

Psychological Factors Associated with School Dropout Intention of Secondary School Students

Cristina-Sabina Găzdac, Lavinia Damian-Ilea

Psychological Factors Associated with School Dropout Intention of Secondary School Students

Cristina-Sabina Găzdac^{a*}, Lavinia Damian-Ilea^b 

^a “Ștefan cel Mare” Gymnasium School, Bistrița, Romania

^b Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, “Babeș-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

*Corresponding author: crisfilipoiu95@gmail.com

Abstract

Keywords:

dropout intention, ethnic identity, ethnic victimization, school engagement, secondary school students, rural area, teacher support

School dropout in Romanian mainstream education has become an increasingly concerning phenomenon, especially among ethnic minority groups such as Roma students. This paper examines the psychological and individual factors involved in students' intention to drop out of secondary school in a rural area. The study investigates factors such as ethnic identity, school involvement, self-efficacy, resilience, and ethnic victimization. A cross-sectional correlational design was applied to a sample of 138 Romanian, Hungarian, and Roma adolescents enrolled in lower secondary schools in Mureș County, Romania. The results highlight that the intention to drop out of school is significantly associated with loneliness, lack of behavioral engagement, and experiences of victimization. Teacher support and resilience emerged as protective factors, mitigating dropout intention. Implications for educational policies and intervention programs are discussed, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive strategies in Romanian schools.

1. Introduction

This study was motivated by the first author's professional experience working with ethnically diverse secondary school students. Among these, Roma students appeared to face challenges in integrating into Romanian education, such as psychosocial barriers and with ethnic values shaping their behavior and cognition. Guided by a scientist-practitioner perspective, the research aimed to investigate these issues empirically.

The primary objective was to examine the relations between school dropout intentions and constructs such as ethnic identity, victimization, school involvement, resilience, and teacher support among Romanian, Hungarian, and Roma adolescents students. A secondary objective was to explore the associations between ethnic identity and school dropout intentions, victimization, school involvement, resilience, and self-efficacy.

A cross-sectional correlational design was employed, with data collected through questionnaires administered to 138 adolescents attending gymnasium schools in the Mureș rural communities of Cristești, Ogra, Izvoarelor Valley, and Chirileu. For greater clarity, it should be noted that secondary school (as used in the title), middle school and gymnasium refer to the same educational stage. In Romania, this stage corresponds to grades 5 through 8.

Findings indicated that school dropout intentions were associated with multiple factors, including low social and teacher support, feelings of loneliness, low behavioral engagement, and experiences of physical, social, verbal, media-based, and property-related victimization. Ethnic identity was positively associated with resilience and behavioral engagement and negatively correlated with victimization and loneliness.

These findings highlight the complex interplay between ethnic identity, psychosocial factors, and school engagement. They underscore the importance of targeted interventions to support adolescents at risk of school dropout, particularly within marginalized ethnic communities.

2. Theoretical foundation

For some students, staying in school represents a significant challenge, leading them to leave upper secondary education prematurely without completing their studies. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as school dropout.

The literature indicates that there is no standardized operational definition of dropout (Christle et al., 2007; Lundetræ et al., 2011; Strom & Boster, 2007). For instance, Fitzpatrick and Yoels (1992) define dropouts as students who leave upper secondary education



without graduating within four years, regardless of whether they later return to complete their studies. Similarly, Lundetræ (2011) defines school dropouts as students who fail to complete the gymnasium cycle within five years. In Norway, approximately 30% of all students who begin gymnasium fall into this category, a proportion that has remained relatively stable over the past two decades (Norway, 2013).

Students who drop out can be classified into three groups: those who leave school early (within the first five years), those who remain in gymnasium during the sixth year, and those who fail to complete their studies (Norway, 2013). Between 2007 and 2012, around 17% of students were anticipated to drop out and leave the educational system (Frostad et al., 2015).

Reviews conducted by Rumberger (1987, 1995; Rumberger & Sun, 2008) indicate that antecedents, correlates, and consequences of secondary school dropout have been extensively studied. These studies suggest that there is no single cause for leaving school. Moreover, students who drop out early are not a homogeneous group; they do not share the same risk factors. Instead, students may have highly diverse reasons for leaving school.

