



Limited access to education in a pandemic context and the risk of school failure of adolescents from vulnerable environments

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Abstract

Our paper addresses a critical issue, regarding the access of disadvantaged adolescents to education, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Adolescents from vulnerable families, generally from rural areas, faced many of the repercussions of restrictions imposed in order to stop the spread of coronavirus. Financial, family or health problems prevent them from adapting to changes in education, and their needs increased along with the restrictions. Failure and school dropout it were before the pandemic alarming phenomenon, that have increased in the last year, 2020-2021. The need for an internet connection and having an electronic device to continue studying is too high a requirement for many students from disadvantaged families and areas. In order to decrease those effects, some organizations and associations have developed projects and programs to facilitate access for vulnerable young people to a fair education, but these were sporadic and did not cover all the identified needs.

To carry out the research, we developed a questionnaire addressed to 30 adolescents identified with vulnerabilities, aged between 14 and 18 years. The collection and processing of the results of the questionnaire was to highlight the educational level of students before and during the pandemic, access to technology and other forms of remedial education of respondents, the family situation and their perception of discrimination due to poverty and lack of resources.

Keywords: education, adolescences, vulnerable groups, pandemic

Introduction

The main concepts addressed in our work are those of marginalized groups, disadvantaged, vulnerable categories, limited access to socio-educational services of the research subjects.

Although, the term "vulnerable group" is often used and certain definitions have been proposed, there is no one that is generally accepted. Thus, in this category was introduced a wide variety of people such as: disable people, ethnic minorities, domestic violence victims, elderly, persons living from the guaranteed minimum income, the term of "vulnerable group" being often used as a synonym for disadvantaged, marginalized or "at-risk group".



Certain social and demographic features are used to recognize people belonging to vulnerable groups, such as age, gender, education, ethnicity, occupation, or rural area. But there are situations and events that can turn normal and generally balanced people and families, into disadvantaged people. These events can be natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, or social events such as wars and economic crises (Popescu R., 2011, p.9).

A definition of vulnerable groups is found in the Social Romanian Welfare Act 292/2011, according to which, the vulnerable group refers to persons or families at risk of losing their ability to meet their daily living needs due to situations of illness, disability, poverty, drug or alcohol addiction, or other situations leading to economic and social vulnerability (Law 292/2011). article 6).

The Romanian legislation (Law no. 116/2002 on preventing and fighting social marginalization), characterizes marginalized groups as having “a peripheral social position, or isolation, with limited access to the economic, political, educational and communicational resources of the Community, manifested by the absence of a minimum of social living conditions” (Art. 3).

According to Ordinance 137/2000, “the disadvantaged category is that category of persons who are either in a position of inequality in relation to the majority of citizens due to identity differences with the majority or face a behavior of rejection and marginalization” (Article 4).

1. The aggravating factors of the vulnerability condition among adolescents

Three of the most serious social problems facing disadvantaged groups are poverty, education and occupation. These factors of social exclusion form cause-and-effect relationships, and for this reason they must be addressed together.

Poverty is frequently present in people with a low level of employment and low level of education, as beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum income or persons of Roma ethnicity (M., 2013 p. 20;21). According to statistics, in Romania, over 500 000 children are experiencing extreme poverty conditions that cause a need for support in educational programs.

The educational need of children from disadvantaged backgrounds is very pressing, and society must contribute to this need on a continuous basis. This is because the need for literacy is very high, and the rise in illiteracy can cause the social and economic development to slow down (Serban C., 2012, p. 30;32).

Unemployment is both a way to promote social exclusion and one of the biggest forms of imbalance in the labor market. Unemployment causes loss of self-confidence, loss of income, feelings of exclusion and breaking away from normal life, eroding the connection with social communities and creating tensions. (Tanase, M., 2013, p. 22, 24).

Poor results, academic failure and the risk of school dropout among adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds are the main causes of their vulnerability and lack of professional perspective. Some of these factors are potentiated by family abuse, low or non-existent social protection, disease and poverty, inadequacy or absence of laws, inability or immaturity of adults, communities or governments to provide basic needs for quality of life of adolescents (Vlad R., Vlad M., 2018 p. 341;342).

The first cause of school dropout in Romania is poverty. Teenagers from disadvantaged families, generally from rural areas, are forced to support their parents by working or caring for their younger siblings. Thus, the young man’s chances of finding a job with which he can support himself and his possibilities of integrating into society decrease considerably (Serban C., 2012, p. 32).

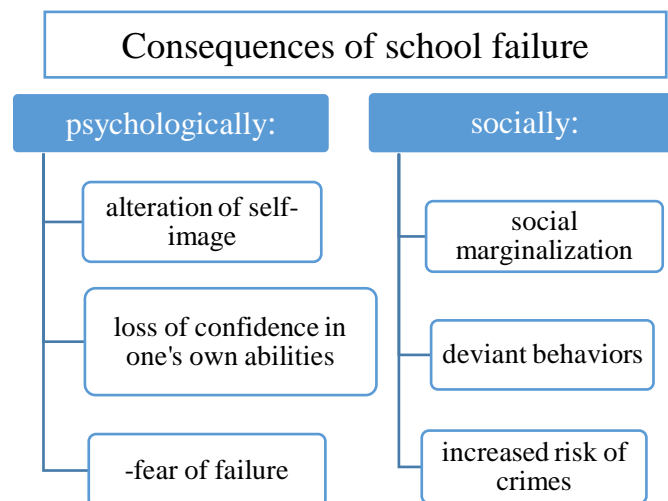


Figure 1. Consequences of school failure

2. The impact of the pandemic on access to socio-educational services among teenagers

Measures taken to combat the transmission of the Covid-19 virus have affected the provision of social services. On the one hand, some pre-existing problems in the system have been worsened by the new restrictions. On the other hand, the restrictions have caused certain specific problems, such as the limitation of the field work of people in the field of social assistance (social workers, Community nurses, social workers) (Vockel G., Stefanescu V., 2020, p. 10).

