

BRIDGING THE GAP: EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TRANSITIONING TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *This article explores the educational needs and social support mechanisms for high school students transitioning to higher education in Romania, with a specific focus on rural and urban disparities. Using quantitative data from a sociological survey conducted among students from two high schools in Craiova, the study identifies critical factors influencing academic aspirations and barriers to higher education. The findings emphasize the importance of financial aid, educational counseling, and preparatory programs in mitigating educational inequalities. Policy recommendations are provided to address systemic challenges and promote equitable access to higher education.*

Keywords: educational transition, social support, higher education, rural-urban disparities, Romania.

1. Introduction

The transition from high school to higher education represents a very important stage in students' lives, significantly influencing their career trajectories and socio-economic opportunities. In Romania, socio-economic inequalities and regional disparities exacerbate barriers to higher education, particularly for students from rural areas or families with low educational attainment. Despite existing national strategies like the 2022–2027 inclusion plan, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access to educational resources. Socio-economic disparities in education not only hinder individual achievement but also perpetuate systemic inequalities across generations. The intersection of socio-economic status with other marginalized identities—such as race, ethnicity, or disability—creates compounding disadvantages that extend beyond academics. For instance, research shows that children from low-income families are more likely to experience chronic stress, which negatively impacts cognitive development and school performance (Evans & Kim, 2013). Additionally, limited access to healthcare, nutrition, and safe learning environments further exacerbates these challenges. As Duncan and Murnane (2011) argue, "educational inequities are not isolated phenomena but are deeply embedded in broader social and economic structures that perpetuate cycles of disadvantage." This intersectional lens underscores the urgency of addressing these disparities holistically, through policies that integrate education with healthcare, housing, and community development initiatives, ensuring that vulnerable populations receive comprehensive support. This study builds on these frameworks, examining students' needs and perceptions to inform targeted interventions.

2. A brief literature review

Socio-economic background is a well-documented determinant of educational attainment. Studies reveal that students from low-income families often face financial constraints, lack of parental support, and limited access to quality educational resources (OECD, 2019). In Romania, this dynamic is accentuated in rural areas, where students encounter additional challenges like geographic isolation and underfunded schools. Studies consistently reveal that students from low-income families face significant barriers, such as financial constraints, limited access to quality educational resources, and lack of parental support (Mitchall&Jaeger, 2018; Engberg & Allen, 2011, Alexe, Hâj & Murgescu, 2015 etc.). For instance, Reardon (2011) notes that "income inequality has led to a widening achievement gap in education, with students from affluent families consistently outperforming their low-income peers." This disparity is particularly stark in countries with less equitable educational systems, where socioeconomic status (SES) is a stronger predictor of academic achievement.

Educational counseling has been shown to improve students' academic outcomes and career planning. Research highlights the importance of tailored counseling sessions in helping students navigate complex educational landscapes (Judijanto, et.al. 2024). However, in Romania, access to professional counseling remains uneven, particularly in under-resourced schools (Enachescu & Rosca, 2014: 321). One of the most immediate impacts of low SES is the financial inability to access high-quality education. According to UNESCO (2021), over 260 million children worldwide are out of school due to financial barriers. Even in developed nations, where public education is ostensibly free, associated costs like transportation, materials, and extracurricular activities create significant disparities. As Lareau (2011) argues, "the hidden costs of education disproportionately affect low-income families, limiting their children's access to enrichment opportunities that foster academic success." This financial strain also affects post-secondary aspirations, as students from low-income families are less likely to pursue higher education, fearing debt or feeling unprepared for the transition. Scholarships and subsidies play an important role in reducing dropout rates and encouraging higher education participation among disadvantaged students, and evidence suggests that such interventions are particularly effective when combined with mentorship and preparatory programs (Chen & DesJardins, 2008: 12). In Romania, initiatives like social scholarships have made progress, but gaps remain in coverage and accessibility (Ministry of Education, 2023; Toc, 2018; Garaz & Torotcoi, 2017).

Educational resources—both material and human—are often less available to low-income students. Schools in underprivileged areas are more likely to lack well-trained teachers, updated curricula, and technological tools (Darling-Hammond, 2010; DuBois et.al, 2011). In a comparative study, Schleicher (2019) highlights that "schools in affluent areas are twice as likely to have teachers with advanced degrees and specialized training compared to schools in low-income areas." Furthermore, disparities in funding exacerbate these issues, as wealthier communities often supplement public funding with local taxes, creating a cycle where low-income schools remain underfunded.

