

# Hidden School Dropout in the Pre-university Education in Albania

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to address the forms and factors that contribute to the hidden school dropout. According to Unicef (2019), some of the factors influencing hidden school dropout in Albania are: the difficult economic situation; health problems and disability; low level of education of parents; distance of schools from inhabited centres; parental emigration; population demographic movements; mentality; blood feuds; social problems; child labour inside and outside the family; irresponsibility of teachers and school leaders; unskilled and insufficient work of parents to enrol children in school or to encourage them to attend school; non-implementation of applicable legal and sub-legal acts in force; non-attendance of kindergarten by pre-schoolers, family, economic and social circumstances of Roma and Egyptian parents, etc.*

*This issue is gaining prominence as a phenomenon that no longer affects only specific groups of students, but as a phenomenon that has spread to all groups as a result of the Pandemic. At first, the students attend school irregularly before becoming hidden school dropouts. According to the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth, 16,697 students from compulsory education in the country have dropped out in the last ten years (2010-2019).*

*The purpose of this study is to identify mechanisms that contribute to the reduction of the phenomenon of hidden school dropout in pre-university education.*

*The method used is the quantitative method. A questionnaire was addressed to teachers to identify students who were at risk school dropout such as: student participation, behaviour, grades (academic achievement), socio-economic status, chronic diseases or disabilities, student's sense of belonging, school relationship with family.*

*Based on the results of the study, after identifying students at risk of dropping out of school, the steps to be followed for the organization were identified, supporting interventions to ensure that such students go back to school. Some of them are: protective factors and strengths that can help the student stay in school, such as interests, talents, social networks, emotional maturity, motivation, etc.; actions to be taken, when and by whom: interventions to be implemented by the school, parents, students and external actors of the school, e.g., mediator, representative of the municipality, educational authorities and monitoring progress.*

**Keywords:** *students, hidden school dropout, pre-university education, pandemic.*

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic shocked education systems worldwide, limiting educational opportunities for many students at all levels and in most countries. Pandemic outbreaks affect over 1.7 billion students, including 99 percent of students in low- and middle-income countries (OECD, 2020c;

United Nations, 2020, p. 2).<sup>1</sup> The states were forced to make an important decision, social distancing, as a result of the situation created by the large number of deaths (3 million people may have died<sup>2</sup>).

Education, the process of teaching and learning, was a key factor in this decision, among others. The disruption of traditional learning, the efficacy of various types of alternative education, the economic shocks that families experienced, food insecurity, stress, anxiety, the impact on mental health, and other factors were among the factors that reduced families' ability to support children and young people in their own education, creating a traumatic context that undermined the focus and commitment required for school assignments.

According to recent research, hidden school dropout is a phenomenon influenced by the following factors: (a) school closures, (b) a lack of instructional materials at home, (c) fear of returning to school and the emotional stress caused by the pandemic, (d) new financial difficulties in the family, (e) a lack of reliable information on the evolution of the pandemic and the reopening of schools, and (f) a lack of teacher training during the crisis. (Hallgarten, 2020, p. 3).<sup>3</sup>

According to UNICEF, the most vulnerable groups of children left out of school in Albania are children with disabilities, children returned from emigration, children with various social problems, children of Roma and Egyptian minorities, girls, children who work to help their families, children who are victims of violence and trafficking, survivors of sexual abuse, abandoned children, children not registered in the Civil Registry Office, etc.

According to the report of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, 16,697 students from compulsory education in the country have dropped out of school in the last 10 years (2010-2019). Children who are at risk of dropping out of school are frequently "out of sight." These children may also be exposed to various risk factors, which "motivate" them to drop out of school even more than their peers.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, a hidden dropout is related to students who physically and regularly attend school but are not active, do not show any kind of interest, and remain mentally detached from school. Students first demonstrate a secret dropout before progressing to a physical school dropout.