If before the pandemic, the educational destiny of children from disadvantaged families was determined by the condition of having the necessary clothing and footwear to go to school, now the educational infrastructure is added to this list. If parents cannot pay for an electronic device or even for tutoring, then children may be at risk of dropping out of school (<https://www.rfi.ro/>).

Although there is talk about an effective adaptation to the online course model, many students have not had this benefit. For these children, with the closure of the school, a refuge from the conditions in which they live and a guarantee of food from that day was lost (<https://www.dw.com/ro/focus/s-10575>).

In May 2020, out of more than three million students, 250.000 had no access to technology. The biggest problem is the lack of material possibilities.

According to the regional director of hope and homes for children for Central and Southern Europe, one in three children lives in poverty. In this context, many children have some basic needs unmet and the requirements for attending online courses may be too high to reach (<https://romania.europalibera.org/>).

3. The role of the social worker in the protection of adolescents at risk

Social work professionals can have multiple interventions and contributions due to the complexity and dimensions of social reality. The situation caused by COVID-19 meant the suppression of activity at all levels of education in most countries and forced the population to be confined to their homes. Social workers must therefore guarantee their support to the educational Community, by telematic means, in order to ensure the social protection of minors of school age.



The needs of students with social problems, or at risk, must be met by carrying out preventive, evaluation, intervention and monitoring work complementary to educational and Community resources. Support is absolutely necessary for the vulnerable, who face the limiting barriers of access to learning, and the acquisition of life skills, ensuring respect for the principle of non-discrimination, social justice and full participation in education of all students, regardless of their social and cultural status, gender or personal characteristics (2020 p. 1).

4. Pandemic and socio-educational services

In order to ensure the highest possible increase in the degree of involvement of students in the education/learning process, it is important to develop complementary programs, aimed at disadvantaged groups, in order to increase the quality of the educational process.

The school performance of the pupils also depends on the degree of involvement of the parents, as a result, strategies aimed at parental education in support of the promotion of children's rights can have a significant impact on their motivation (Pop L., 2014 p. 35; 36).

In times of humanitarian crisis, people involved in education can try to improve the level of teaching-learning as much as possible, help children protect themselves from risks and promote inclusive education. They have the power and duty to ensure that every child is welcomed, appreciated and respected, regardless of the family or socio-economic background from which they come (Antonowicz L., 2020 p. 8, 9). In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the closure of schools has had a negative impact on both the educational progress of students and their mental health and, above all, on their safety in the virtual environment.

According to a survey conducted by Save the children, almost half of Romanian students did not have access to a tablet or computer, absolutely necessary devices, for active participation in online lessons, and over 50% said that one of the biggest risks of this period, it was the internet addiction.

One of the limiting situations created by the pandemic is the restriction of access to education for children from disadvantaged families who do not have the opportunity to connect to the internet or attend online courses. In these children, social inequalities have been worsened, and isolation, discrimination and marginalization have had major effects on school performance and mental health on a long term (<https://www.salvaticopiii.ro/>).

Investing in individual guidance and attention given to each student is important, and the presence of teachers and an appropriate form of teaching are the best ways to prevent school dropout caused by distance learning. Another important factor in preventing school dropout is providing regular and constructive feedback, which gives students the feeling that they have the necessary support to continue their studies. In addition, the support of the school Community and parents increases the chance for students to complete their studies. During the pandemic, students who had parental support in the problems they encountered were able to better adapt to the online environment (Niemi H., Kousa P., 2020 p. 355).

5. Research methodology

The goals of our study are as follows:

the general objective is to identify the socio-educational needs of adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds and the risk factors that contribute to their vulnerability during the Covid-19 pandemic, while the specific objectives of the research are: 1) highlighting the role of the social worker in preventing and combating school dropout; 2) identifying difficulties in accessing education and analyzing the school situation of disadvantaged adolescents during the pandemic period; 3) highlighting the risk factors present in the family environment and their impact on the socio-educational development of the adolescents included in the study; 4)



making a comparative analysis between the groups of subjects included in the research, according to environmental and gender criteria; 5) highlighting the difficulties students had in participating in online education, due to the quality of the Internet and the lack of the electronic devices.

In our research, we aim to verify the following hypotheses:

- It is assumed that there are differences in the gender criterion in the school performance of adolescents in the target group in the pandemic context.
- It is assumed that there are differences of perception on education, in the parents of pupils from rural areas, compared to those from urban areas.

There are presumed to be differences in the background of adolescents in terms of access to meditations and remedial teaching activities during the pandemic.