International comparisons shed light on the systemic nature of these inequities. For instance, in the United States, Kozol (1991) documented the stark contrasts between urban schools serving low-income students and suburban schools in affluent neighborhoods. Similarly, in South Africa, Chisholm (2012) describes how the legacy of apartheid continues to affect educational resource allocation, with rural and low-income schools receiving fewer resources despite policy commitments to equity.

Disparities between rural and urban education systems have been widely studied in Eastern Europe. Rural students often lack access to qualified teachers, extracurricular activities, and technology, limiting their academic potential (World Bank, 2018). In Romania, rural students' transition to higher education is hindered by systemic inequities, necessitating comprehensive policy responses (Niță, Motoi & Goga, 2021; Zamfir, Militaru, Mocanu, & Lungu, 2020).

Romania's education policies, including the 2023 Higher Education Law, aim to enhance access and inclusivity (for more details see Otovescu, 2015). However, effective implementation requires addressing localized challenges and fostering collaboration between schools, families, and policymakers. The impact of SES on educational attainment is further exacerbated when intersected with other forms of marginalization, such as race, gender, or disability. For example, in the United States, Black and Hispanic students are more likely to attend underfunded schools due to the historical legacy of segregation and systemic inequities in housing policies (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Similarly, Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia face compounded disadvantages, with students often attending schools with fewer resources and culturally insensitive curricula (Oakes et al., 2013).

3. Research objectives and hypothesis

The research employed a quantitative sociological approach to identify the educational needs and perceptions of high school students regarding their transition to higher education. Specific objectives included:

1. Identifying the needs and perceptions of students about transitioning to higher education and the factors influencing continuation.
2. Evaluating the impact of various support interventions such as information dissemination, counseling, and scholarships.

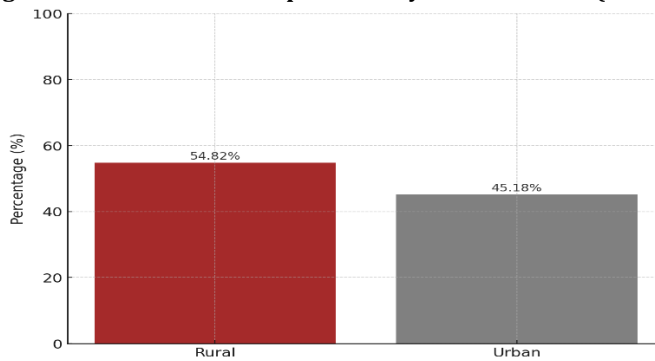
The study was guided by three hypotheses:

- H1: Students from families with low educational levels require more support to continue their studies post-high school.
- H2: Adequate information and educational counseling are essential for increasing university continuation rates.
- H3: Scholarships and financial aid are essential in reducing school dropout rates and facilitating access to higher education.

The study used a structured questionnaire covering the following themes: Demographic and contextual information, Intent to continue studies, educational support priorities, Participation in support activities, Specific opinions and needs

The survey was conducted online using Google Forms for ease of access and rapid data collection. The link was distributed via official school communication channels and social media platforms targeting students. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained before survey completion. Responses were collected and analyzed using descriptive statistical methods.

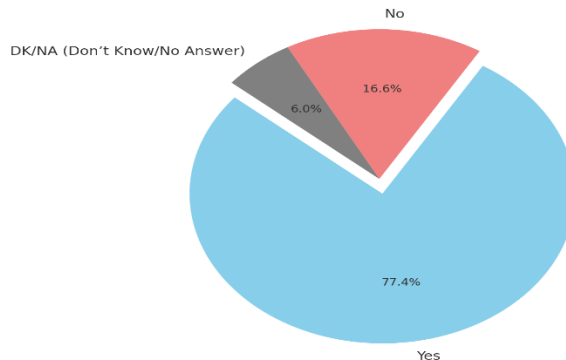
Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by residence area (N= 156)



4. Results

The study revealed a strong inclination among respondents to pursue higher education, with 77.41% expressing their intent to continue their academic journey after high school. This high percentage underscores the value placed on higher education by students, even in the face of substantial barriers. It reflects a widespread belief in education as a pathway to improved socio-economic opportunities and personal development. Students' aspirations are likely driven by the increasing demand for higher qualifications in the labor market, as well as societal perceptions of higher education as a critical step toward career advancement and financial stability.

