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*The Importance of Educational Day Care Centers  
for Preventing School Dropout*

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**Doctoral Thesis**

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## **Abstract**

The hereby presented research aims to identify the impact of day-care centers that provide educational activities on children coming from socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The impact will be measured by analyzing the children's perception of the importance of education, by studying the contribution that the day-care centers have had on the continuation of studies for the young people who have benefited from the center's activities, and by examining the importance that the day-care centers have in the formation of social actors, important and with social and economic integration skills, able to adapt to the changes occurring in society.

By day-care centers we mean centers for pupils who, under the supervision of a competent staff, benefit from systematic educational activities and activities for personal development and socialization. In accordance with Order No. 27/2019 on the minimum standards of quality and operation of day-care centers, all units of day-care centers for children, regardless of their main purpose, shall provide children with unconditional access to formal and informal educational activities, carried out in the centers, by a team of specialists, responsible for their school monitoring and prevention of school failure.

The present thesis analyzes the importance of day-care centers from the point of view of the child beneficiaries, the specialists who work in the day-care centers and the indirect beneficiaries (family, school), local collaborators, specialists who have in their records children who are enrolled in the center. The aim is thus to integrate all perspectives on the importance of day-care centers, involving important local actors in this research approach.

In the research approach we included the follow-up of the personal trajectory of some beneficiaries who were supported through the programs developed within the day-care centers, being able to assess the impact of the services on the prevention of risk behaviors, the educational level achieved as a result of the support received, but also the impact on the learning motivation and perseverance of the beneficiaries in achieving higher levels of education and on the development of independent living skills.

The present research aims to make scientific contributions through information that enrich the social reality and contribute to a better understanding of the importance of day-care centers at community level.

The research will also make significant empirical contributions through the results that

will be obtained in the future, as it is hoped that there will be more interest from relevant actors at local and national level on the importance of supporting day-care centers to prevent school dropout.

The personal and professional motivation for this research approach is due to the author's professional experience in a day-care center in the position of social worker, but also in the position of center coordinator.

At the same time, I believe that this research can help to strengthen perceptions about the importance and impact of day-care centers on the future of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the need for collaboration and support of day-care centers at local level.

According to the legal framework in Romania, day-care centers operate in order to prevent the separation of the child from the family, more specifically in order to support the family in order to provide adequate care for children. The center, through its organization and proper functioning, creates a framework in which children and beneficiaries feel protected and supported in any problems encountered. The benefits or 'investment' made by day-care centers for the direct beneficiaries are long-term and have a direct impact on them by developing their self-esteem, improving their social behaviors and preventing delinquent behaviors (Kirshnamurthi, Ballard & Noam, 2014).

Since 2018, in the European Education Area (EEA) these principles have led to the development and implementation of strategies to improve the quality of education and school inclusion. The strategies for 2020 and 2030 have adopted a new set of methods to support the educational process in the European states, such as the creation of an action plan for digital education, the main focus of the strategies (European Commission, 2015).

According to the European Commission, early school leaving is one of the main factors contributing to inequalities in the labor market, especially among young people, and to the increased risk of poverty among this age group. The targets set include reducing the early school leaving rate to below 9% and increasing the share of young people having completed tertiary education to at least 45% by 2030 (European Commission, 2024, p. 29).

Dropping out of school is defined as dropping out of education due to external factors that intervene and overlap with school motivation and the importance and role of education. In secondary school and throughout high school, pupils are influenced by their background. Thus, an important role in their lives is played by their friends, family and community, systems in which various factors are at work that can support or raise barriers to children's participation in education (Roth et al., 2009). Thus, extrinsic factors such as the socio-economic situation of

the family, poor educational support from parents, belonging to a group of friends who are involved in criminal or delinquent activities can lead to dropping out of school.

The term school dropout is often assimilated as equivalent to early school leaving, although in technical terms it is an indicator that is calculated differently from the early school leaving rate (Iliescu et al., 2024).

In the definition of the Ministry of Education, the dropout rate is an indicator calculated based on data from the National Institute of Statistics and as measuring “*the difference between the number of pupils enrolled at the beginning of the school year and the number of pupils who remain enrolled at the end of the school year*” (Ministerul Educației, 2021, p. 4). In order to address the dropout phenomenon, the European Commission has recommended to centralize data on school dropout for each EU member state and to develop concrete strategies through which to intervene in a timely manner, based on the data collected from each individual country, making use of good collaboration between member states and providing a model of best practices in preventing this phenomenon.

