

Postmodernism and communication in education. European funds for combatting school dropout in Romania

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Abstract. *The education system is the means through which education conveys knowledge and information tailored to meet the requirements of inclusive education, i.e. giving access to school to all children in order to learn and be able to decide on their future career. School dropout is the main cause of unemployment, social exclusion, poverty and poor health. These are the reasons why some youngsters leave school earlier: personal and family problems, learning difficulties or a difficult socio-economic situation. Other factors: the functionality of the education system, the atmosphere in school and the relationships between teachers and students. The problems in education worsened because of the pandemic, data showing a high increase in the rate of school dropout. Solutions to this problems need to be found, but it requires considerable financial effort.*

Keywords: education, traditional education, postmodernism, the status of Romanian education, school dropout, financing for combatting school dropout.

JEL Classification: H52, H53, H75.

1. Introduction

Education, as a cluster of actions and activities aimed at forming and developing human personality and integrating youngsters into society, is formally achieved by means of specialised institutions (kindergartens, schools, universities, continuous education centres, etc.), according to a common syllabus (curricula, textbooks, courses, etc.).⁽¹⁾

The educational process, with the help of a competitive and effective education system, may contribute to social stability, empowering decision-makers and managers and leading to competitive workforce. Education is due to pass knowledge and information adapted to global requirements, meet high quality standards, contribute to improving the quality of human activity at the individual and community level, to generate multiple changes in the benefit of society.

Without being confined and isolated from other types of education (intercultural, for security, democracy, mass-media, ecological), education for a global society can be considered a mixture of “new educations” of the individual.

The purpose of the present paper is to find solutions in order to satisfy the necessity of giving access to inclusive education to all children, offering them the opportunity of high-quality education in order to learn and benefit from support, which may add up to the potentialities of the education system, schools and teachers.

2. The history of education

Modern education is centred on personalised learning, the autonomy of the individual and his/her ability of making decisions and interacting with his/her peers of different ages.

The modernist perspective on education proposes a superior mingling of pursuits and creativity, reshaping the relationship between aesthetics, politics, technology, science, culture and social groups.

In conclusion, the education systems are to analyse, plan, develop and support strategies in the following domains:

1. Access to education.
2. High-standard inclusive education.
3. Welfare (mental health, psychological and social support).
4. Safe schools.

Postmodernism is the sequel of modernism. The term “post-modern” is mainly used by critics, whereas “postmodern” is preferred by its supporters. The reason may be the fact that the adjective “postmodern” is considered a symbol and its meaning could be ignored.

It is hard to establish the moment that marked the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Some theorists disagree with the idea of such a distinction, stating that postmodernism is just a part of the larger context of modernity.

The assessment of postmodern education

The purpose of education is to collect data, analyse risks and take regulatory actions, in order to assess and monitor the implementation of educational policies, decide on future actions and intervention conditions at the national, local and school level to attend classes again and recover knowledge.

All the above mentioned should offer guidance to decision-makers so that they could plan and design policies meant to encourage educational performance, identify discrimination when it comes to high-standard inclusive education and learning inequities between different groups during and after the pandemic.

The officials have to make sure that the participants to inclusive education are able to learn and can be supported so as to break limits of accessibility and learning facilities, increase the resilience of the education system and increase the capacity of schools, teachers and the whole education system to offer top education.

In postmodernism, education is influenced by:

- Technology, genetics.
- Digitalization of various environments.
- Pluralism of ideas.
- Toleration and affirmation of minorities.

Postmodernism in education tries to radically break up with modernism by changing the paradigm of education centred on the teacher into student-centred education. Under the circumstances, the statement “education is centered on the student, not on the teacher” is wrong. A system cannot work out without someone to coordinate it and the coordinator cannot coordinate in the absence of the element that needs coordination.