The right to education, as well as other children's rights, are sanctioned in legislation; for example, law no. 18/2017 "On the rights and protection of the child"<sup>5</sup> describes a number of obligations of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth and its subordinate institutions, such as access of children to school, cooperation between Ministries, Individual Education Planning (IEP), the right of students to activities, violence prevention etc.

It is specifically stated in point h) of this law that "measures shall be taken for the identification of the child at risk of dropping out of school or of the one who has dropped out of school, coordinating actions with the authorities of the local self-government unit, in order to keep or return the student to school."

The issuance of the Instruction no. 17, dated 09.05.2018, of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth "On the procedures for attending compulsory education by students who have not attended at least two classes of basic education and for part-time system in basic education,"<sup>6</sup>, from the facilities created by the new beneficiary instruction is a very positive act.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. (2020, August). Policy brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond. Retrieved from [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> WHO. (2021b). COVID-19 Global excess mortality. Retrieved 27 May, 2021, from <https://www.who.int/data/stories/the-true-death-toll-of-covid-19-estimating-global-excess-mortality>

<sup>3</sup> Hallgarten, J. (2020, March 31). Evidence on efforts to mitigate the negative educational impact of past disease outbreaks. Institute of Development Studies. Reading, UK: Education Development Trust. (Report 793).

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF; (July, 2019) Guideline for Monitoring out of school children and children at risk of dropping out, p. 14

<sup>5</sup> Law no. 18/2017 "On the rights and protection of the child"

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MASR) Instruction no. 17, dated 09.05.2018 "On the procedures for attending compulsory education by students who have not attended at least two classes of basic education and for part-time system in basic education"

According to UNICEF (2019, 16), some of the factors influencing hidden school dropout in Albania are: the difficult economic situation; health problems and disability; low level of education of parents; distance of schools from inhabited centers; parental migration; population demographic movements; mentality; blood feuds; social problems, child labour exploitation inside and outside the family; irresponsibility of teachers and school leaders; unskilled and insufficient work of parents to enrol children in school; non-implementation of applicable legal and sub-legal acts; non-attendance of preschoolers at kindergarten, family, economic, and social circumstances of Roma and Egyptian parents, etc.

As noticed, there are almost the same reasons that affect school dropout by students at different levels and grades and at different times of the school year. Some of the key factors are: individual factors; family factors; school factors, social factors.

## **2. Methodology**

The quantitative method is employed. A questionnaire was distributed to teachers in order to identify students who were at risk of hidden dropping out of school based on factors such as student participation, behavior, grades (academic achievement), socioeconomic status, chronic illness or disability, personal, feeling of student affiliation, and school relationship with the family. The study was conducted in the district of Durres. Study participants were 89% female and 11% male. Most of them belong to the age group 41-50 years, with a work experience of 11-20 years.

### **Significance of the Study**

- To act as protection agents to students who are at risk of dropping out of school.
- To act as protection agents to prevent other social problems that may arise as a result of dropping out of school.
- To encourage students not only to avoid this phenomenon, but also to strengthen their connection with school, particularly for students at risk.
- To strengthen teacher-family relationships so that teachers can provide guidance and resources to parents on how to better support their children at home.

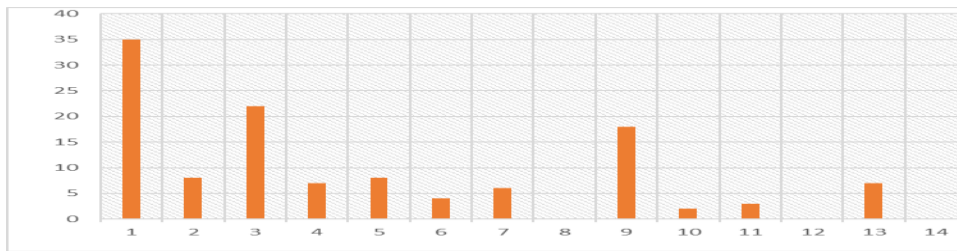
## **3. Results**

According to the results of the questionnaire completed by the teachers for the first question, all teachers (100%) believe that there are students who have been exposed to hidden school dropout in the school where they work.