Another approach in trying to understand why pupils drop out of school consist of the pull-out theories which suggest that factors external to school life, such as family or financial obligations, pull pupils out of the educational system. Push-out theories, on the other hand, focus on factors within the school, such as inadequate academic support or inadequate, misunderstood disciplinary policies, that push pupils toward the dropout decision. Fall-out theories postulate that the experience of failures along the educational pathway causes pupils to fall behind, leading to gradual disengagement and ultimately to dropout (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). Most of the time it's the overlap of all these factors. The risk of dropout is characterized by: poor school performance, shown by pupils' grades, these are associated with factors such as pupils' coming from a disadvantaged background, low-income family and/or pupils who are of different ethnicities, high number of absences.

A report to the European Council by the Reflection Group on the Future of the EU 2030 wants to draw attention to the high rate of early school leaving which has an impact on the qualification of young people on the labor market, caused by the lack of skills needed for the working conditions of young people. The employment probability for young people who have failed to complete compulsory schooling falls sharply, and only one out of ten potential young people without a high school education manages to take up a position in the labor market (European Commission, 2015).

There are also good practice models on the implementation process and sustainability of

European strategies and systems to increase children's participation in early education. In this respect, countries such as Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden have low dropout rates, and have succeeded in becoming examples of early childhood education systems. These countries have succeeded in introducing sustainable models in their educational curricula and teaching methods, primarily targeting the most vulnerable children at risk of failure and social exclusion (European Commission, 2024).

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

CHAPTER I is dedicated to clarifying the concept of early school leaving, its factors and social consequences.

Dropout risk is characterized by: poor school performance (as shown by pupils' grades), which is associated with factors such as pupils coming from a disadvantaged background, low-income family and/or pupils belonging to different ethnic groups, and high number of absences. Thus, extrinsic factors such as: the socio-economic situation of the family, poor educational support from parents, belonging to a group of friends involved in criminal and delinquent activities, may increase the risk of absenteeism and dropout.

Most researches on school dropout tend to consider the characteristics of the child as the main problem leading to dropout, without taking sufficient account of the school's ability to integrate children according to their needs. These approaches are considered misguided, as they portray dropout as the child's inability to cope with the educational demands and the educational environment. Instead, the school and the education system are primarily responsible for the school integration of pupils, regardless of their background (Ecker-Lyster & Christopher, 2016).

Absenteeism, the first indicator towards school dropout, can be associated with a number of chronic socio-familial student problems, which teachers are responsible for investigating in order to reduce absences or prevent dropout. The lack of appropriate economic conditions for the families from which children come can maintain an environment that is unsuitable for learning. Material deprivation leads pupils to destructive behaviors such as: their involvement in violence, drug use, early sexual activity (which in turn leads to unwanted pregnancies among young girls), all of which contribute to maintaining high absences and the imminent danger of dropping out of school (Sahin et al., 2016, p. 196–205). Involving teachers and maintaining a supportive attitude by the family are the essential key to breaking this vicious cycle.

CHAPTER II: Explanatory theories. This chapter aims to highlight the theoretical underpinning of the thesis.



Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of child development emphasizes the importance of the environment in shaping the development and education of children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to this theory, every factor in a child's environment – family, school, community, as well as educational institutions and available resources – plays a crucial role in shaping the child's aspirations and success at school. In this sense, day-care centers play a fundamental role in intervening in the educational environment of vulnerable children by providing a safe space and support for their educational, emotional and social development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

The ecological model emphasizes the interaction between risk and supportive factors, with each system in which the child interacts having an impact on school performance. At the microsystem's level, the child's direct relationships with family, school education and peer group influence motivation and performance. Therefore, day-care centers, through their educational and support activities, contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to learning, thus counteracting the educational deficiencies of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Participation in these centers can also transform children's educational aspirations by providing them with positive role models and opportunities that may be missing from their home environment.

The social capital theory is described by various authors, e.g. Coleman (1988), who believes that capital can be characterized by either a cultural or a subjective structure. For Newton, Whiteley and Inglehart, social capital is *"a psychological trait, an individual resource evidenced in social relations through a set of values"* (Dragoman, 2006, p. 57). The importance of this theory for the proposed paper denotes from the fact that there is a link between the level of social capital of the family (composed of the family's schooling level, economic conditions, culture) and children's education. It is essential that educational policy and school institutions recognize the crucial role of social capital in the educational process, in particular through the active involvement of families and the community in the life of the school.