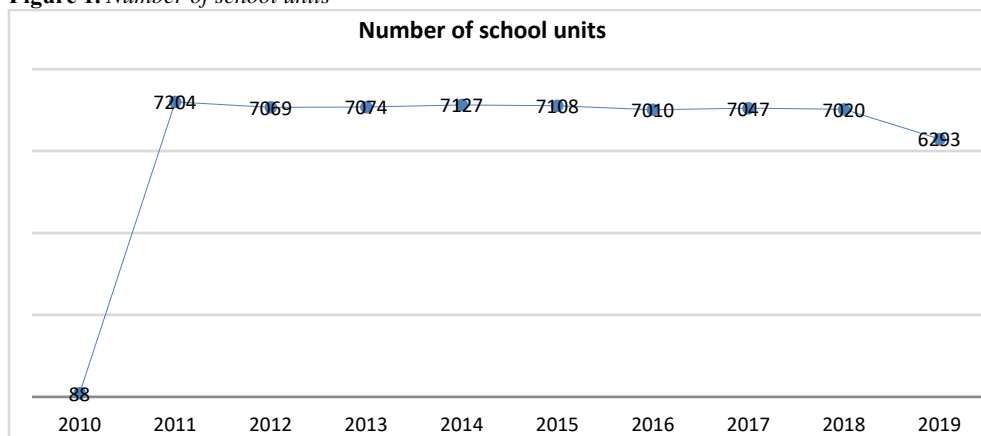
The question that poses is: who is more important? The concept of objectivity offers the central position. Many critics see postmodernism as an ephemeral phenomenon, which is impossible to be defined because, from a philosophical point of view, is not more than a series of separate connections, which only have in common the nostalgia for Modernism. The antipathy of postmodernism against modernism, and their continuous tendency to define themselves in spite of this, attracted a lot of criticism. It was stated that modernity is a dynamic and ever-changing dimension; the evolution from modernism to postmodernism must be regarded as progressive, not as a new type, a sequel or a gap.

3. The status of Romanian schools

At the moment (year 2022), there are 6.293 schools in Romania, according to the data provided by the Ministry of National Education. On the other hand, The National Institute of Statistics counted 7020 schools in 2018, according to the data collected by edupedu.ro from TEMPO database. It has been noticed a dramatic decrease since 2010 by 727 schools. There was a decrease in the number of schools between 2018 and 2019, taking into account the fact that the number of schools was relatively constant from 2011 to 2018, with small

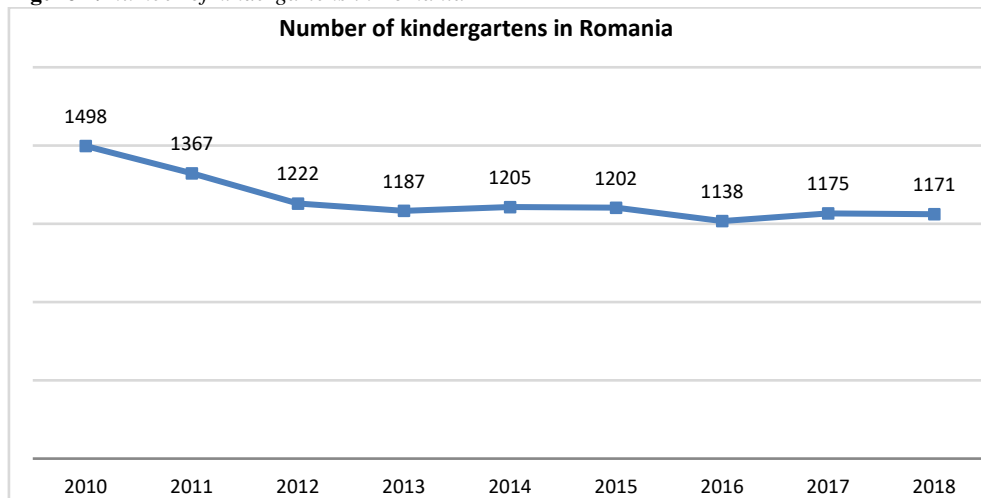
fluctuations. Apart from the 6.293 schools which function as juridical entities, there are also other 11.171 subordinate institutions which may be school buildings, kindergartens or nurseries.