The majority of them responded that there are 40 children in their school who have been affected by this phenomenon. Not all teachers (78%) responded that there were children in their class who had fallen victim to this phenomenon; those who responded positively, more than 78 percent responded that 1-3 students in their class had fallen victim to the phenomenon of hidden drop out.

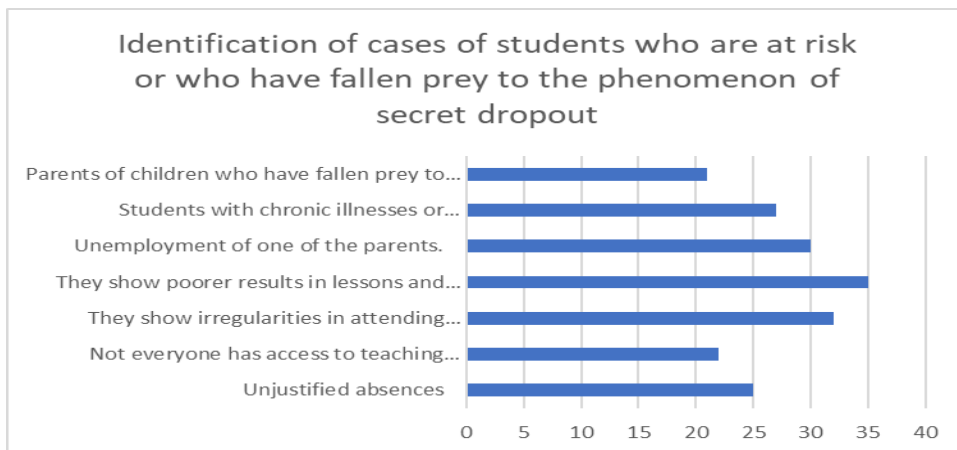
Parents list the following reasons for their children becoming victims of the given phenomenon: difficult economic situation, low level of education of parents, social problems, parental migration, family circumstances, health problems, and economic and social disability of Roma and Egyptian parents, the distance of schools from inhabited centres, the mentality, unskilled and insufficient work with parents to enrol children in school; non-implementation of applicable legal and sub-legal acts, child labour exploitation inside and outside the family.

Blood feuds and non-attendance of kindergartens by pre-schoolers were not selected as potential factors to fall victim to this phenomenon by students in the district of Durres.



Regarding the identification of cases of students who are at risk or who have been exposed to the phenomenon of hidden dropout, most of the teachers (78%) answered that some of the children do not attend school regularly, their absences are unjustified and not everyone has access to instructional materials. Students who have fallen victim to this phenomenon show irregularities in attending classes, participating in activities such as discussions, recording for various topics such as acting, music, physical activity, etc.

In terms of academic performance, they demonstrate poorer academic performance as well as non-performance of school assignments. In terms of the parents' financial situation, the majority of teachers have stated that one of the parents is unemployed. Students with chronic illnesses or disabilities are particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon, as most teachers have responded to insufficient school resources in order for the child to fully attend school. Parents of children who have been subjected to the phenomenon of hidden dropout do not attend parent-teacher conferences.