Traditional research on this phenomenon has examined the role of demographic predictors such as age, gender, and ethnicity (Rumberger, 1983). In addition to demographic factors, several social predictors have been identified, including poverty, single-parent families, parents with low educational attainment, and minority background (Frostad et al., 2015). A third group of predictors includes early academic underachievement and low scholastic performance (Fagan & Pabon, 1990). Personal factors, often combined with poor academic performance, constitute another reason for school dropout. However, this issue requires a comprehensive perspective, considering individual student characteristics alongside school-related factors that affect students' decisions to stay in or leave school (Frostad et al., 2015). These findings suggest that school organization, communication, leadership, and teachers can significantly impact a student's decision to remain in school (Knesting, 2008; Rumberger, 1987).

3. Research methodology

This study aimed to investigate two primary aspects:

- The relations between school dropout intentions and the following constructs: ethnic identity,

victimization, school involvement, resilience, self-efficacy and teacher support among secondary school students.

- The relations between ethnic identity and the following constructs: school dropout intentions, victimization, school involvement, resilience, and self-efficacy among secondary school students.

The target population comprised 138 adolescent boys and girls enrolled in grades VI, VII, and VIII in secondary schools located in the Mureș county rural communities of Cristești, Ogra, Valea Izvoarelor and Chirileu.

A stratified random sampling method was employed, with ethnicity as the stratification variable. Participants identified as Romanian, Hungarian, or Roma. The distribution of participants by ethnicity was as follows: 45 Romanian (32,6%), 41 Hungarian (29,7%), and 52 Roma (37,7%) students. Regarding gender, the sample included 80 boys and 58 girls. Distribution by grade level was 53 students in grade VI, 45 students in grade VII, and 40 students in grade VIII.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire with answers on Likert scales, which included scales measuring the following constructs: ethnic identity, resilience, school engagement, self-efficacy, perceived ethnic discrimination or victimization, and school dropout intention. The specific instruments utilized were translated for the present study, while those previously translated were referenced according to earlier studies:

- *Ethnic Identity Scale* (Umaña-Taylor, Yazedijian, & Bamaca-Gomez, 2004);
- *Resilience Questionnaire* (Oshio et al., 2003; translated and adapted into Romanian by Cazan & Truța, 2015);
- *Self-Efficacy subscale of the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales* (PALS; Midgley et al., 2000; translated and adapted into Romanian by Damian et al., 2017);
- *School Engagement Measure* (Fredricks et al., 2004, 2005).

4. Results

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 25, 2019) to perform Pearson's bivariate correlation coefficients (r). Descriptive statistics can be consulted in Table 1 whereas results of correlational analyses can be found in Table 2. We will

describe the obtained results for each study objective below.

4.1. School dropout intentions and ethnic identity, victimization, school involvement, resilience, self-efficacy and teacher support among secondary school students. In the current study, the intention to drop out was significantly positively associated with all types of victimization: social victimization, media victimization, property attacks, and physical victimization. There is also a significant positive correlation between the intention to drop out and loneliness at school. Conversely, the intention to drop out was found to correlate negatively with behavioral school engagement.

Regarding teacher support, the data showed that it correlates negatively with the intention to drop out among adolescents. At the same time, teacher support was positively associated with better behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in school, as well as with increased adolescent self-efficacy.

As for the relation between teacher support and resilience, the surveyed students reported being more willing to explore situations in the academic environment and to maintain a positive orientation toward their academic future (i.e., novelty seeking and positive orientation). They also reported being more aware of the meaning of their own ethnicity and having a clearer sense of the value of their ethnic identity. Loneliness at school was strongly associated with the intention to drop out. Teacher support correlated significantly positively with self-efficacy.

4.2. Ethnic identity and school dropout intentions, victimization, school involvement, resilience, and self-efficacy among secondary school students. Research results indicated that the ethnic identity of middle school students does not significantly affect their intention to drop out of school or permanently

discontinue their studies, as the correlations with ethnic identity affirmation, ethnic identity exploration, and ethnic identity clarity were nonsignificant.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alphas

Scale	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient
Intention to Drop Out			
1. Intention to Drop Out	15.6	6.14	.83
2. Teacher Support	21.7	5.86	.88
3. Loneliness	10.01	5.27	.87
Ethnic Identity			
4. Exploration	22.45	5.84	.62
5. Affirmation	24.58	5.13	.71
6. Clarity	15.39	3.76	.72
Resilience			
7. Novelty Seeking	25.97	4.55	.67
8. Emotional Regulation	20.29	4.50	.39
9. Positive Orientation	19.21	4.26	.78
10. Self-Efficacy	17.27	4.47	.83
School Engagement			
11. Behavioral Engagement	18.46	3.69	.64
12. Emotional Engagement	19.27	4.73	.71
13. Cognitive Engagement	23.26	6.48	.77
Victimization			
14. Physical Victimization	7	3.69	.84
15. Verbal Victimization	8.69	4.35	.78
16. Social Victimization	8.04	4.07	.83
17. Property Attack	7.80	4.57	.89
18. Average Victimization	8.4	4.65	.84

Table 2.