5.1 Methods, techniques and tools used in research. The sample

The survey method based on the questionnaire had as its starting point its own tool, developed by us, to assess the accessibility of socio-educational services in a pandemic context and containing 30 questions (open, closed and multi-answer). They aimed to measure: Students' adaptation and opinion to online courses, the degree of support offered by families, students' perception of their own future and access to technology and educational services in the pandemic context. The research group consists of 30 adolescents aged 14 to 18 years, with at least one of the following characteristics, corresponding to vulnerable persons, namely: The overall average over the last year was less than or equal to 7; Comes from a low-income family or receives a social scholarship; is a person with chronic illness; comes from a single-parent family; comes from a family with several children (more than 2); is part of a minority ethnicity; one or both parents are away for work abroad; He comes from a foster home; he was raised in foster care.

5.2 Results and discussion

From the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the collected data, as well as from the comparisons made between the samples, the following discussions resulted:

Item no. 2 `What are three reasons why you could not attend online courses?`

The subjects' responses were varied, but a large number of them listed as reasons not to attend online classes the following: Problems connecting to the internet or on-app; health problems; lack of interest or motivation; limited access to technology; problems of a family nature; too much pressure on students; difficulties in understanding the matter; fatigue caused by sitting at the computer for a long time.

Item no. 3 `Did your grades changed since you started online classes?`

The charts show that online school environments have changed more grades among male students, than among female students. Girls had a higher percentage of averages that remained the same (61,54%), while boys had both increases (47,06%) and decreases (17,65%) more significant.

Hypothesis 1, according to `which there are differences in school performance in a pandemic context by gender`, is confirmed by the answers to item no. 3. As shown by the charts above, female individuals had constant averages both, before and after the pandemic, and male individuals had greater variations after starting online classes than in the face-to-face version.



Pie Chart Count of 5. Have your grades changed since you started you started online classes?

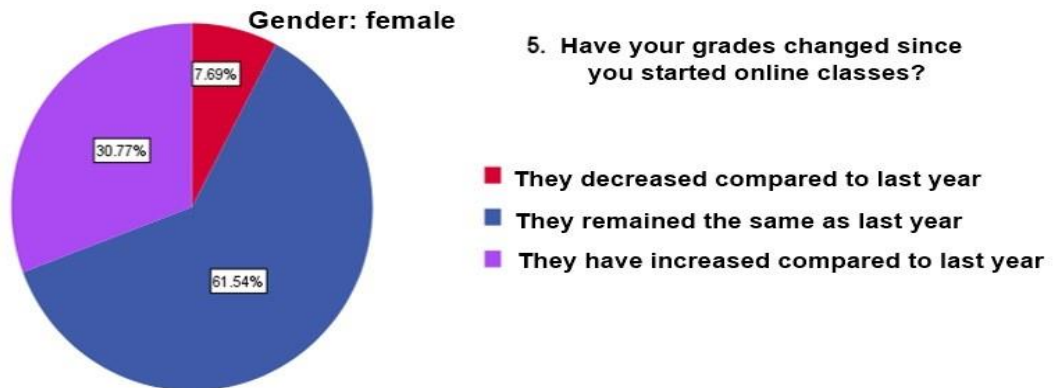


Figure 2. School performance in a pandemic context for female respondents

Pie Chart Count of 5. Have your grades changed since you started online classes?