Figure 2. Desire to continue studies after high school (N=156)



However, the remaining 22.59% of respondents either showed reluctance to continue their education or expressed uncertainty, pointing to significant challenges that hinder their educational progression. Among these, 16.59% explicitly indicated a lack of intention to pursue higher studies.

Financial constraints emerged as a predominant factor, with many students unable to afford tuition fees, transportation, or living expenses associated with higher education.

This finding aligns with existing research that highlights the role of economic hardship as a major deterrent to educational attainment. Furthermore, logistical barriers such as the unavailability of nearby higher education institutions or lack of transportation exacerbate these challenges, particularly for students from rural areas. This group often feels marginalized and excluded from the opportunities available to their urban counterparts.

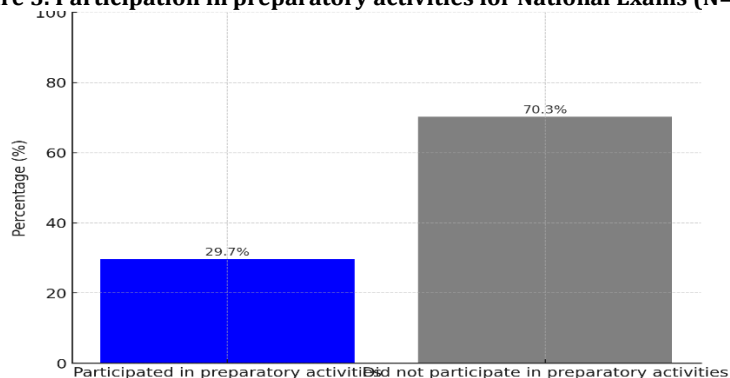
A majority (60.51%) of respondents felt they had access to sufficient information about the benefits of pursuing higher education. This indicates that existing outreach and informational campaigns, whether through schools, community initiatives, or online platforms, have been relatively effective in conveying the value of higher education. These students likely had access to career counseling, guidance sessions, or family and community networks that reinforced the importance of continuing their education.

A significant minority (32.07%) reported feeling that information on higher education opportunities was inadequate. This discrepancy points to gaps in the dissemination and accessibility of information, particularly in underprivileged or rural areas. Students in these contexts often lack exposure to higher education pathways due to limited school resources, absence of career counselors, or familial support that might otherwise fill this gap. This inadequacy leaves many students unaware of available programs, fields of study, or application processes, creating an unnecessary barrier to higher education participation.

Scholarships and financial aid emerged as a critical area of concern, with 41.55% of respondents identifying these supports as essential for their educational aspirations. This underscores the economic challenges that many students face, particularly those from low-income or single-income families. These findings reflect broader trends in educational equity research, which consistently show that financial insecurity is a primary obstacle to higher education access. For many students, scholarships and grants are not just supportive resources but essential lifelines that determine their ability to continue education.

The findings show a critical gap in students' participation in preparatory activities for national exams, with 70.3% of respondents reporting no involvement in such programs. This lack of participation reflects the limited availability of accessible, tailored academic support programs for many students, particularly those from under-resourced schools or disadvantaged backgrounds. Students may also face logistical challenges, such as a lack of transportation, financial constraints, or limited awareness of existing preparatory opportunities.

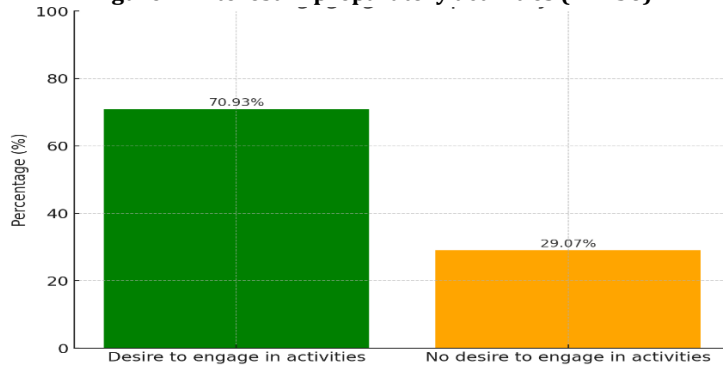
Figure 3. Participation in preparatory activities for National Exams (N=156)



However, a promising 70.93% of students expressed a desire to engage in these activities, demonstrating a clear and unmet demand for academic support programs. This interest underscores the recognition among students of the importance of structured preparation for achieving success in exams that are pivotal to accessing higher education. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions, including the expansion of preparatory courses, both in-person and online, to ensure equitable access for all students.

