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## **The role of educational partnership in preventing learning difficulties of students from disadvantaged backgrounds**

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**Abstract.** The economic environment in Romania has generated major differences in living standards and education in certain areas, in rural areas or in communities where interest in children's education is low. The material situation of the family is one of the most important generating factors of school dropout. To this is added the students' learning difficulties determined by the low motivation for learning, but also by the inefficiency of their learning skills. The present study presents the data of a pedagogical research addressed in the 2021-2022 school year at Limanu – 2 Mai Secondary School, Constanța county. From the analysis of school documents, it emerged that 10 students between the ages of 8 and 12 were at increased risk of developing learning difficulties, respectively, school dropout. The purpose of the research: the identification of school-family-local community partnership activities with a role in reducing the risk of developing learning difficulties in students from disadvantaged social backgrounds. The following research methods and tools were used: analysis of school documents; interview-based investigation. The research began with the establishment of the initial level of the group of subjects regarding the school situation, absenteeism, attitudes and behaviors. Later, through the educational partnership activities addressed, the mobilization of human and material resources and their focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are at risk of developing learning difficulties was pursued. The "We care" afterschool program was the most important project carried out, bringing the students back to the educational environment and offering, on the one hand, a hot meal to the students, and, on the other hand, support in completing homework and remedial activities. The final stage of the research highlighted the significant reduction in absenteeism, the increase in school performance, the involvement of students in various activities, the social integration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We consider it opportune to repeat this research on a larger group of subjects, from several school units and from several localities, in order to achieve a clearer picture regarding the learning difficulties of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their prevention through the prism of the school-partnership family-community.

**Keywords.** learning difficulty, disadvantaged environment, educational partnership



## **1. Introduction**

The economic environment in Romania has generated major differences in the standard of living and education in certain areas, in rural areas or in communities where the interest in children's education is low. The material situation of the family is one of the most important generating factors of school dropout. Added to this are poor parental education, parental divorce, death of one of the parents (or another family member), health problems of one of the family members, loss of job/unemployment of the parents, alcohol/drugs, domestic violence, but also low motivation for learning, inefficiency of learning and communication skills, etc. In many situations, especially in the countryside or on the outskirts of big cities, the economic situation of the family generates major material shortages, the significant reduction of the budget allocated to children's education, low interest in the children's school activity (the main concern being the provision of food), absenteeism and, later, school dropout. Consequently, the student's social integration decreases significantly. The rehabilitation of the economically disadvantaged environment is slow, cumbersome, depends on many factors and especially the regional economy, but supporting the child and his family from a material, social, medical, psycho-pedagogical point of view can be achieved in a short time and it can be effective if the factors involved, the school, the community and the family, collaborate in the actions of identifying students with learning difficulties and effective intervention in the prevention of school dropout. Sometimes, simply by involving the community, the student receives the (material) support he needs. In other situations, the problem having deeper causes, it is necessary to approach a long-term plan.

### **1. Prevention of learning difficulties of students from disadvantaged backgrounds**

According to the legislation in force, all children have the right to education. Entering school, all students must benefit from the same rights and obligations, have access to all school resources, be treated without discrimination, be guided and coordinated by teachers, school counselors and other specialists, receive social protection and support. The first steps to support the family can be taken by the teacher, who, knowing details about the students' background and their school results, can signal these aspects to the other factors involved in the school-family-community project.

#### **2.1 Supporting students through school-family-community educational partnerships**

The concept of "educational partnership" or "pedagogical partnership" has recently been introduced in the field of education. It "reflects the changes registered at the level of existing relationships between the institutions involved, directly and/or indirectly, in designing and achieving the objectives of the education system: school, family, local community, social agencies (economic, cultural, political, religious, etc.), associations (professional, humanitarian, sports, etc.), social assistance factors, etc." (Cristea, 2000, p. 280).

The school-family-community educational partnership supports students who show learning difficulties through quick and specialized action, the passing of the student's academic results to the background (this being valued through the prism of other skills), the involvement of everyone (families, the local community) in supporting families who have children with learning difficulties (and not only for them), the development of free time activities with a vocational character in which these students are integrated.