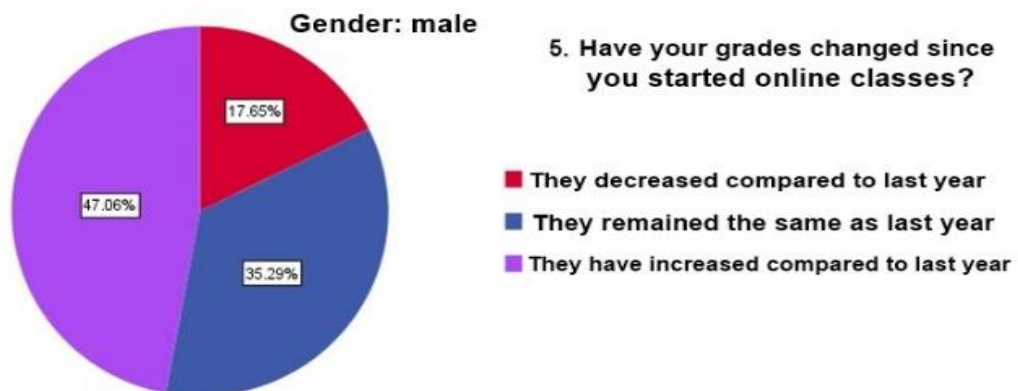


Figure 3. School performance in a pandemic context for male respondents

Item no. 4 `Is education important in your family?`

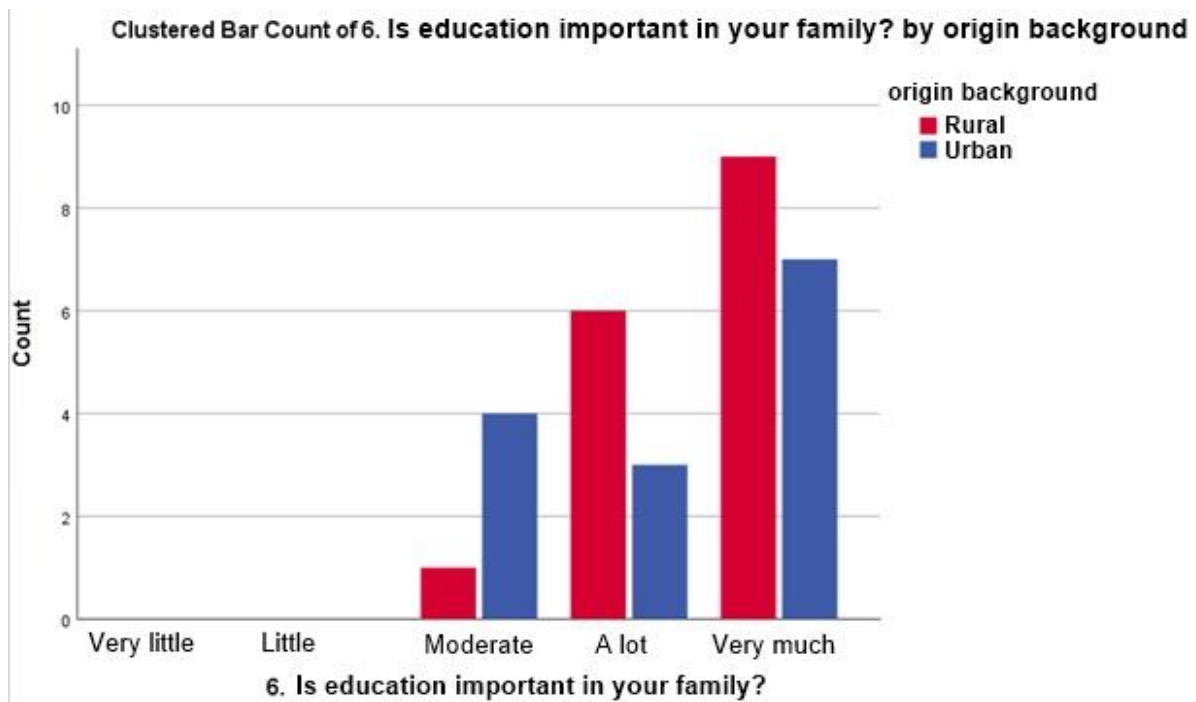


Figure 4. The importance of education in respondent's families

At the level of item 4, all subjects claimed that in their family education is of medium, high or very high importance. However, a difference can be noted between students from rural areas and those from urban areas. From this graph it follows that education is more important in the families of the respondents who come from the rural areas compared to those from the urban areas.

Hypothesis 2, according to which there are differences in the perception of education between parents of students from rural areas and those from urban areas, is confirmed by item 4, in whose graph it can be seen that families of students from rural areas consider education to be more important compared to the families of students from the urban environment.

Item no. 6 `What is your opinion about the effectiveness of online classes?`

Among the participants' responses, 15 were negative, 7 were positive and 8 were neutral. From the point of view of the interaction between the student and the teacher, the people who had negative answers believe that:

- both the knowledge verification and scoring methods are not good;
- the connection between the teaching staff and students is deficient;
- students find it difficult to concentrate for a long time;

Also, the subjects who had negative answers argued that:

- there are many problems connecting to the Internet or the online platform;
- there are negative effects on the eyes.



Participants who had positive answers claim that:

- lessons can be effective as long as the students show interest;
- protection against the virus is much better;
- students have more free time;
- teachers have adapted well to online classes.

Among the neutral answers is the fact that some school subjects such as the Romanian language or history are easier to teach online, but subjects such as physics and mathematics are more difficult to understand in the online environment. Respondents also believe that as long as teachers can keep students interested, classes can be effective, but not as effective as physical classes.

Item no. 8 `Have you had difficulties in class due to problems with electronic devices?`

Pie Chart Count of 11. Did you have difficulties in class due to problems with electronic devices?

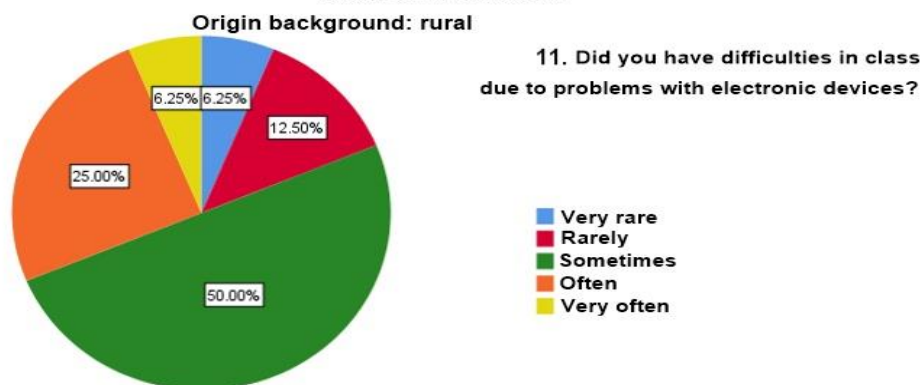


Figure 5. Difficulties in class due to problems with electronic devices for rural background respondents

Pie Chart Count of 11. Did you have difficulties in class due to problems with electronic devices?