Figure 1. *Number of school units*



Source: National Institute of Statistics.

Figure 2. *Number of kindergartens in Romania*



Source: National Institute of Statistics.

In the academic year 2020-2021 school population was estimated at about 3.494 million children, primary, secondary and university students, 49.8% of them being male students and 73% studied in urban areas (Agerpres. UTILBEN).

Almost half of the school population was represented by primary and secondary schools (45.5%), and about a third by high-school and preschool students (17.8%, respectively 15%). Most of the school population (94.7%) was integrated into state schools, whereas 5.3% of the students studies in private institutions. (NSI).

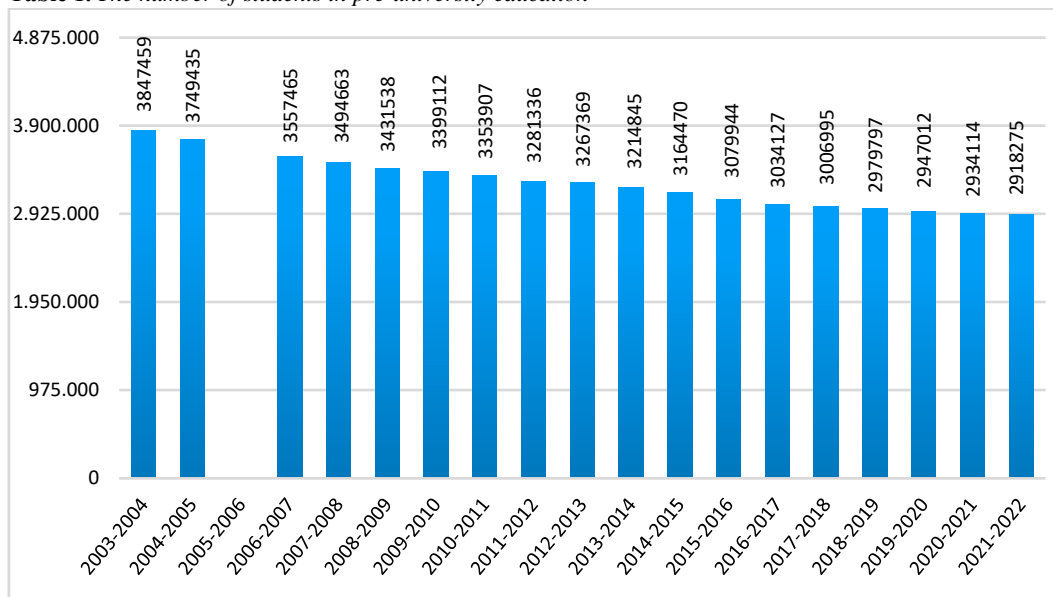
Locally, in the academic year 2020-2021, the biggest school population was registered in the north-eastern region (601.100 people), namely Bucuresti-Ilfov (517.600 people).

The schools/institutions which functioned in the academic year 2020-2021 provided mainly primary and secondary education (57.3%), high-school education (21.0%) and preschool education (16.9%).

According to data provided by NSI, there were 235.600 educators who brought their contribution to the instructional-educational process. “The average of school population and the number of educators was of 15 students for every educator. The number of female educators was dominant both at the level of the whole education system and at the undergraduate level”, according to data collected by NSI. In 2020, 28.4% of the total number of families had a child; 16.1% – 1 child, 9.7% – 2 children, 1.9% – 3 children, 0.7% – 4 or more children.

The school population aged 0 to 23 will be decreasing over the next 40 years, according to the National Institute of Statistics. The figures show that in 2060 there will be by 1.4 million fewer children and youngsters in the education system in comparison with the academic year 2018-2019. The age group 0-2 will face up the most dramatic decrease.

Table 1. *The number of students in pre-university education*



Source: The Ministry of Education, NSI and data.gov.ro/ – initial estimates.

The Romanian Government decided that 2.4% of GDP will go to education by 2070, according to the Convergence Programme approved to be sent to the European Commission. During the government program, The Executive promises to grant 6% of GDP by 2024.