Correlations Among School Dropout Intention, Teacher Support, Loneliness, Resilience, School Engagement, Self-Efficacy, and Victimization

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1. School Dropout Intention	—																		
2. Teacher Support	-.19*	—																	
3. Loneliness	.51**	.20	—																
4. Resilience – Affirmation	-.13	.12	-.33**	—															
5. Resilience – Exploration	-.06	-.01	-.03	.11	—														
6. Resilience – Clarity	.04	.20*	-.17*	.28**	.29**	—													
7. Behavioral Engagement	-.29**	.27**	-.11	.22*	.16	.37**	—												
8. Emotional Engagement	-.11	.30**	-.05	.08	-.08	.10	.15	—											
9. Cognitive Engagement	-.05	.29**	.02	.08	.10	.11	.45**	.43**	—										
10. Self-Efficacy	-.12	.35**	-.26**	.09	-.02	.28**	.33**	.35**	.47**	—									
11. Novelty Seeking	.03	.33**	-.20*	.13	.18*	.39**	.29**	.11	.21*	.53**	—								
12. Emotional Regulation	-.05	.03	-.06	.14	-.04	.07	.12	.23**	.36**	.10	—	—							

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
13. Positive Orientation	-.12	.34**	.23**	.22**	.05	.31**	.29**	.23**	.26**	.50**	.39**	.09	—						
14. Total Resilience	-.06	.36**	-.25**	.26**	.10	.39**	.36**	.30**	.42**	.58**				—					
15. Physical Victimization	.37**	-.17	.32**	-.23**	-.01	-.10	-.10	.17	.06	-.14					—				
16. Social Victimization	.30**	-.07	.26**	-.22*	-.24**	-.13	-.14	.23**	.01	-.01						—			
17. Verbal Victimization	.13	-.02	.28**	-.19*	.01	-.06	-.01	.17	-.02	-.15							—		
18. Property Victimization	.21*	-.14	.33**	-.31**	-.07	-.09	-.15	.03	-.06	-.19*								—	
19. Media Victimization	.25**	-.09	.40**	-.19*	-.10	-.13	-.10	.19*	.06	-.05									—

5. Discussions

5.1. School dropout intentions and ethnic identity, victimization, school involvement, resilience, self-efficacy and teacher support among secondary school students. The present study identified that the primary factors correlated with school dropout intentions among secondary school students were loneliness at school, low behavioral engagement, and victimization. Adolescents who showed higher levels of behavioral engagement were less likely to consider leaving school. Active behavioral participation includes volunteering, presenting projects in front of the class, taking on active roles in group work, and feeling accepted and appreciated by peers (Farmer et al., 2003).

High correlation scores between school dropout intention and victimization indicate that students are more prone to consider leaving school when they experience physical, emotional, verbal, or media-related abuse, or when their personal property is harmed. These findings align with prior research showing that school victimization negatively impacts both school participation and socio-emotional adaptation (Phelan et al., 1994).

Consistent with Lee et al. (1999), one of the most important factors affecting adolescents' school satisfaction is the quality of the student-teacher relationship, characterized by acceptance and support. In this study, high correlations were observed between teacher support and self-efficacy, novelty seeking, resilience, positive orientation, and emotional regulation.

Adolescents expressing an intention to leave school reported lower levels of resilience. They were less inclined to explore the academic environment, held a less positive vision of their future, and exhibited lower self-efficacy. Additionally, they were less likely to assert themselves within their ethnic community or to develop a clear sense of ethnic identity. In addition, teacher support was significantly associated with loneliness, indicating that students who felt isolated at

school also perceived lower levels of support and understanding from their teachers.