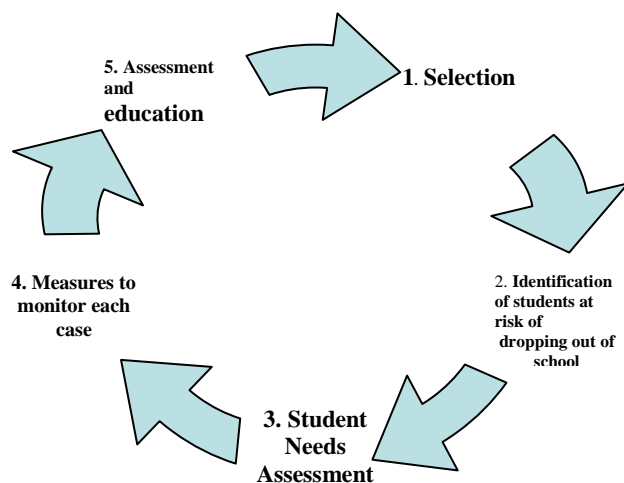


#### 4. Recommendations

The challenge is to identify students who are at risk of hidden dropout based on teacher recommendations in order to provide timely comprehensive support. Risk factors can be helpful, but they are insufficient on their own. Schools should be encouraged to combine their knowledge of student situations with common dropout predictors to inform their dropout prevention work.

The following are five simple steps for identifying students at risk of not returning to school and supporting their (re)enrolment:<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, Early Warning Systems for Students at Risk of Dropping Out, Geneva: UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2018.



During a typical academic year, teachers can use routinely collected data to monitor student performance in indicators that predict school dropout, such as: student participation, behavior, grades (academic achievement), social status-economic, chronic illness or disability, personal, student sense of affiliation, and school relationship with family.

Data collection can be assisted by both school leaders and teachers in order to facilitate an organized action plan for individual student achievement. School leaders could document students identifying multiple risk factors for dropping out of school and communicate with parents to take immediate action.

***Effective dropout prevention strategies at the school level employ a two-pronged strategy:***

***1. A whole-school approach*** encompasses the entire school environment and functioning, including school policies and practices, staff capacity and professional development, teaching, socio-emotional welfare support, strategy and monitoring, and data collection to ensure that processes and activities related to school dropout prevention result in positive changes.

***2. Individual support for students at risk of dropping out*** refers to the processes and interventions implemented to prevent or respond to hidden dropout when an identified risk exists.

Dropout prevention is most effective when it involves all aspects of the school, classroom, interactions, and roles of students, parents and families, outside agencies, and larger community groups.

When students are at risk of dropping out of school, the next step is to organize, support interventions to ensure they attend the school. To do so, schools must understand each student's specific needs and barriers to education and learning in order to determine appropriate measures. This requires a level of planning and coordination.

The risks of dropping out and the reasons of absences and disengagement can be complex and perceived differently by different stakeholders. Gathering and triangulating information from several sources is critical to understanding these different perspectives. Some sources of information can be: students, families, staff and others such as peers. After gathering information, the social worker can manage the case in collaboration with the school psychologist.

- **Planning student support interventions**

Student dropout prevention plans are useful tools for recording and coordinating school actions to re-enrol a child and prevent school dropout. A simple plan would include the following information:

- ✎ Based on needs assessment, identify **student dropout risk factors** and provide information on key dropout predictors / indicators such as attendance, behavior, learning, and so on.
- ✎ **Defensive factors and strengths that can help a student attend the school**, such as interests, talents, social networks, emotional maturity, motivation, and so on.
- ✎ **Objectives of Planning**, e.g., reducing absenteeism or delay; Improving grades in mathematics, increasing participation in online learning, etc .;
- ✎ **Actions to be taken, when and by whom:** Interventions to be implemented by the school, parents, students, and external actors of the school, such as a mediator, a representative of the municipality, education authorities, etc.
- ✎ **Progress monitoring**

## 5. Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the participants in the given study, as well as the classroom teachers and subject teachers who have completed their Bachelor's and Master's degrees and are now employed in the Pre-University Educational Institutions of the schools of the district of Durres.

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## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS

- **This questionnaire is part of the study on 'Hidden dropout in the pre-university education in Albania'. Your answers are very essential for this study, so please feel free to express your thoughts on the given topic. Your data is confidential, they will not be made public and the findings of the questionnaires will only be used for study purposes.**

*Thank you for your co-operation!*

### **I General Data**

Please complete the boxes below by circling one of the numbers in the options provided.