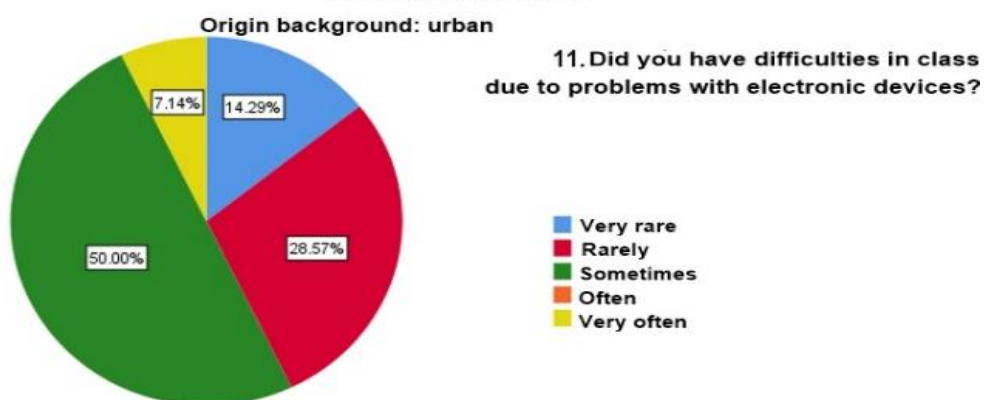


Figure 6. Difficulties in class due to problems with electronic devices for urban background respondents

At the level of item 8, a percentage of 50% of people answered that they sometimes had difficulties due to problems with electronic devices. According to the origin background, respondents from rural areas had problems with devices more often than those from urban areas. Among students from rural areas, 18.7% claimed that they had difficulties rarely and very

rarely, and 31.2% had difficulties often or very often. Among urban students, 48.2% stated that they had difficulties rarely and very rarely and 7.1% had difficulties very often.

Item no. 9 `Did you have difficulties in online classes due to the quality of the Internet?`

13. Did you have difficulties with the internet during online classes?

30 answers

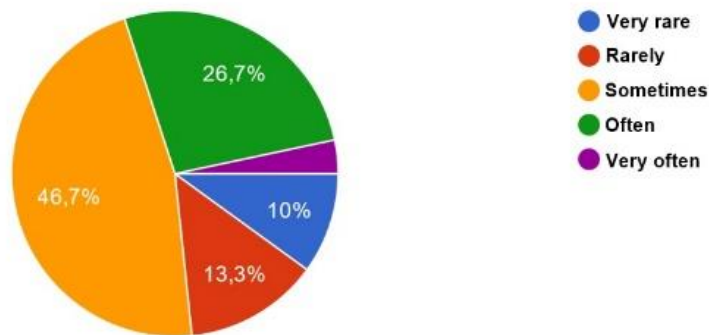


Figure 7. Difficulties in online classes due to the quality of the Internet

From this graph it can be seen that most of the respondents had difficulties during the online courses caused by the quality of the internet. Thus, 30% of respondents had difficulties often or very often and 46.7% had difficulties sometimes.

Hypothesis 3, according to which students had difficulties in participating in online classes due to the quality of the Internet and electronic devices, was confirmed by item 8 and item 9. Graphs 5 and 6 show that a small percentage of respondents have difficulties rarely and very rarely caused by electronic device problems (30%). Graph 7 shows that only a percentage of 23.3% of the participants had no difficulties caused by the quality of the Internet.

Item no. 13 `Have you participated in tutoring for certain subjects, paid for by the family?`

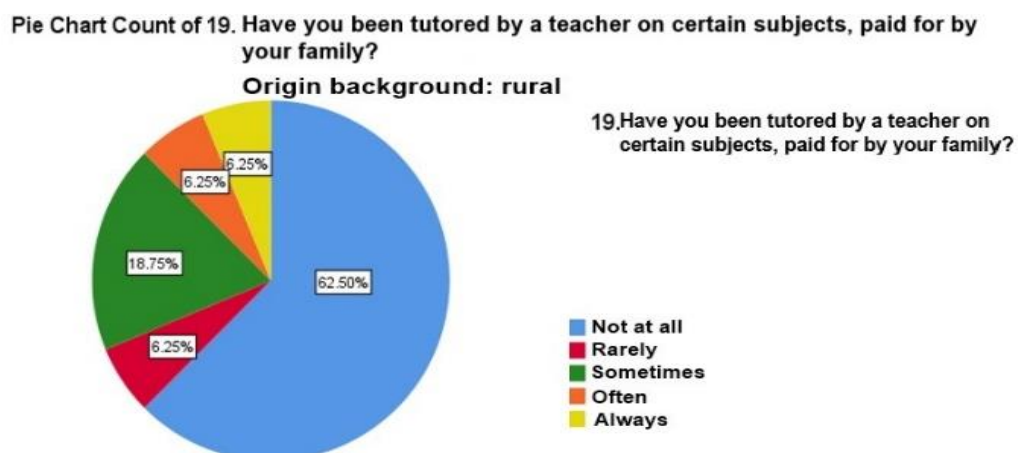
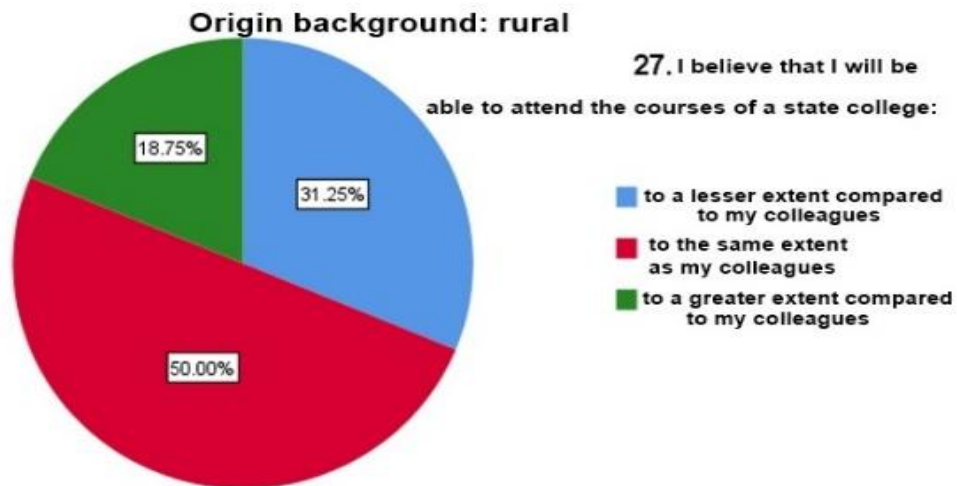