5.2. Ethnic identity and school dropout intentions, victimization, school involvement, resilience, and self-efficacy among secondary school students. Interestingly, no significant correlations were found between ethnic identity and school dropout intentions in this sample. The correlations between ethnic identity and students' intention to drop out of school were found to be minimal and statistically non-significant. Overall, these findings indicate that ethnic identity alone does not exert a substantial effect on the decision to discontinue formal education during the middle school years. It is likely that other interpersonal and intrapersonal factors play a more prominent role in shaping students' intentions to leave the educational environment. These findings highlight the importance of focusing on broader interpersonal and intrapersonal factors—such as victimization, loneliness, school engagement, and teacher support—when addressing school dropout risk, rather than attributing it to ethnic identity factors.

These important findings should be interpreted through the lens of a few limitations. First, the correlational design prevents causal inference, providing only information on concurrent relations between variables. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study allows assessment at a single point in time, limiting the ability to predict long-term outcomes. Third, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce subjectivity, defensive response mechanisms, or superficial answers. Consequently, future research should address these limitations by using larger samples, longitudinal designs, and culturally adapted measurement tools to further investigate and prevent school dropout, with particular attention to ethnic-specific needs. To deepen the understanding of school dropout, the following future research directions are proposed: (1) *Sample expansion*: Including a larger number of participants to increase the generalizability of the results; (2) *Longitudinal design*: Monitoring the evolution of dropout intentions over an extended period to identify trends and predictive factors; (3)

Development of a national questionnaire: Creating an instrument adapted to the cultural and educational specificities of Romania to assess adolescents' school dropout intentions; (4) *Designing intervention programs:* Developing counseling and career guidance programs that take into account the ethnic-specific needs of students.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations, the present research has important implications which we will discuss below.

From a theoretical perspective, this research deepens the understanding of school dropout among gymnasium students, highlighting factors that contribute to the development of early school leaving, including teacher support, self-efficacy, victimization, school engagement, and resilience. The findings provide a foundation for further research in vocational guidance and career counseling.

From a practical standpoint, the results offer a basis for developing intervention and prevention programs targeting adolescents at risk of dropping out. Understanding the importance of teacher support can inform future teacher training programs, emphasizing empathy, unconditional acceptance, and respect, which may help reduce dropout rates.

Recognizing the unique characteristics of different ethnic groups and their influence within the Romanian education system can inform practical interventions. At the human resources level, schools may ensure the presence of specialized personnel tailored to the needs of each ethnic group, including teachers, school pedagogues, counselors, and community mediators. Attention should be given to providing qualified teachers for teaching the Romani language, according to the needs of students and their families.

At the curriculum level, educational plans, programs, textbooks, and supplementary materials should be adapted to the needs of target students, covering core knowledge (reading, writing, mathematics, history, geography, civics) as well as vocational elements. For Roma students, curricula should include the Romani language and aspects of Roma history and culture, similar to the content provided for Hungarian students.

Active-participatory teaching methodologies should be employed to address adaptation difficulties, prevent school failure, and value students' cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral progress. These methods aim to enhance learning motivation and improve students' self-image.

Engagement with community mediators—educational, social, and medical—can strengthen the relationship between schools and the community. Social support may be enhanced through projects such as counseling programs for Roma children and their families, provision of free school meals, and initiatives to increase involvement and acceptance from peers and the wider community.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study shows that school dropout intention among Romanian secondary school students is affected by multiple psychosocial factors, including loneliness, low behavioral engagement, and experiences of physical, social, verbal, and media-related victimization. Ethnic identity emerged as a protective factor, being positively associated with resilience and behavioral engagement, and negatively related to victimization and loneliness. Teacher support, self-efficacy, and positive school experiences play a central role in fostering student retention and promoting academic persistence.

These findings have important theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, they contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social determinants of school dropout within ethnically diverse populations. Practically, they provide a basis for developing targeted intervention programs, teacher training initiatives, and culturally responsive curricula designed to support at-risk students.

Providing both theoretical and practical implications, the present findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social determinants of school dropout within ethnically diverse populations and offer a foundation for developing targeted interventions, teacher training, and culturally responsive curricula to support at-risk students.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the teachers of Cristești Gymnasium School (Mureș, Romania) for their invaluable assistance in data collection.

Authors note:

Cristina-Sabina Găzdac is a graduate of the Master's program in Public and Clinical Health Psychology at Faculty of Psychology and Educational

Sciences “Babeş-Bolyai” University, Romania, and currently works as a primary school teacher at “Ștefan cel Mare” Gymnasium School, Bistrița, Romania. She intends to pursue doctoral studies in Educational Psychology, focusing on school dropout, ethnic identity, resilience, and psychosocial factors affecting adolescent learning. Her research aims to contribute to educational inclusion and student well-being, particularly among Roma and minority students in Romania.