4. School dropout

School dropout is the main cause of unemployment, social exclusion, poverty and poor health. There are many other reasons why youngsters leave school too early: personal and family problems, learning difficulties or a difficult socio-economic situation. Other important factors would be: the functionality of the education system, the atmosphere in school and the relationships between teachers and students.

The Romanian national survey: an overview of children who are not integrated in the Romanian education system.

The highest rate of school dropout is registered at the beginning and end of the education cycle, namely in the preparatory year and the 5th grade, in primary and secondary school, with an overwhelming majority in the rural area, where over 23% of the students enrolled 8 years ago had left school by the end of secondary school. According to the official records about the status of pre-university and university education between 2019 and 2020, published by the Ministry of Education, school dropout has increased at all levels of education. It is to be noted that the difference between the rate of primary and secondary school dropout in the rural and urban area has narrowed down, the rural area still struggling (1.8% urban and 2.6% rural). As a rule, boys have the tendency to leave school more than girls, but in 2021 there was a similar evolution of the rate of dropout in both genders.

As far as gender is concerned, it can be seen that male students drop out school more frequently (in the academic year 2018-2019, 2.3% boys and 2% girls – with an increase by 0.5 p.p., both in the case of boys and girls)”, according to the report.

Further research shows an increase of both values in primary and secondary school:

Table 2. School dropout in primary and secondary education

Primary education											
Total	1,4	1,4	1,6	1,6	1,1	1,2	1,8	1,7	1,5	1,6	2,0
Urban	1,3	1,4	1,6	1,6	0,9	1,1	1,6	1,4	1,1	1,1	1,7
Rural	1,5	1,4	1,6	1,5	1,3	1,4	2,0	2,0	2,1	2,2	2,4
Female	1,3	1,3	1,5	1,4	1,0	1,1	1,6	1,5	1,4	1,4	1,8
Male	1,6	1,6	1,7	1,7	1,2	1,3	1,9	1,8	1,7	1,7	2,1
Gymnasium education											
Total	1,9	1,7	2,0	1,9	1,7	1,8	1,9	2,0	1,8	1,8	2,4
Urban	1,6	1,5	1,9	1,8	1,4	1,5	1,5	1,5	1,2	1,2	2,1
Rural	2,2	1,8	2,0	2,1	2,1	2,1	2,3	2,5	2,5	2,7	2,8
Female	1,8	1,5	1,9	1,7	1,6	1,7	1,7	1,8	0,6	1,7	2,1
Male	2,0	1,8	2,1	2,2	1,9	1,9	2,1	2,1	2,8	2,0	2,6

Source: NSI, 2009-2020.

In primary school, dropout has constantly gone up after 10 years of schooling became mandatory; the situation was better between 2012-2014 only to record a new increase of the rate afterwards. During the current academic year, a growing tendency of rate is to be noted, with a value of 2%. There has been a slight narrowing of the difference between areas of residence, the rural area still facing up with problems.

As far as gender is concerned, the tendency is to remain constant in comparison with the previous academic year (2.1% boys in primary school leave school compared to 1.8% girls), according to The Ministry of Education.

Dropout in university

At the end of the academic year a number of 363.8 (90.4%) thousand students was registered out of the total of 402.7 thousand students that enrolled at the beginning of 2018/2019. Out of the total number of students enrolled at the beginning of the academic year, 346.5 thousand (86%) passed all the exams, while 4.3% were not able to graduate at the end of the year or did not have enough grades.

5. Education and the pandemic

Closing schools because of the COVID-19 pandemic imposed a series of measures to be taken in order to allow the learning and teaching process to continue. Under the circumstances, distance learning is embraced, but, at the moment, it does not manage to provide enough resources and methods that could guarantee the quality of the educational process. It is generally acknowledged that there are noticeable differences between the competences acquired in the urban and rural areas, and the gap between learning facilities is huge. The pandemic deepened the gap by emphasizing the inequality of chances. Television, the internet, the telephone and laptop are the only tools which make learning possible in Romania during the pandemic.