Figure 8. Paid tutoring by family depending on rural background



Pie Chart Count of 27. I believe that I will be able to attend the courses of a state college:



Pie Chart Count of 19. Have you been tutored by a teacher on certain subjects, paid for by your family?

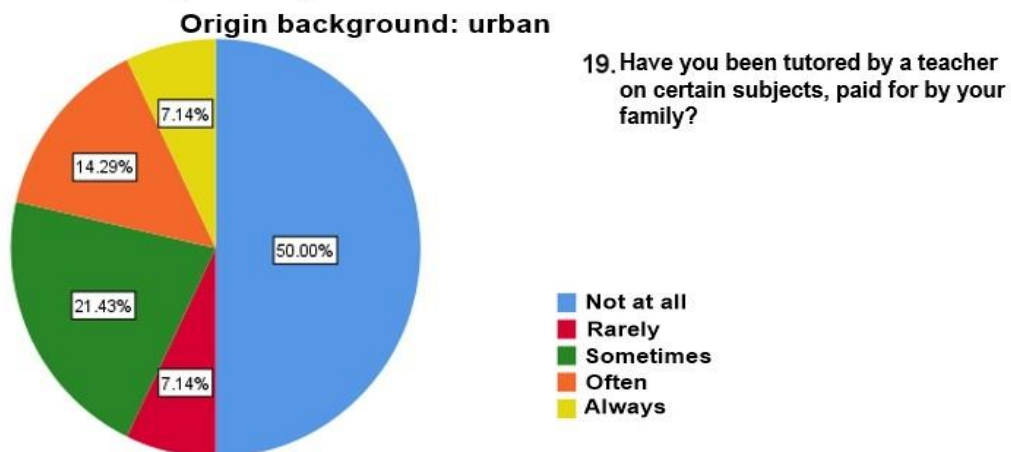


Figure 9. Paid tutoring by family depending on urban background

These graphs show that there are significant differences between rural and urban areas in terms of participation in additional school preparation courses paid for by the family. Among rural respondents, 68.7% were rarely or never tutored by a teacher who was paid by the family, and 57.1% of urban respondents rarely or never attended extra classes. Also, 12.5% of people from rural areas participated often and very often in extra classes, and people from urban areas participated often and very often in proportion to 21.4%. Thus, the students from the rural environment were tutored by a teacher paid by the family in a lower proportion compared to the students from the urban environment.

Hypothesis 4, according to which there are differences according to the area of origin of the teenagers, in terms of the degree of use of paid tutoring services, was confirmed by item 13. Students from the urban areas participated in paid tutoring in higher percentages compared to students from the rural areas.



Item no. 17 `I believe that I will be able to attend the courses of a state college`

Figure 10. Attending a state college by rural background

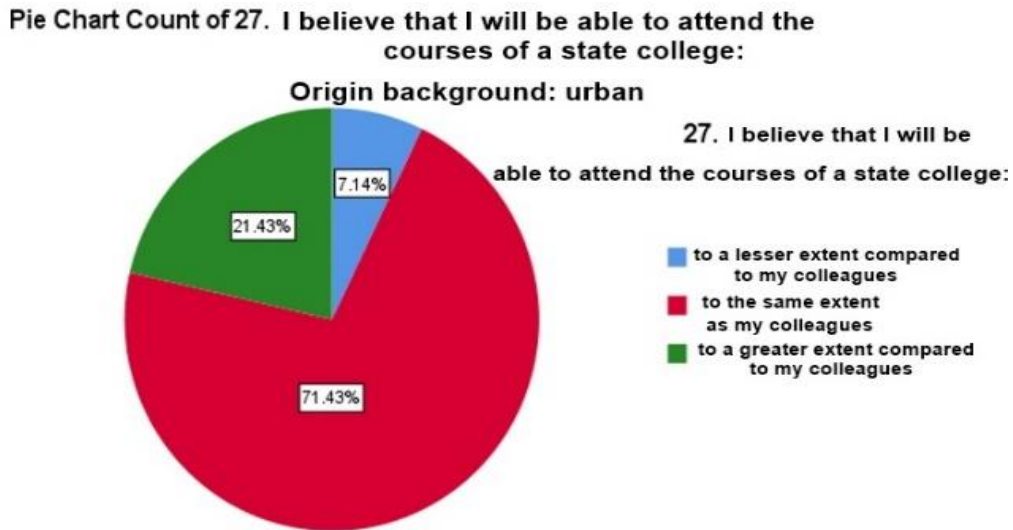


Figure 11. Attending a state college by urban background

At the level of item 17, a difference can be observed between the rural and the urban areas. A higher percentage of respondents from rural areas believe that they will be able to attend college to a lesser extent than their peers (31.2%) compared to respondents from urban areas, who had a percentage of 7.1%. Also, a higher percentage of urban students believe that they can attend college to the same extent (71.4%) or to a greater extent (21.4%) than their peers, in relation to urban students, which have lower percentages (50% and 18.7% respectively).