The school-family-community partnership has the student as its central element. All actions taken by the school (represented by the teaching staff), the family (represented by parents, grandparents or legal guardians) and the local community (represented by various public state or private institutions) are carried out for the benefit of the student. The purpose and objectives must be clearly defined, and the activities carried out must be suitable for the age, interests and level of development of the students. Within the school-family-community partnership, each involved factor fulfills certain specific roles that, complementing the roles of the other factors, generate educational, psychological, social, moral and behavioral changes at the student level.

The collaboration between school and family is not limited to communication (mutual information) regarding the student's progress, but involves immediate action, sometimes remedial, to correct or recover some deficiencies/losses in terms of school progress or in emotional terms, solving problem situations, of conflicts between students, etc. In Romania, according to the National Education Law no. 1/2011, parents are considered the main partners and beneficiaries of the education process.

A key role in the coagulation process of school-family interactions belongs to the educational counseling services through the network of psycho-pedagogical assistance centers and offices.

Also, within a viable educational partnership, local public administration authorities, other educational institutions, representatives of religious cults, economic agents (state or private), health units, the National Red Cross Society of Romania, the police, firefighters, various associations, etc.

The local public administration authorities, represented by the Mayor and the local Council, can be partners in education and, together with the school, can support the activities planned to be carried out within the school-family-community partnership. The contribution of the local public administration authorities consists in providing the necessary materials for teaching activities, providing the necessary spaces for educational activities, organizing contests, shows, providing electrical/electronic equipment, equipping the school with appropriate furniture, active involvement in identifying solutions and making decisions, support for children with CES, support for drafting projects to attract European funds and their implementation, etc.

Also, the Church can play a very important role in supporting the school and the family. It organizes and coordinates volunteer actions, supports students from poor families, offers a hot meal, etc.

The sanitary units, the National Red Cross Society of Romania, for their part, get involved in social and humanitarian activities and programs, actively participating in the implementation of school dropout prevention measures, in supporting families from disadvantaged backgrounds, in collecting and giving donations, medically specific educational activities, co-opting volunteers and organizing their activities. In many situations, the activity of the Romanian Red Cross is carried out alongside other partners: UNICEF, MEN, Social Assistance, Local Council, etc.

Associations and non-governmental organizations can also exercise their role within the school-family-community partnership by: opening some after-school centers (free of charge), granting sponsorships related to the needs of those to whom they are intended, involvement in acts of volunteering and donations, organizing the collection/donation of books for students, organizing vocational training circles or on school subjects for students who have learning difficulties or who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, involvement in various educational activities



(competitions, exhibitions, camps thematic). An example in this regard is the Ovidiu.ro Association which, through the programs run in partnership with M.E.N., with various publishing houses and institutions (Embassy of Finland, Embassy of Sweden), meets the needs of educational factors (teachers and families). Among the programs run by the Ovidiu.ro Association in the last three years, we find: Read 100 stories to me, Bag with two books, Summer school, Story Romania, Talking books workshop, How to raise readers, The magic of reading, Measuring the ecological footprint.

The approach to school-family-community educational partnership activities has multiple formative values: improving the school skills of students, improving the educational skills of parents, supporting the work of teaching staff, stimulating community service for the benefit of schools and families, connecting families with school and community members, offering services and support to families, etc. (Agabrian, 2006, p. 7).

## **2.2 Supporting students through voluntary actions**

Volunteering is another way of preventing learning difficulties in students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Voluntary actions aimed at students with learning difficulties can be carried out in several directions: social (collecting and distributing food, clothing, shoes, school supplies), ecological (sanitizing areas where children with learning difficulties live), civic (sending letters/e-mails to support various initiatives), cultural (organization of events, secretarial services regarding documents needed by students with learning difficulties), health, organization of fundraising campaigns for medical causes, etc. (Dărăban, 2013, p. 47).