In Romania there are thousands of students (about 500.000 students who do not have access to the internet and over 100.000 students who do not have access to television) who do not have access to information. The parents of over 90.000 Romanian students work abroad. The lack of doctor's offices is one of the major problem of schools. According to a survey made by the organisation Save the Children, in 144 schools in 135 towns and villages all over the country, only 16 benefit from a doctor's office with full-time qualified staff.

Surveys conducted by organisations and foundations (the foundation The Agency for Community Development, The National Student Council and the National Federation of Parents' Association) show that over 50% of students considered that the first month at school at the beginning of the pandemic was chaotic, it was difficult for them to learn in such an educational environment and some teachers were not motivated enough to improve the quality of teaching.

Teachers define the educational process as: 40% believe that the education in the first month of school was a compromise, whereas 34% have a high opinion of it.

Hybrid learning

Students and parents who experienced hybrid learning have a low opinion of it, considering quality diminished because the educator had to give his/her attention both to the students

in the classroom and the ones connected online. Students are not able to understand much when taught online because of technical problems.

Educators consider that the main problem of hybrid learning was the unbalanced distribution of attention between the students in the classroom and the ones staying at home.

Unlike students, educators noticed to a greater extent the lack of access to education for some students, also mentioning the fact that it was even worse for students with special needs and/or disabilities to learn online.

On the other hand, they do not appreciate positively the involvement and presence of parents in online classes: “many members of the family walk through the room where the child studies”.

Parents think that classes are not adapted to hybrid learning and educators are not able to tailor teaching to the needs of the students in the classroom and the students at home. They remarked a lack of rapport between some of the educators and the students, also noticing that some educators were not interested in the students’ feedback and the way they react to content. Although some students gave feedback, educators proved to be stiff and inflexible when it came to adapting content and teaching methods to the students’ experience. Parents who have children in primary school consider that online learning is totally inappropriate, especially for the first years of study, when pupils learn how to read and write.

Access to online education

The purpose of these surveys was also to analyse access to online education by means of some questions addresses to the students about the number of classmates and teachers they consider not to be able to attend online classes.

Thus, according to the students, 30% of them believe that less than 10% of their classmates are unable to attend classes. Moreover, about 60% of the students consider this is not true of any student in their class. The educators’ opinions are totally different from those of the students as they noticed several students from the whole school cannot participate in online classes (including hybrid learning).

Estimates are inaccurate and are based on subjective individual opinions and experiences.

From the students’ point of view, teachers have no solutions to the problem of students who do not have access to online education.

In conclusion, students who experience hybrid learning find it hard to understand the contents and some of them receive worksheets and materials they have to study on their own. At the same time, educators are overwhelmed by the huge number of tasks they have to fulfil in order to adapt the syllabus to online and hybrid teaching, to find solutions for students who are not able to connect to online classes, to communicate with parents, to assess and evaluate students, to face up the pressure of designing interactive classes and to develop digital skills.

Although significant progress has been noted as far as children's rights is concerned over the last 30 years, 40% of the Romanian children live in poverty or risk to suffer from social exclusion, one of the highest rates in the European Union.

About 400-500 thousand children are still not integrated into the education system. Compared to the European standards, more Romanian children and youngsters leave school earlier, even though 2019 registered the lowest percent ever, only 15.7%. Furthermore, 44% of teenagers aged 15 had poorer results than the minimum standards set by the OECD PISA tests.

If we think about the connection between the lack of education and the lack of opportunities, the purpose is to make sure that all children attend school as much as possible and thus have more chances to succeed in life.

Not only during the COVID-19 pandemic should we offer access to education for vulnerable Romanian children, but also after this period in order to reduce absenteeism and school dropout.

One solution would be to give tablets and IT equipment and internet providers for free to vulnerable children in order to allow them to participate in online classes, which could be possible with resources from the European funds.

We shall also take into account training for educators, improving their skills to send information and teach, keeping students engaged and motivating them to learn from home. In rural areas, children live in totally different conditions, starting from natural distance to crowded households, where it is impossible to concentrate on lessons.