Item no. 19 `I believe that my family will support me in achieving my goals or pursuing a career in my dream field.`

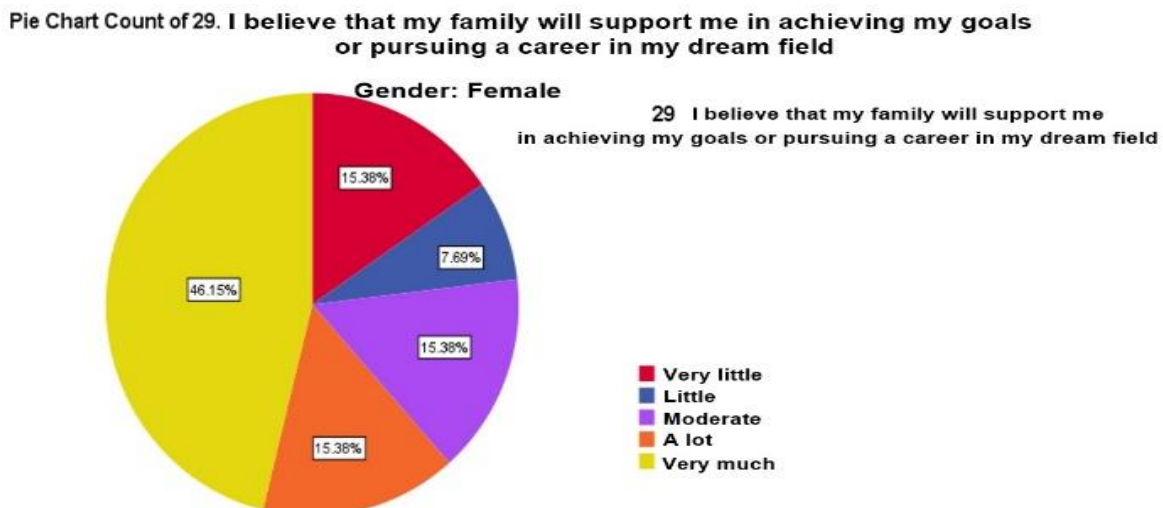


Figure 12. Family support in achieving goals or pursuing a career by female gender

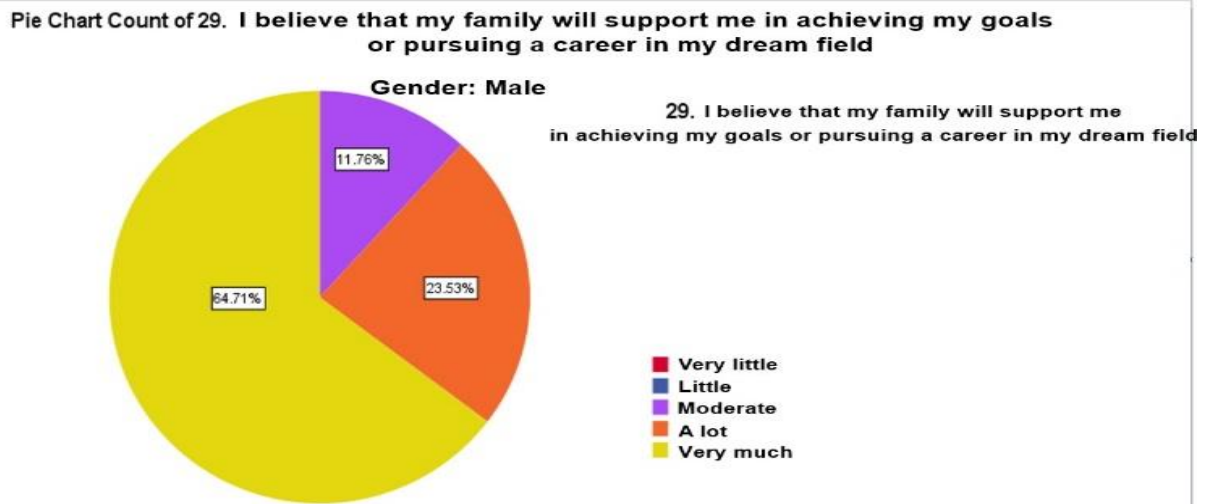


Figure 13. Family support in achieving goals or pursuing a career by male gender

According to the graphs above, there are significant differences between the female and male gender in terms of family support. Among the male respondents, 88.2% believe that they will be supported a lot and a lot by the family, while the female respondents claim that they will be supported a lot and a lot in percentage of 61.4%. Also, 23% of females believe that they will receive little or very little support from their family, and no male person believes that they will receive little or very little support.

Item no. 20`Reasons why I believe this`:

Of the participants' responses, 20 were positive, 6 were negative, and 4 were neutral. Positive responses include:

- receiving support and support from the family;
- the determination of parents to offer a better future to their children;
- confidence in children's abilities;
- good relations between children and their parents;

Among the negative responses were:

- lack of education of the parents;
- the inability of the family to accept the dreams and passions of teenagers;
- lack of income, which forces the student to choose careers that guarantee a stable income in the shortest possible time.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research, which sought to identify the risk factors of adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds and their socio-educational needs during the coronavirus pandemic, was fulfilled by achieving the objectives and confirming the hypotheses.