Emotional support activities, such as anti-bullying and equality programs, are critically important in schools as they create a safe and inclusive environment where all students feel valued and supported, enabling them to focus on their academic and personal growth without the fear of discrimination, harassment, or social exclusion. These programs address the psychological and social challenges that many students face, particularly those from marginalized or vulnerable groups, by fostering a culture of empathy, respect, and mutual understanding, which is essential for building healthy interpersonal relationships and reducing conflict among peers.

Figure 4. Interest in preparatory activities (N=156)

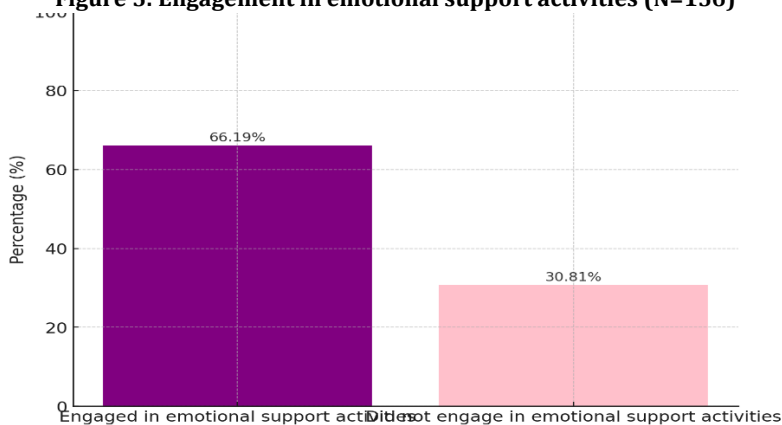


Moreover, by actively combating bullying, segregation, and inequality, schools not only protect students from immediate harm but also contribute to the development of positive self-esteem and resilience, which are crucial for long-term emotional well-being and success in adulthood. Emotional support initiatives also enhance the overall school climate, leading to improved academic outcomes, as students who feel emotionally secure and socially connected are more likely to engage in classroom activities, participate in extracurricular programs, and pursue higher educational goals.

Our study revealed also that 66.19% of respondents had participated in emotional support activities, such as anti-bullying and equality programs. This majority highlights the positive impact of existing initiatives aimed at fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment. However, 30.81% of students reported no engagement in such activities, indicating a significant gap in the implementation and accessibility of these programs.

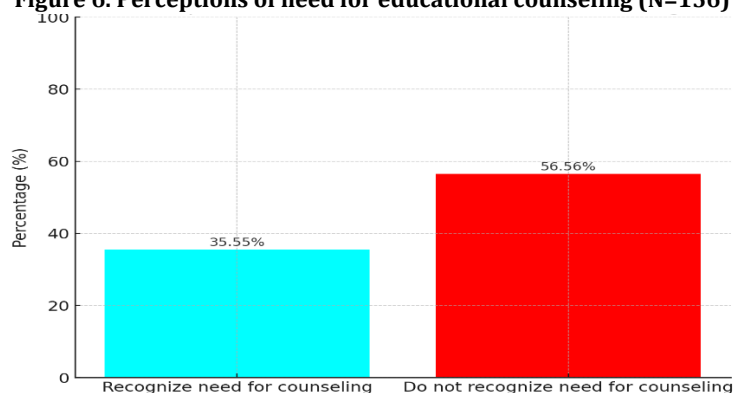
For the remaining segment, barriers may include a lack of program availability in their schools, limited awareness of the benefits, or logistical challenges preventing participation. Emotional support and equity programs are critical for addressing broader issues like mental health, discrimination, and social exclusion, which can significantly impact academic performance and overall well-being.

Figure 5: Engagement in emotional support activities (N=156)



When it comes to educational counseling, 35.55% of students recognized its importance and the need for such services (Figure 4). This group likely understands the value of guidance in navigating academic decisions, career planning, and university admissions processes. However, the majority (56.56%) believed they did not require counseling, potentially indicating a lack of awareness about the benefits of these services or a perception that such resources are not necessary for their academic journey.