The life course perspective (LCP) is an interdisciplinary theory that helps to identify the social links between what an individual experiences at the macro level and what they experience at the micro level. The life course perspective allows the individual to be studied in terms of sequences of events, experiences and transitions in a person's life from birth to death. But also from the perspective of the family, in terms of the family's way of life synchronized over time. In addition, the *life course* perspective analyzes the dynamics of a person's life as a property of the cultures and social institutions that shape the person's

individual and family life (Glen, 1998, p. 1).

The flexible mindset theory proposed by Carol Dweck (2016) plays a crucial role in the educational development of pupils, especially in the context of day-care centers. According to this theory, learning ability is not a fixed attribute, but a flexible trait that can be shaped and developed throughout life, influenced by efforts, challenges and feedback. In the educational environment, the application of a flexible mindset can significantly improve the pupils' academic performance, contributing to increased motivation, resilience and positive attitudes towards learning.

Integrating the flexible mindset theory into educational practice in day-care centers is an effective strategy to support pupils to overcome challenges and reach their full potential, helping to reduce educational and social inequalities.

### CHAPTER III: Factors contributing to early school leaving.

This chapter highlights the factors contributing to school dropout for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The structure of the chapter, which analyzes the factors of school dropout at the individual, school, family and macro levels (poverty being a major structural factor), reflects the perspectives of ecological theory (Boudon, 1974). The complex interplay between these levels is evident, low academic performance is the result of broader social processes, unstable family environment affects emotional and behavioral development, and dysfunctional educational system or inclusive policies directly influence the individual pupil's experience (Roman, Davidse and Sonn, 2022). Poverty acts as a global context factor (macrosystem), affecting all other levels, from individual and family stress to school and community resources. The studies mentioned in this chapter emphasize how early and long-term experiences influence educational trajectories (Dumitru, 2019; OECD, 2012). Prolonged exposure to poverty in childhood affects cognitive and emotional functioning, with long-term consequences for learning capacity. Lack of access to quality education perpetuates the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Education, in turn, is seen as a crucial mechanism to break this cycle and enable upward social mobility (Evans and Kim, 2013).

In conclusion, the analysis in this chapter substantiates the need for complex interventions that address the network of factors – social, contextual and psychological – that interact to increase the risk of school dropout, especially in the context of poverty. In this sense, the intervention of day-care centers acts at these multiple levels, through the complexity of the services they offer and the targeted multidisciplinary intervention for which they are responsible.

#### CHAPTER IV: Day-care centers

Day-care centers play a key role in preventing the marginalization of children from disadvantaged backgrounds by providing them with educational and personal development opportunities that are not evidently available in their family or community environment. Participation in the programs of these centers contributes significantly to the development of children's educational and social skills, reducing the gaps that may occur when children enter the education system. For the development of educational skills different studies demonstrate that for children from low-income families participation reduces achievement gaps between children, because differences in math tests are faded away between pupils from different social classes (Krishnamurthi, Ballard and Noam, 2014, p. 10).

Thus, day-care centers not only support children to overcome educational difficulties, but also prevent their involvement in risky behaviors, such as juvenile delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse or early sexual debut (Vinson, Sniegowski and Liu, 2015, Little, Wimer and Weiss, 2007, p. 7). These centers also provide a safe and structured environment that facilitates emotional and social development, contributing to the social integration of vulnerable children. In this sense, proactive interventions through day-care centers not only promote social inclusion, but also contribute to the prevention of risks associated with social exclusion, thus providing a favorable framework for their further development and integration into society (Santos, 2024, p. 32).

#### CHAPTER V: Research methodology

This chapter aims to present the methodology of the research on the impact of educational day-care centers on the beneficiaries, namely children from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. The impact will be measured by analyzing the children's perception of the importance of education, the data relevant to the contribution that the day-care centers have had on the continuation of studies for the young people who have benefited from the day-care centers' activities and the perception of the social actors involved in the day-care centers on the beneficiaries' social integration skills and their ability to adapt to social change. The design of the research is one longitudinal, retrospective, requiring the use both methods quantitative as well as qualitative. The methodology of research was based on the model of evaluation of programs educational developed by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (Geiger & Britsch, 2017), renowned for expertise its in the development of instruments relevant for the analysis of the impact of programs intended for children, youth and adults.

The target group is represented by beneficiaries and former beneficiaries of educational

day-care centers with the mission of preventing school dropout in a Transylvanian municipality, which we have referred to in this study as city X, in order to anonymize the institutions and respondents whose data were analyzed.