The first hypothesis assumes that there are gender differences in terms of school performance in a pandemic context. This was confirmed by the answers received, following the interpretation of the results, confirming that female individuals had more stable environments compared to male individuals, who had greater changes. Hypothesis 2 assumes that there are differences in the perception of education between parents of students from rural areas and



those from urban areas. This hypothesis was confirmed, the answers received proving that education is more important in the families of rural students.

The third hypothesis assumes that students had difficulties in participating in online classes due to the quality of the Internet and electronic devices. Like the first two hypotheses, this was also confirmed by analyzing the responses. The last hypothesis assumes that there are differences according to the teenagers' background in terms of the degree of use of paid tutoring services. The answers showed that fewer students from rural areas participated in tutoring hours paid by their parents than those from urban areas, thus confirming the hypothesis.

Both the general and specific objectives were achieved. The socio-educational needs of adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds and the risk factors that contribute to their vulnerability during the pandemic were identified both in the theoretical part, by highlighting the problems they face, and by analyzing the results of the questionnaire.

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Annexes:

Appendix 1 – Own Questionnaire

Questionnaire access to socio-educational services in a pandemic context

Hello! I am a student of Social Work and I am conducting a research on the access of adolescents to educational services in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Completing the questionnaire will take a maximum of 5 minutes.

Your answers are anonymous and the data obtained will be used only for research purposes.

To complete the survey, check the option that suits you or write the answer in the box provided.

Thank you for your time!

Age:

The gender:

- a) Feminine; b) Masculine

Origin Background:

- a) Rural; b) Urban

Last class graduated:

1. I belong to one of the following situations

- The overall final grade in the last year was less than or equal to 7;
- I come from a low-income family or receive a social grant;
- I am a person with chronic diseases;
- I come from a single-parent family (I live with only one of the parents);
- I come from a family with several children (more than 2);
- I belong to an ethnic minority;
- One or both parents are away working abroad;
- I come from a placement center;
- I was raised in foster care;
- None of the above.

2. How did classes go in your school this school year?

3. How often did you participate in online courses?

- a) Very rarely; b) Rarely; c) Sometimes; d) Often; e) Very often

4. What would be three reasons for not attending classes?

5. Have your grades changed since you started online classes?

- a) They decreased compared to last year;
b) They remained the same compared to last year;
c) They increased compared to last year

6. Is education important in your family?

- a) Very little; b) A little; c) Moderate; d) A lot; e) Very much

7. Do your parents encourage you to continue your studies (finishing high school/entering a college)?



a) Very little; b) A little; c) Moderate; d) A lot; e) Very much

8. Have you adapted to the online environment?

a) Very easy; b) Easy; c) Moderate; d) Difficult; is very difficult

9. What is your opinion about the effectiveness of online classes?

10. Did you have access to technology during the pandemic (phone, laptop, tablet, computer)?

a) Not at all; b) Rarely; c) Sometimes; d) Often; e) All the time

11. Did you have difficulties in class due to problems with electronic devices?

a) Very rarely; b) Rarely; c) Sometimes; d) Often; e) Very often

12. Did you have access to the internet during the pandemic?

a) Not at all; b) Rarely; c) Sometimes; d) Often; e) All the time

13. Did you have difficulties in online classes because of the quality of the internet?

a) Very rarely; b) Rarely; c) Sometimes; d) Often; e) Very often

14. Do you have personal electronic devices?

- a) Yes;
- b) No, I share them with my brothers;
- c) No, I use them jointly with other family members

15. Does the school organize tutoring sessions with the classroom teacher?

a) Yes; b) No

16. If yes, to what extent do you participate?

a) Not at all; b) Rarely; c) Sometimes; d) Often; e) All the time

17. Did you have access to afterschool before the pandemic?

a) Yes; b) No

18. But now?

a) Yes; b) No

20. What is the purpose of your allowance?

a) The allowance is used by me; b) The allowance is used by parents c) The allowance is used by siblings

21. How often do you receive pocket money from your parents?

a) Very rarely; b) Rarely; c) Sometimes; d) Often; e) Very often

22. Which of the following services and products did you get discounts or freebies for?

a) Transportation; b) Cinema; c) Cultural institutions (museums, theater, art galleries); d) Vouchers from the town hall



23. What is the minimum amount of money you think a student should receive from their parents per day?

24. I felt at a disadvantage compared to my classmates.

a) Total agreement; b) Partial agreement; c) Neutral; d) Partial disagreement; e) Totally disagree

25. According to which of the following criteria do you think you are discriminated against by your colleagues?

a) By gender; b) By ethnicity; c) By income; d) By religion; e) Due to a disability; f) None of these

26. According to which of the following criteria do you think you are discriminated against by the teachers?

a) By gender; b) By ethnicity; c) By income; d) By religion; e) Due to a disability; f) None of these

27. I believe that I will be able to follow the courses of a college.

a) To a lesser extent compared to my colleagues; b) To the same extent as my colleagues; c) To a greater extent compared to my colleagues

28. I believe that I could follow my dream by practicing a sport, an artistic activity, etc.

a) To a lesser extent compared to my colleagues; b) To the same extent as my colleagues; c) To a greater extent compared to my colleagues

29. I believe that my family will support me in achieving my goals or pursuing a career in my dream field.

30. Reasons why I think this:

a) Very little; b) A little; c) Moderate; d) A lot; e) Very much