## **2.3 Personalized intervention plan**

The personalized intervention plan (P.I.P.) is "a working document developed to support the beneficiary in the learning process" (<https://aba-romania.ro/standarde-aba-elementele-cheie-ale-planului-de-interventie-personalizat/>). The personalized intervention plan is made by the specialist, the progress recorded being consolidated by the professor and the family, and involves: identifying the problem, initial assessment, establishing the strategies used to remedy this problem (the actual intervention), continuous and final assessment. The personalized intervention plan includes the following key elements: information about the beneficiary (name, gender, age, diagnosis); information about the family/family environment; the type of intervention and the number of recommended hours; therapy session management; functional evaluation of undesirable behaviors, presentation of work objectives for each development area separately. During the course of the activities in the personalized intervention plan, records are made regarding the degree of involvement of the student, the results recorded (progress, stagnation, regression), based on which changes can be made to the actions to be taken.

## **3. Research on the prevention of learning difficulties of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through school-family-community partnership activities**

### **3.1 General coordinates**

The present study presents the data of a pedagogical research addressed in the 2021-2022 school year. The research aimed to identify some students from disadvantaged backgrounds, enrolled at Limanu - 2 Mai Secondary School, Constanța county, who are at risk of developing



learning difficulties. From the analysis of school documents, it emerged that 10 students, 4 girls and 6 boys, aged between 8 and 12 years, were at high risk of dropping out of school. Five of them were in the 5th grade, one in the 2nd grade and four in the 4th grade.

The research began with the establishment of the initial level of the group of subjects regarding the school situation, absenteeism, behaviors observed by teachers/directors but also the personal opinions of the students regarding various aspects related to school and social integration. Later, through the educational partnership activities addressed, the mobilization of human and material resources and their focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are at risk of developing learning difficulties was pursued. The "We care" afterschool program was the most important project carried out, bringing the students back to the educational environment and offering, on the one hand, a hot meal to the students, and, on the other hand, support in completing homework and remedial activities. The final stage of the research highlighted the significant reduction of absenteeism, the increase in school performance, the involvement of students in various activities, the social integration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **3.2 The purpose of the research**

Identification of school-family-local community partnership activities with a role in preventing/reducing the risk of developing learning difficulties in students from disadvantaged social backgrounds.

### **3.2 Research methods and tools**

The following research methods and tools were used: analysis of school documents, interview-based investigation.

### **3.4 Lot of Subjects**

The subject group consists of 10 students, 4 girls and 6 boys, aged between 8 and 12 years. Half of the subjects are in secondary school, all of them are in the 5th grade, two of them are a year older because they are repeating the 5th grade. The other subjects are in the primary cycle. Thus, one subject is in the 2nd grade and four subjects are in the 4th grade. Two of the students included in the group of subjects are part of single-parent families, in one case the father abandoned the family, in the other case the mother died. All subjects have at least one sibling. Three of the subjects are siblings, part of a family with 7 children. All subjects are of Orthodox religion and Romanian citizenship, two being of Roma ethnicity.

In order to preserve the confidentiality and protection of personal data, the subjects were named *Student 1*, *Student 2*, .... *Student 10*.

### **3.5 Research results**

The research began with the establishment of the initial level of the group of subjects regarding the school situation, absenteeism, behaviors observed by teachers/directors but also the personal opinions of the students regarding various aspects related to school and social integration. The analysis of school documents and the application of the interview-based investigation constituted the main investigation methods used.

The school situation of secondary school students in November. The data refer to students' grades in all subjects present in the catalog at the time of their collection. From the information



provided by the teachers, we find that none of the students have grades of 3, 9 or 10. Student 1 is the only one who got a grade of 8, and Student 2 is the only one who got a grade of 7, in two different subjects. All students have a grade 6 except for Student 2. Grade 4 is most often recorded among the students included in the subject group. The grades obtained were not detailed by subject, being centralized globally.

Regarding the situation of unmotivated school absences of secondary school students, we note that, in November, the most absences were recorded by Student 1 - 26 absences, and the fewest by Student 3 - 16 absences.

The school situation of primary school students in November. The data refer to the students' grades in all subjects present in the catalog at the time of data collection. We note that none of the students obtained the qualifier "very good". Among all the primary education students included in the subject group, Student 7 recorded the most "insufficient" qualifications and the fewest "satisfactory" and "good" qualifications. We also note that all the primary education students included in the subject group, in the recorded evaluations in November, they have poor results, the predominant qualification being generally "satisfactory", with the exception of Student 7. This situation represents an alarm signal for the teaching staff, who must act and intervene promptly. The grades obtained were not detailed by discipline, they being centralized globally.