Figure 6. Perceptions of need for educational counseling (N=156)



This finding suggests that many students may be unaware of how counseling can address critical gaps in knowledge, support career aspirations, or alleviate uncertainties about higher education. The perception that counseling is unnecessary could also stem from a lack of visibility or availability of professional guidance services in their schools. In our opinion, the perception that counseling is unnecessary among many students can often be attributed to a combination of factors, including the lack of visibility, promotion, or integration of professional guidance services within their schools, which may result in students not fully understanding the role of counseling in addressing critical gaps in their knowledge, offering tailored support to clarify and align their career aspirations with realistic goals, or helping them navigate the often complex and daunting pathways to higher education, thereby leaving them to rely on fragmented or informal sources of advice that may not adequately address their specific needs or concerns.

5. Discussion. Testing the hypothesis through Pearson’s correlations:

The table below presents the Pearson correlation coefficients for testing sociological hypotheses related to educational support, counseling, and socio-economic factors in determining students' aspirations and opportunities for continuing their education.

Table 1. Pearson correlation coefficients between key factors influencing the desire to continue education

Variables	Correlated with	Pearson Correlation
Educational_Level	Desire_to_Continue	0.019
Adequate_Information	Desire_to_Continue	0.125
Counseling_Importance	Desire_to_Continue	0.124
Scholarship_Importance	Desire_to_Continue	-0.024
Scholarship_Importance	Counseling_Importance	0.536

The first hypothesis (H1), which posits that students from families with low educational levels require more support to continue their studies post-high school, is supported only minimally by the data. The correlation between parental educational level and students' desire to continue their education (0.019) is extremely weak, suggesting that the direct influence of parental education on educational aspirations is limited. This finding aligns with broader sociological theories that emphasize the growing

importance of institutional and peer influences in shaping young people's aspirations, particularly in societies where public education systems play a central role in providing equal opportunities. However, the weak correlation also indicates the need to consider other latent variables, such as the quality of schools, access to extracurricular activities, or social capital within communities, which may mediate the relationship between family background and educational aspirations.

The second hypothesis (H2) highlights the importance of adequate information and educational counseling in increasing university continuation rates. The weak positive correlation between access to adequate information and students' desire to continue their studies (0.125) suggests that informational campaigns and resources can have a modest yet positive impact on educational aspirations.

Similarly, the weak correlation between the perceived importance of counseling and the desire to continue education (0.124) underscores the potential role of targeted guidance programs in shaping students' decisions. These findings point to the need for improving the availability and quality of counseling services, particularly in underprivileged schools, where students may lack the social networks or familial support to navigate complex educational pathways. Although the correlations are not strong, they highlight the potential of low-cost, scalable interventions like career counseling workshops, informational sessions, and mentorship programs to influence students' aspirations and decision-making processes.

The third hypothesis (H3) explores the role of scholarships and financial aid in reducing dropout rates and facilitating access to higher education. Interestingly, the correlation between the importance of scholarships and the desire to continue education (-0.024) is negligible and slightly negative, suggesting that scholarships alone may not be sufficient to motivate students to pursue higher education. This finding may reflect structural barriers, such as the geographic availability of higher education institutions, the perceived value of a university degree in the labor market, or the psychological effects of economic insecurity, which can diminish the effectiveness of financial incentives. However, the moderate positive correlation between the importance of scholarships and counseling (0.536) reveals a strong synergy between financial and informational support systems. Students who value scholarships also recognize the importance of counseling, suggesting that a combination of financial aid and personalized guidance may be more effective in addressing the multifaceted barriers to education than standalone interventions.

6. Conclusion

The weak correlations overall highlight the structural nature of barriers to higher education, which cannot be addressed through isolated measures but require systemic reforms. Policies that combine financial aid with counseling, mentorship, and preparatory programs are likely to have a more significant impact on reducing inequalities and fostering educational opportunities for all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, these findings suggest the need for further research to identify the underlying factors that mediate these relationships, such as school quality, community resources, or cultural attitudes toward education. By addressing these complexities, policymakers and educators can develop more effective strategies to promote equity and inclusion in education. The integration of such systemic reforms necessitates a coordinated effort among policymakers, educators, community organizations, and families to ensure that the interventions are not only designed with a clear understanding of the diverse needs of students but are also implemented in a way that addresses the intersectional challenges faced by different demographic groups, such as rural students, ethnic minorities, and students from low-income families.

This process requires substantial investment in teacher training programs to equip educators with the skills needed to deliver inclusive and supportive learning experiences, alongside the development of infrastructure that enhances access to educational resources, including technology, libraries, and extracurricular opportunities that can bridge the gap between underprivileged and privileged students. In conclusion, continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to assess the effectiveness of these programs, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that the initiatives remain adaptive to the changing educational landscape and the evolving needs of students.

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