understanding of the dropout phenomenon in our milieu, as well as an assessment of applicability and efficiency of different models or measures and strategies for prevention in order to provide the conditions for improving the educational system and reducing the dropout rate.

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Školski faktori povezani sa osipanjem iz osnovnog i srednjeg obrazovanja u Srbiji – kvalitativno istraživanje

Nataša Simić
Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet

Ksenija Krstić
Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet

Osipanje iz obrazovnog sistema je ozbiljan individualni, porodični, obrazovni i socijalni problem. Na ovaj složen proces utiče veliki broj faktora. Proces odustajanja od školovanja se dešava u školi, pa različiti školski faktori mogu delovati kao faktori rizika ili prevencije. Stopa osipanja iz obrazovnog sistem u Srbiji je i dalje velika. Jedan način da se unapredi obrazovni sistem i da se obezbedi pravo na jednako obrazovanje za svako dete jeste da se smanji stopa osipanja iz osnovnog i srednjeg obrazovanja. Kao deo veće studije, cilj ovog istraživanja bio je da se istraže i identifikuju ključni školski faktori povezani sa osipanjem iz osnovnog i srednjeg obrazovanja u Srbiji. Istraživanje je sprovedeno u 8 osnovnih i 13 srednjih škola iz 17 opština sa visokom stopom osipanja. Da bi se čula mišljenja različitih aktera u obrazovnom sistemu, sprovedeno je kvalitativno istraživanje, koje je obuhvatilo intervjue i fokus grupne diskusije sa nastavnicima, direktorima, psiholozima, pedagoškim asistentima, roditeljima i učenicima. Na osnovu analize odgovora, izdvojeno je nekoliko najznačajnijih školskih faktora. Pokazalo se da najveći uticaj na osipanje učenika imaju nizak kvalitet (individualizacija) nastave, nedostatak emocionalne podrške i podrške u učenju, i nedostatak pozitivnih odnosa nastavnik-učenik. Sa druge strane, naši rezultati ukazuju da je učešće roditelja i učenika resurs koji nije dovoljno iskorišćen u prevenciji osipanja. Ovi faktori su opisani i objašnjen je njihov značaj u kontekstu obrazovnog sistema u Srbiji. Rezultati su diskutovani u svetlu sličnih nalaza ranijih istraživanja.

Ključne reči: osipanje, školski faktori, odnos nastavnik-učenik, podrška u učenju, kvalitativna analiza

Familial and individual reasons for student dropout: schools' perception[1]

Marina Videnović[2]
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Psychology

Ljiljana B. Lazarević
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Psychology

The main objective of the research was to identify individual and familial factors students cite as the reasons for dropping out of school or being at the risk of doing so. We interviewed a total of twelve students who dropped out of school or are at the risk of dropping out of primary (six students) or secondary school (six students) and four parents. A semi-structured interview was used. We singled out four categories of students, determined by their perception of the reasons for dropping out of school. Those categories included: underage pregnancy, assuming a parental role, problematic behaviour (thefts, fights) and weak motivation for school and learning. It seems justified to look for a typology of dropout cases since each of the selected groups of students requires specific preventive measures in order to secure continuation of their education. Furthermore, research has shown that, when it comes to their children dropping out of school, parents tend to blame the child's character traits they deem unchangeable. The failure of school staff to help the child further encourages this belief in parents.

Key words: school dropout, risk factors, typology of dropout cases, qualitative methodology.

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2   Email: marina.videnovic79@gmail.com