Lavinia Damian-Ilea (former Damian) is a lecturer at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. She conducts seminars in School Psychology and in Career Counseling at undergraduate level and Mental health promotion in children and adolescents at masters level. Her research focuses on antecedents and outcomes of perfectionism in adolescent school students, especially in the school context.

References

- Cazan, A.-M., & Truța, C. (2015). *Stress, resilience and life satisfaction in college students*. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 187, 551–556. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.03.103>
- Christle, C. A., Jolivette, K., & Nelson, C. M. (2007). School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial and Special Education*, 28(6), 325–339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325070280060101>
- Damian, L. E., Stoeber, J., Negru-Subtirica, O., & Baban, A. (2017). On the development of perfectionism: The longitudinal role of academic achievement and academic efficacy. *Journal of Personality*, 85 (4). pp. 565-577.
- Damian, L. E., Stoeber, J., Negru-Subtirica, O., & Baban, A. (2016). Perfectionism and school engagement: A three-wave longitudinal study. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 105 (15). pp. 179-184.
- Fagan, J., & Pabon, E. (1990). Contributions of delinquency and substance use to school dropout among inner-city youths. *Youth & Society*, 21(3), 306–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X90021003002>
- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P., Friedel, J., & Paris, A. (2005). School engagement. In K. A. Moore & L. H. Lippman (Eds.), *What do children need to flourish?* (pp. 305–321). Boston, MA: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/0-387-23823-7_15
- Fitzpatrick, K. M., & Yoels, W. C. (1992). *The social construction of illness: The experience of the chronic patient*. Greenwood Press.
- Frostad, P., Pijl, S. J., & Mjaavatt, P. E. (2015). Losing all interest in school: Social participation as a predictor of the intention to leave upper secondary school early. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 59(1), 110–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2013.847688>
- Knesting, K. (2008). Students at risk for school dropout: Supporting their persistence. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 52(4), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.3200/PSFL.52.4.3-10>
- Lee, P. W. (1999). In their own voices: An ethnographic study of low-achieving students within the context of school reform. *Urban Education*, 34(2), 214–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085999342002>
- Lundetræ, K. (2011). Does parental educational level predict drop-out from upper secondary school for 16- to 24-year-olds when basic skills are accounted for? A cross country comparison. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 55(6), 625–637. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2011.598847>
- Midgley, C., Maehr, M. L., Hruda, L. Z., Anderman, E., Anderman, L., Freeman, K. E., & Urdan, T. (2000). *Manual for the patterns of adaptive learning scales*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
- Mynard, H., & Joseph, S. (2000). *Posttraumatic stress, posttraumatic growth and coping in survivors of acute and chronic trauma: A cross-sectional comparison*. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 7(1), 35–43. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0879\(200002\)7:1<35::AID-CPP228>3.0.CO;2-I](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0879(200002)7:1<35::AID-CPP228>3.0.CO;2-I)
- Norway, S. (2013). Population’s level of education, 1 October 2013. *Statistics Norway Statbank* (www.ssb.no/en/utdanning/statistikker/utniv). Assessed April 1, 2014). ISO 690
- Oshio, A., Kaneko, H., Nagamine, S., & Nakaya, M. (2003). Construct validity of the adolescent resilience scale. *Psychological Reports*, 93(3_suppl), 1217–1222. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.2003.93.3f.1217>
- Popa, M. (2008). *Statistică pentru psihologie – teorie și aplicații SPSS*. Iași: Polirom.
- Rumberger, R. W. (1987). High school dropouts: A review of issues and evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 57(2), 101–121. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543057002101>
- Rumberger, R. W., & Sun, Ah Lim, S. (2008). Why students drop out of school: A review of 25 years of research. California Dropout Research Project Report. University of California, Santa Barbara. https://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/pubs_reports
- Strom, R. E., & Boster, F. J. (2007). Dropping out of high school: A meta-analysis assessing the effect of messages in the home and in school. *Communication Education*, 56(4), 433–452. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520701528923>
- Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Yazedjian, A., & Bámaca-Gómez, M. (2004). Developing the ethnic identity scale using Eriksonian and social identity perspectives. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 4(1), 9–38. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532706XID0401_2