Objectives:

- 1. Investigating specialists' perspective on the impact of the day-care center on children*
- 2. Analyzing the perceptions of former beneficiaries of day-care centers on the importance that day-care centers had on their social integration*
- 3. Highlighting the importance of day-care centers for dropout prevention from the perspective of reducing the societal costs of school dropout*
- 4. Investigating the contribution that day-care centers have on the school motivation of the beneficiaries.*

Research questions:

- 1. What is the impact of day-care centers on the educational performance of children from disadvantaged backgrounds?**
- 2. What is the impact of day-care centers on preventing risk behaviors and child safety?**
  - To what extent do day-care centers contribute to reducing the risks of abuse, neglect or involvement in deviant behavior?
  - What safety measures are implemented in the centers, and how do they influence children's behavior?
- 3. How do day-care centers help reduce inequality of opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds?**
  - How do day-care centers facilitate children's access to educational, recreational or personal development activities that they would not otherwise have?
  - What role do day-care centers play in promoting a more equitable education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds?
- 4. How do day-care centers support families of children from disadvantaged backgrounds?**
  - What types of support do day-care centers offer to families, and how is the importance of this support for families described?
  - How do day-care centers contribute to improving the quality of life of families from disadvantaged backgrounds?
- 5. What is the perception of the community and local authorities on the effectiveness of**

### **day-care centers in supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds?**

- How are day-care centers evaluated by parents, educators and local authorities?
- What are the challenges and barriers identified in their implementation and operation?

### **6. How do the children enrolled in the center describe the benefits of attending the day-care centers?**

- What are the elements that help motivate them to participate in the center?
- How do children see the impossibility of being enrolled at the center?

### **7. How do former beneficiaries of day-care centers describe the experience and opportunity they had by attending the center?**

- How do former beneficiaries perceive the importance of the existence of these centers at the local level and the lack of them?
- What do they see as the long-term benefits that have made a difference to their personal and social development?

The quantitative part of the study describes the profile of the beneficiaries of the day-care center in Municipality X and presents a quantified, overall picture of the children's attitudes towards the school and the center, as well as their satisfaction with the services offered by the center. In the quantitative study we consulted 154 files, 28 questionnaires were administered to parents (the annual ones) and 36 to the direct beneficiaries, the children. I will track the following indices: *satisfaction with the center's activity, frequency and duration of attendance, relations with the center's staff, school motivation, perception of help received to improve school results, the center's capacity, inclusiveness (friendly environment) and the safety the center offers*. The scale to measure pupils' perceptions of the day-care center programs consists of 20 statements, and pupils have a choice of four response options (never, sometimes, most of the time, every time).

The qualitative research aimed to measure the perception of the importance of children's participation in the day-care center, the quality and effectiveness of services offered at community level from the perspective of all local actors, partners of the day care center in Municipality X. Thus, 20 interviews with parents and children were carried out, selecting a diverse group of participants for the interview: children from I-VIII grades and beneficiary parents with different socio-economic conditions.

At the same time, 10 interviews were conducted with collaborators of the center: specialized inspectors from the Social and Medical Services Directorate (Direcție de Asistență

Socială și Medicală – DASM), X Child Protection Service, from the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (Direcția Generală de Asistență Socială și Protecția Copilului – DGASPC) of County X, as well as teachers, principals, school mediators, educational counselors from different partner schools in X, and social workers from other NGO's in X.

**Table no. 1.** Design methodology

What is the research looking for?	By what methods?	Tools
Description of the typology of beneficiaries from the opening of the center until the time of the evaluation 2010–2020	Document analysis Sociological survey	Document Analysis Sheet (Annex no. 9) and Annual questionnaire to identify the socio-economic situation of families (Annex no. 2)
Assessment of motivation for school learning and involvement in center activities.	Sociological survey	Motivation questionnaire applied to the pupil beneficiaries of the program (Annex no. 1)
Evaluation of satisfaction with the services offered by day-care centers.	Sociological survey	Questionnaire on satisfaction with the center's program, applied to parents (Annex no. 2)
Perception of the centers' influence on beneficiaries. Long-term impact of day-care centers. The importance of community centers.	Semi-structured interviews tailored to the target group	Interview guide for pupils (Annex 4) Interview guide for parents (Annex 6) Interview guide for teachers (Annex 5) Interview guide for former beneficiaries (Annex no. 7) Interview guide for the center specialists (Annex no. 8) Interview guide for local collaborators (Annex no. 5).
Changes in day-care centers during the Covid-19 pandemic	Semi-structured interviews	Interview guide for social workers working in day-care centers and pupil beneficiaries of day-care centers, applied during the pandemic (Annex no. 3)

## CHAPTER VI: Research results

This chapter presents the results of the descriptive and satisfaction research on the services offered by the day-care center:

Children beneficiary describes their participation in the center in a predominantly positive manner, highlighting in particular the educational support, the emotional impact, the safe environment and the relationships with specialists.