Apart from developing online learning and supporting the digitalisation of education, there are also other solutions that seem valid and should also be taken into account. In case tablets and the internet are not available in the area, materials can be printed and sent to each household by means of community services.

Children who live in poverty, children who belong to minorities or children with disabilities have a lot to suffer, especially if they live in rural areas. As a result of the pandemic, vulnerable children are even more exposed to risks, such as being separated from their families, lack of access to medical services, violence and neglect. Of all the European Union countries, Romania distributes the lowest percent from GDP to education. Investing in children requires a redistribution of most of the funds where the majority benefits from: early and compulsory education. These resources can be supplemented from European funds and loans from European and international financial institutions.

The pandemic was a threat for immediate resources, but, at the same time, it also offered us the opportunity to invest in children.

Postmodern criticism

International studies about postmodernism

Charles Murray, a postmodern critic, defines the term as an intellectual trend, laying stress on the words multicultural and political correctness, which hides his distrust in the scientific method.

Some critics consider postmodernism an ephemeral phenomenon, which cannot be defined because of the fact that it is not more than a series of disconnected connections, which only have in common the nostalgia for Modernism. The evolution from modernism to postmodernism must be regarded as progressive, not as a new type or a sequel.

In 1979, Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote a report on the incredulity against meta-narratives. (Translated into Romanian by Ciprian Mihaili, Editura Babel, 1993). Jean Baudrillard, Michael Foucault and Roland Barthes are also representative theorists for postmodernism. Postmodernism is interconnected to other subjects, especially sociology.

Although it is hard to trace back with accuracy the origins of such a major social change, one may assume that postmodernism represents the peak of disappointment to the Enlightenment and to scientific progress, which is the nucleus of modern thought.

Despite the fact that theorists of modernism hoped to emphasise the essentials of art, postmodernism tries to overthrow them so as to embrace diversity and contradiction.

The Romanian school

The Romanian school, the whole education system, needs radical changing because of:

- The reduced capacity of the state to manage and finance education.
- The low interest in research and low stimulation for performance in research and education.
- The ineffective manner of training, recruiting and motivating the staff in education.
- School dropout, slow development of education.
- The lack of skills to present and learn the democratic norms and competences.

Guidelines for the development of the Romanian education system:

- Greater expectations about the length of education and the decrease of school dropout.
- Training youngsters in schools and for their future career.
- Higher quality training offered by universities.
- Keeping the balance between access to higher education and the social status of the candidates or the financial resources available to them.

Funding to reduce school dropout

The pandemic caused things to grow worse for education, school dropout reaching its peak. The rate of school dropout increased in 2020. Over 15% of the Romanian students gave up school in the first year of pandemic, when they could only participate in online classes, and Romania was not ready for this, especially in rural areas. In the countryside, the rate of school dropout registered 26% in 2020.

From this point of view, Romania is on the last positions in Europe. Next year, Romania is going to reduce the rate of school dropout by 9%, and, in order to do this, it will benefit from funding provided by PNRR. It is an ambitious plan, a goal that is hard to be achieved. On Thursday, the government adopted the National Programme for the Reduction of School Dropout, which will receive 543 million euro funding, stated Sorin Campeanu, the Minister of Education. This programme is a non-refundable part of The National Plan for Recovery and Resilience. Over 3.000 schools with high risk of school dropout will receive money to reduce this phenomenon as soon as possible.