Regarding the situation of unmotivated school absences of primary school students, we note that, in November, the most absences were recorded by Student 6 and Student 10 - 20 absences each, and the fewest, Student 9 - 12 absences.

Analyzing the data obtained, we notice that Student 1, Student 6 and Student 10, who are brothers, recorded very close percentages of the number of unmotivated school absences in relation to the total number of corresponding class hours depending on the school cycle they belong to, due to the fact that they were absent from classes on the same days.

The interview-based survey had the role of collecting information on the degree of involvement of students in school activities and their interaction with colleagues and teachers, thus establishing the initial level of these data.

The items used in the interview with the directors/teachers are as follows:

*Is he attentive to the lessons?*

*Does he offer to answer the question asked by the teacher?*

*Does it initiate communication with colleagues?*

*Does he perform his duties?*

*Does he get involved in group activities (joint projects)?*

*Asking for help from colleagues?*

*Do they ask for help from teachers?*

*Do they ask the teacher questions related to a particular topic?*

The information collected from the directors/teachers of the classes in which the students included in the subject group are enrolled confirms the conclusions of specialized studies regarding the profile of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, namely: most students do not pay attention in class, gradually isolate themselves, do not initiate communication with peers, does not offer to answer (even if sometimes they know the answer), with increasing age gives up on school work tasks, does not participate in group activities, does not ask for help from peers/teachers, loses interest in learning/knowledge and stop asking teachers questions about a topic that initially piqued their interest.



The items used in the interview with the student subjects are as follows:

- a. *Do you feel good at school? Why?*
- b. *Do you have friends among your colleagues? How many?*
- c. *Do you meet your colleagues in your spare time? why don't you date /How often do you meet?*
- d. *Do you go home to any of your classmates? Why do not you go? /How often do you go?*
- e. *What activities do you do together?*
- f. *Do you think that your family situation prevents you from learning? What would you need to be able to learn?*
- g. *Is there any school subject that you like more? Which one?*

The centralization of the information collected from the students included in the group of subjects highlighted their opinions regarding various aspects related to school and social integration, answers valid in November of the current school year. Thus, 4 subjects stated that they feel good at school, 3 of them being siblings. The eldest brother has received support from the school and the local community since he was in second grade. Among the reasons why students feel good at school, we have identified some related to the environment (*small housing*), needs (*many shortages*), emotional state (*at school, colleagues and teachers are happier*). The other subjects stated that they do not feel well at school or that they do not feel well because of the way they are treated by their peers. Only one subject stated that he has two friends at school, but they do not meet in free time, because he cannot go to them for various reasons: distance, his parents and those of his friends, or because, in free time, they have different concerns. Item f) totally generated the answer *Yes*. The students motivated the answer by stringing together the material lacks that prevent their involvement in learning: *lack of supplies, lack of clothing/shoes, involvement in household chores or in the procurement of financial resources, the small space in the house where there is too much bustle and they cannot concentrate and so on*. To item g), three students answered *Yes*, naming some favorite subjects: *physical education, drawing, music*. The subject in the second grade named several subjects, including the *Romanian language*, explaining that *the mother does not know how to read and sometimes reads to her from the Romanian book*.

The initial assessment of the school situation of the students included in the group of subjects represented a first step in approaching strategies to prevent/reduce the risk of developing learning difficulties in students from disadvantaged social backgrounds. The aim was to mobilize human and material resources and focus them on students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are at risk of developing learning difficulties.

The "We care" afterschool program was the most important project carried out, bringing the students back to the educational environment, offering, on the one hand, a hot meal to the students, and, on the other hand, support in completing homework and remedial activities. The students were included in the program on the condition that they do not register absences during class hours. The daily presence in the afterschool program facilitated the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in remedial activities. Attending classes facilitated communication and collaboration with teachers and other students, stimulated active involvement in projects, ensured a suitable environment for learning, ensured the preparation of homework under the supervision of teaching staff, ensured access to the material base of the school unit, etc. The *We care Foundation* as a sponsor, with the support of Flanco, ensured the coverage of the



costs necessary for the preparation and running of the "We care" afterschool program, including the daily provision of a hot meal for the students included in the program.