A large majority of children report that they like to attend the center (94.3%, out of which 61% almost every time). This is also reflected in good attendance at the center (72% go at least 4 times a week). The main reasons given by children for attending are doing homework (75%) and interesting activities (55.6%). Although generally satisfied, children also have suggestions for the program, wanting either more time for homework/meditation or more time for socialization

and personal development, depending on the school cycle. This shows that they perceive benefits from both educational and recreational/social activities.

There appears an educational path with school difficulties for children enrolled at the day care center. A considerable percentage of the children included in the study (44.7%) have failed at least once over the years – for this aspect, the center provides crucial support in homework. The vast majority of the children (91.7%) state that they are helped with their homework by the center's specialists, 61.1% of them go home almost every time with their homework done. A significant percentage (44.4%) manage to complete all their homework at the center every time. As a result of these services offered at the center, both the children and their parents perceive **an** improvement in their school results. 86.1% of the children have noticed progress at school since attending the center. The parents' opinion is similar, with 89.8% feeling that their children's school results have improved. Homework support is considered the most important service by parents, with 92.4% of the parents naming it as their first choice. Parents are satisfied with the quiet and suitable space for homework and the opportunity for them to complete homework correctly and on time.

Among the results of the qualitative analysis, several aspects mentioned by the respondents regarding the positive impact of the centers stand out. Educationally, the center contributed to the completion of an educational cycle and motivation to continue school, while socially, by the specific activities, the center helped them to develop the skills they needed after completing the center attendance, for integration both educationally and in the circle of friends. All former beneficiaries described a direction in which they could go in the future, either educational or personal. In order to help develop services that will further reach the needs of the children, former beneficiaries largely recommend choosing a location that will allow more children to attend the center.

On a personal level, the young people, former beneficiaries of the center, consider that the center has shaped them and contributed to their personal development. Maturation is considered important for social success. At the center they found support to develop their thinking to adapt to daily challenges. The center also played an important role in risk prevention. By spending their free time in a productive way, it has prevented young people from getting involved in activities that would have jeopardized their life trajectory. Former beneficiaries are aware of the dangers to which the environment exposed them (street, alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, problems with the police) and believe that without the center they could have ended up on a negative path (becoming a “thug”, as one former beneficiary described it).

As far as future plans are concerned, former beneficiaries aspire to financial stability (through jobs, buying a home) and want to have stable jobs that not only bring them material satisfaction, but also enjoyment of what they do.

The social workers consulted highlighted the role of the centers during the pandemic, they pointed out that the beneficiaries of the day-care centers participated in the online classes organized at the center, with different types of motivation that were identified. The beneficiaries of the day-care centers also recognized the importance of the support received, both educationally and emotionally.

CHAPTER VII: Comparative analysis of day-care centers in municipality X and services offered to prevent school dropout

This chapter aims to analyze the efficiency and effectiveness of day-care centers in Municipality X, in order to emphasize the importance that these services bring to the community by preventing school dropout and developing the socio-educational skills of children coming from socio-economically disadvantaged families. The day-care centers in the Municipality under analysis, operate with the explicit aim of preventing the separation of children from their parents and combating school dropout, especially for children being at risk of poverty and social exclusion. These are accredited according to Government Resolution no. 867/2015 and comply with the minimum quality standards established by Order 27/2019. The day-care centers offer a complex and integrated range of services, addressing vulnerable children and families. The assessment of effectiveness (the extent to which objectives are achieved and change is produced) is predominantly based on qualitative data and outcomes reported by the centers, with no quantitative data systematically measured according to scientific standards. However, sources indicate notable effectiveness.

The sources consistently emphasize the vital role and the major importance of continuous and long-term investment in the services of these day-care centers. By preventing school and social dropout, developing life skills, improving integration and supporting vulnerable families, the centers contribute directly to reducing the long-term social costs associated, for example, with unemployment and exclusion. Although there are improvements in educational outcomes that we can quantify only at center no. 1, centers no. 2 and 3 do not report data on the educational performance of the beneficiaries, and there are improvements in the acquisition of necessary educational skills.