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of completion of the questionnaire \_\_\_/ April 2022

<b>1</b>	<b>Sex</b>	1	Male
		2	Female

<b>2</b>	<b>Age</b>	1	23-30 years old
		2	31-40 years old
		3	41-50 years old
		4	51-60 years old

<b>3</b>	<b>Education</b>	1	Higher Education
		2	Master's Degree
		3	PHD

<b>4</b>	<b>Years of experience</b>	1	0-10 years
		2	11-20 years
		3	21-30 years
		4	More than 30 years

### **2 . Teachers' perception of children who are at risk of the phenomenon of hidden dropout**

**2.1 Do you think there are children in your school who are victims of the phenomenon of hidden dropout?**

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I don't know

*(if you selected option b go to question 2. 3)*

**2.2 In your opinion, how many children have fallen victims to the phenomenon of hidden dropout in your school?**

- a. 1-10 students

- b. 10-20 students
- c. 30-40 students
- d. 40-50 students
- e. 50-60 students
- f. 70-80 students
- g. 80-90 students
- h. 90-100 students
- i. more than 100 students

**2.3 What about in your class?**

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I don't know

*(if you selected option b go to question 2. 5)*

**2.4 In your opinion, how many children have fallen victims to the phenomenon of hidden dropout in your class?**

- a. 1-3 students
- b. 4-6 students
- c. 7-9 students
- d. more than 10 students

**2.5 According to you, which are the factors that influence the school hidden dropout? (you can circle more than 1 option)**

- a. difficult economic conditions;
- b. health issues and disability;
- c. low level of education of parents;
- d. distance of schools from inhabited centres;
- e. parental migration;
- f. demographic transition of the population;
- g. mentality;
- h. feud;
- i. social issues;
- j. child exploitation for work inside and outside of the family;
- k. unqualified and insufficient work with parents to enrol their children in school; non-implementation of applicable legal and sub-legal acts;
- l. non-attendance of kindergarten by pre-schoolers,
- m. family, economic and social circumstances of Roma and Egyptian parents
- n. other \_\_\_\_\_

**3 . Identification of cases of students who are at risk or have fallen victim to the phenomenon of hidden dropout.**

**3.1 Student participation in class:**

**3.1.1 Attending lessons.**

- a. all students attend school regularly
- b. some of them do not attend school

*(If you selected option b go to the next question)*

**3.1.2 Absences are:**

- a. justified
- b. unjustified

**3.1.3 Access to the available instructional materials.**



- a. yes
- b. no

**3.2 Behaviour:**

3.2.1 Participation in activities such as discussions, recordings for various topics such as acting, music, physical activities, etc., :

- a. students do not attend classes regularly
- b. students attend classes regularly

3.2.2 Penalties

- a. have received penalties
- b. have not received penalties

**3.3 Grades (academic achievements):**

3.3.1 Grading

- a. students attain lower academic results
- b. students attain the same academic results

3.3.2 Assignments

- a. Non-completion of assignments
- b. Failure to complete assignments

**3.4 Socioeconomic status**

3.4.1 Students who, in your opinion, have fallen victims to the phenomenon of hidden dropout:

- a. Parental unemployment
- b. Unemployment of one parent

**3.5 Chronic diseases or disabilities**

3.5.1 According to you, students with chronic diseases or disabilities fall victims to this phenomenon because:

- a. Lack of school resources so that the child can fully attend school
- b. Lack of school staff so that the child can fully attend school
- c. Other \_\_\_\_\_

**3.6 Family-School Relationship**

3.6.1 Parents of children who have fallen victims to the phenomenon of hidden dropout:

- a. Do not attend the parent-teacher conferences,
- b. Parents refuse to meet the teacher
- c. Other

**3. Recommendation**

3.1 What are some of the suggestions you would list in support of students who have fallen victims to the phenomenon of hidden dropout?

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