Also, other school-family-community educational partnership activities were initiated in order to support students at high risk of developing learning difficulties. Here are some of the most representative ones: the establishment of the *Limanu Parents' Association* to support families experiencing difficulties; the involvement of families in the organization of events such as: *the Harvest Fair, the Christmas Fair, the Martișoare Fair, the Easter Fair* - the objectives aimed at carrying out these activities were: stimulating the creativity of students, stimulating work in child/parent pairs, developing entrepreneurial and communication skills, presentation/exposure of the products of the activity; *the organization of competitions* - The Silver Shell Competition Festival, in its 3rd edition in 2022, brings together participants in the sections of dance, vocal interpretation, gastronomy (in the organization of this festival, Limanu City Hall and the Association by Parinți Limanu); *the 7-star Chef competition* was held in teams made up of children and parents; annually, on June 1, the Limanu-2 Mai Secondary School organizes *the Children's Cross*, this year being the 4th edition; *the organization of volunteering actions* - at the level of the school unit, actions were organized to collect food products, clothing/shoes and donate them to the home for the elderly or to needy families (including the students included in the group of subjects); *the promotion of nonviolence and the elimination of discrimination* (example: debates on the topic of school bullying); the organization of activities dedicated to the National Reading Day or the International Day of Reading Together at the level of each class. He participated in these activities with pleasure, discovering the pleasure of reading aloud and the subject of the 2nd grade (Student 10). The local town hall and the *Prestige* and *Nemira* publishing houses provided books for the school library; the organization of cultural performances or activities on *Dobrogea Day, Romania Day, Heroes' Day, Little Union Day, Christmas Show, It's your birthday mommy!* and other.

The involvement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in educational partnership activities organized by the school represents the motivational support they need to overcome the emotional, material or financial barriers that block school preparation, create learning difficulties and lead to self-isolation, absenteeism and, subsequently, to drop out of school.

The final stage of the research highlighted the significant reduction of absenteeism, the increase in school performance, the involvement of students in various didactic and extra-didactic activities, the social integration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similar to the initial stage of the research, the school documents were analyzed and the interview-based survey was applied to the teachers and students included in the subject group. The final evaluation was carried out in April, after the activities of the educational partnership program.

The school situation of secondary school students in April. The data refer to students' grades in all subjects, noted in the catalog at the time of their collection. The grades obtained were not detailed by subject, being centralized globally. From the information provided by the leading teachers, we find that none of the students have grades of 3, 9, or 10. Student 1 and Student 2 each have a grade of 8, Student 3 is the only one who does not have a grade of 7, while Student 2 has two 7's. All students have multiple 5's and 6's, except Student 2 who has only one 6's. The number of 4's was found to decrease in all subjects, Student 1 and Student 2 did not get none 4.

School situation of primary school students in April. The data refer to the grades of students in all subjects, present in the catalog, at the time of data collection. The grades obtained were not detailed by discipline, they being centralized globally. Only two of the students obtained



a "very good" grade in the Physical Education discipline in both cases. The two students are brothers. Of all the students in primary education, included in the group of subjects, only Student 7 obtained an "insufficient" qualification, the others having higher qualifications. Among all subjects, only Student 9 scored more 'satisfactory' than 'good', with the others scoring more 'good' than 'satisfactory'. The most "good" grades were obtained by Student 10. In April, only Student 8 has an absence.

Analyzing the information, we notice that the school situation and attendance at classes have changed significantly in the case of all subjects. This is due to the inclusion of the subjects in the activities of the afterschool program "We care", but also in the other educational partnership activities. The joint effort of the school, the family and the community constituted an essential motivating factor in this direction. We appreciate that the decrease in the number of absences to zero in some cases and to a single absence in other cases is also due to the pressure of parents not to register absences, one of the conditions for the inclusion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the afterschool program "We care" is the presence daily in hours.

The interview-based survey had the role of collecting information on the degree of students' involvement in school activities and their interaction with peers and teachers.