The problem needs solving, but this solution involves financial efforts. The Ministry of Education closed the selection of projects which will be funded in the first phase of The National Programme to Reduce School Dropout (NPRSD): “We registered 1.474 applications for funding, but 1.431 of them did not meet the requirements. To support school communities more effectively, even though it was supposed to finance only 750 institutions in the first stage, the Ministry of Education decided to select and give funds to all the projects that met the requirements, in accordance with the methodology. Thus, the 1.391 schools that were granted a minimum of 6/10 points are invited to sign the funding contracts during the following period and are due to achieve their goals in three years from now on.” All the education institutions with high risk of school dropout are eligible for NPRSD. Out of the total number of 1.391 education institutions, 1.114 are located in the rural area (80%) and 277 in the urban area (20%). “The total value of grants is of over 191 million euro + VAT; the average per grant is 138.000 euro + VAT”. The National Programme to Reduce School Dropout is part of the National Reform Project “Educated Romania” and it was approved by The European Commission to be funded with 543 million euro by The National Plan for Recovery and Resilience. The Mechanism of Early Warning in Education (MEWE), which is at the core of implementing the programme, is a tool designed by The Ministry of Education with the help of The World Bank and financing by means of The Structural Reform Support DG REFORM of the European Commission. According to the Minister, “NPRSD is the solution given by the Ministry of Education to the problem of early leaving of school and school dropout, its target being the students with high risk of school dropout, especially students who are part of vulnerable groups, belonging to the Romani minorities, students living in rural and urban areas, students with special educational needs (SEN), students coming from poor families, children risking to suffer from social exclusion because of poverty, lack of home, single-parent family, dysfunctional families, students exposed to other social risks”. According to international practices, NPRSD uses the following leverage to be sustainable:

- The autonomy of schools to make use of resources: the grants will be implemented directly by the education institutions in cooperation with the local community.
- Responsibility for results – goals to be achieved in school are set: a higher rate of applications, lower rate of absenteeism, a higher rate of participation in the national exams, a higher percent of students who manage to pass the final exams with 6; assessment-monitoring students with high risk of school dropout in order to be supported by personalised learning plans.

The Ministry of Investments and European Projects (MIEP) approved the grant application to provide social electronic coupons that ensure the education of 259.786 deprived students in the academic year 2021-2022, with the help of the Operational Program Helping Disadvantaged People (POAD). The value of such a ticket is 500lei/year/student. The help consists in distributing, in the form of tickets, school supplies and materials, clothes that disadvantaged students need to attend school (target group established by OUG no. 133/2020).

Such a project is of tremendous importance to the development of Romania, taking into account the fact that early leaving of school has serious long and medium term socio-economic consequences and that school dropout causes further social exclusion of the individual.

The main aim of this project is to prevent school dropout and early leaving of school for disadvantaged children in preschool, primary and secondary state schools, who are tutored by families with a monthly income that represents maximum 50% of the minimum national gross salary per family member. Another category that benefits from financial assistance is represented by disadvantaged pupils in preschool state schools belonging to families where the minimum monthly income per family member is double the minimum guaranteed income for a person.

The budget of 130 million lei is distributed to 259.786 beneficiaries.

Due to the fact that, at the moment, the Ministry of Education has identified a bigger number of eligible students, further budgetary increase by 215 million lei was demanded so as to give educational assistance to all the eligible beneficiaries.

More than 1.390 schools were selected in the first stage of funding grants for the programme of reducing school dropout, informs the Ministry of Education. The institution made the list of these education institutions public. It is the first funding from The National Plan for Recovery and Resilience. 1.431 schools were acknowledged as eligible. As a result of external evaluation of the quality of the action plans proposed by the education institutions, 1.390 projects received at least 6 points out of 10, although they meet the requirements for financing according to the methodology, states the institution. In the beginning, only 750 schools were supposed to be financed in the first stage, but the Ministry of Education decided to select and give funds to all the projects which respected the financing standards set by the methodology.

Thus, all the 1.391 education institutions which got a minimum of 6 out of 10 points will be invited to sign the funding contracts in the following period and will have to achieve their goals in three years from now on. The problem of school dropout grew worse during the pandemic. Romania, on one of the last places in Europe, will use European funds to improve things.

Note

- ⁽¹⁾ See Montessori education, which involves freedom, with limits; the child has the freedom to work when he/she wants, but the child is not allowed to distract his/her colleagues' attention; the child has the freedom to choose if he/she wants to work with materials that stimulate mathematical or language skills, if he/she wants to sit down or on the floor. Waldorf encourages learning without textbook; competition is not encouraged, the stress being on cooperation and developing the full potential of the student.

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