CHAPTER VIII: Interpretation of results and final conclusions

Interviews with social workers, teachers, inspectors and school mediators show a consensus



on the effectiveness of day-care centers. Local actors emphasize their role in the followings: preventing dropout and delinquency, specialists are grateful for the way in which day-care centers succeed in combating juvenile delinquency, criminality and maladaptive behaviors in society through the activities they involve the beneficiaries in, thus contributing to the formation of skills necessary for adaptation in society and by occupying young people's free time in a constructive way. Research on the efficiency and effectiveness of day-care centers in Municipality X shows the importance of investing in these types of services at local level. The centers contribute directly to reducing long-term social costs (associated, for example, with unemployment and social exclusion and marginalization). As it can be deduced from the research carried out in this paper, from the analysis of the interviews conducted with the specialists involved in the life of the beneficiaries, it emerges that day-care centers have an important contribution at community level by preventing delinquent behavior frequently encountered in disadvantaged communities among children who do not attend a day-care center and do not spend their time in a constructive way, aspects also outlined in the literature by various relevant studies in the field (Little, Wimer & Weiss, 2007, Reynolds et al., 2001).

Impact on motivation and school performance: in Romania, the absence of personalized policies for pupils' educational needs can lead to their feeling of exclusion and rejection, increasing the risk of dropping out (Ionescu, 2023). Quantitative and qualitative data indicate that individualized educational support (homework, tutoring, counseling) strengthens children's confidence in their own abilities (mindset theory). More than 80% of the beneficiaries say they are happier and more engaged at school after enrolling at the center. This component of punctual support for educational endeavors through homework support, tutoring, mediation of relations with the school have a strong impact which is reflected not only in the pupils' school performance, but also in the importance that these children attach to school.

Perception of beneficiaries and former beneficiaries: the positive and appreciative attitude of the former beneficiaries regarding the way in which their participation in the center has been able to make a considerable contribution to their socio-educational development is clearly noticeable. Their participation in the educational activities at the center motivated them to continue their studies, and all five interviewed beneficiaries, who were enrolled since the first grade, completed their studies and went on to high school or arts and crafts school. The involvement of specialists, such as the social worker who mediated the relationship with the school, was perceived as an additional help for school success. On a personal level, these young people consider that the center shaped them and contributed to their personal development by: developing the thinking necessary

to adapt to daily challenges, developing the skills necessary for integration, both educationally and socially. The center also played an important role in risk prevention. By spending their free time in a productive way, it prevented young people from getting involved in activities that would have jeopardized their life trajectory. Former beneficiaries are aware of the dangers to which the environment has exposed them (street, alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, problems with the police), and believe that without the center they could have ended up on a negative path (becoming a “thug”, as one former beneficiary described it). In terms of future plans, former beneficiaries aspire to financial stability (through jobs, buying a home) and want to have stable jobs that bring them not only material satisfaction, but also enjoyment of what they do.

Benefits at community level: *“In the long run, these children will be more likely to become independent and active adults in the labor market, because they have received support to overcome the educational obstacles of their childhood”* (day-care center psychologist). This major impact at the level of society is realized by all the specialists at the local level and also by the specialists of the day-care center. *“Attending the day-care center helps children acquire a learning discipline and form work habits that will help them in the long run in their careers”* (specialized inspector). Through the effectiveness of day-care center services in preventing school dropout, it reduces the 100% probability of ending up on social assistance, according to data supported by Iliescu et al., 2024, who took into account that social assistance beneficiaries constitute 23% of the Romanian population, and live in economic instability, unemployment and have low income.

The role of the day-care centers during COVID-19 was highlighted both from the results measuring the changes that occurred at the centers during the pandemic, through interviews with social workers, as well as from the analysis of the efficiency and effectiveness of the day-care centers. Through prompt intervention and the way they were able to respond to the complex needs of the family, the role of the day-care center social worker became paramount in the context that every change in the family or environment involves crisis intervention, the social worker was resilient in the face of changes and new challenges that arose, in order to support both the child and families to adapt and to cope with the new living conditions.

Effectiveness and sustainability: effectiveness indicators show consistent retention of pupils on the educational pathway and preparation for labor market integration. The investment in day-care centers is confirmed as a cost-effective intervention with potential to improve Romania’s PISA scores.

Recommendations for public policy and future research include: expansion and funding

of day-care centers, impact monitoring, longitudinal research and community involvement.

With these conclusions, the present paper argues that day-care centers are a strategic social investment, capable of producing multiple benefits at individual, family and societal levels.

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