In the final assessment, the items used in the interview with the director/teacher regarding the student's activity in class are the same as those used in the initial assessment:

*Is he attentive in class?*

*Does he offer to answer the question asked by the teacher?*

*Does it initiate communication with colleagues?*

*Does he perform his duties?*

*Does he get involved in group activities (joint projects)?*

*Asking for help from colleagues?*

*Do they ask for help from teachers?*

*Do they ask the teacher questions related to a particular topic?*

Information gathered from the principals/teachers of the classes in which the students included in the subject group are enrolled shows a significant increase in positive responses. The teaching staff reasoned that the involvement of students in the school activity is due, above all, to the inclusion of students in the activities of the "We care" afterschool program. If in the initial evaluation the teachers appreciated that most students do not get involved in joint projects, the final evaluation indicates a change in this aspect. Many of the students included in the subject group became much more active in the group activity.

The items used in the interview with the student subjects are also those used in the initial assessment:

*a. Do you feel good at school? Why?*

*b. Do you have friends among your colleagues? How many?*

*c. Do you meet your colleagues in your spare time? why don't you date /How often do you meet?*

*d. Do you go home to any of your classmates? Why do not you go? /How often do you go?*

*e. What activities do you do together?*

*f. Do you think that your family situation prevents you from learning? What would you need to be able to learn?*



*g. Is there any school subject that you like more? Which one?*

According to the answers given, we appreciate that the well-being of the students in the school environment has improved. Thus, no negative response was recorded for item a). The students' motivation was related to the activities in which they are involved, generally sports or practical activities, or in relation to the relationship they developed with other students. Most students say *they made friends at school*. None of the subjects visit their friends at home or are visited by them, but meet during their free time in the park or in public places where they play, talk or walk. Next, all the subjects consider that their family situation makes it difficult for them to prepare for school, appreciating that in order to learn they need a room where there is silence, not to be asked by their parents for various household activities and, above all, to be helped by someone when the workload is more difficult than they can handle. Among the students' favorite subjects are still those that do not require home preparation or additional practice to consolidate knowledge: *sports, drawing, music, practical activities*. The 2nd grade subject again mentioned reading as an enjoyable activity, specifying that he had been to the library and borrowed a book.

Student responses highlight a major behavioral change. They show a greater interest in school activities, communicate and relate more with their colleagues, get more involved in joint activities, show initiative in approaching learning tasks, etc. Student 3 and Student 8 are still distant from the group they belong to, they do not ask for help from colleagues and teachers, they do not ask questions, they do not get involved in learning activities.

The involvement of the school, the family and the local community in supporting students from underprivileged backgrounds has led to the reduction of the risk of dropping out of school for students from Limanu - 2 Mai Secondary School in Constanța county. Because of this, the school unit did not receive approval to be included in the program developed by the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, called the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Through this project, it is intended to finance educational units in order to reduce early school leaving, to support students who are vulnerable in this regard, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We believe that this aspect is unfavorable to the students in this school, who could have benefited from much more consistent support.

### **Conclusions**

The prevention of learning difficulties and, implicitly, school failure and dropout, is an important objective of the educational programs carried out in the school, through the involvement of both the family and the community. With the support of the family and through activities carried out with representatives of the local community, the aim is to mobilize human, material and financial resources and focus them on students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and who show cognitive and socio-emotional learning difficulties. Stimulating the motivation for learning by including students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are at risk of developing learning difficulties in school and extracurricular projects and activities are just some of the actions undertaken within the school-family-community educational partnerships. In this sense, the present study highlighted the need to adopt some urgent socio-educational measures for students from disadvantaged backgrounds included in mainstream school. The inclusion of students in the "We care" afterschool program contributed to a significant reduction in absenteeism and an increase in school performance. The students received a hot meal every day, but above all, support in completing homework and remedial activities.



The research we initiated in the 2021-2022 school year also has some limitations. Thus, the school situation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds was analyzed in a single school unit, due to compliance with the legislative norms regarding COVID 19. Also, the present pedagogical research was carried out in a school institution different from the one in which the authors of this study carry out their professional activity, the involvement in the activities of the educational partnership program being limited by this aspect.

We consider it opportune to repeat this research on a larger group of subjects, from several school units and from several localities, in order to achieve a clearer picture regarding the learning difficulties of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their prevention through the prism of the school-partnership family-community.

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