Pedagogika, 2024, 74(4), 379–384
http://pages.pedf.cuni.cz/pedagogika/

Smetáčková, I. et al. (2024): *Cesty dětí s rizikem školní neúspěšnosti [Pathways of children at risk of school failure].* Prague: Charles University – Faculty of Education.

A research project, the results of which form the basis of a peer-reviewed publication,"had the goal of **mapping the sources of school failure at the start of compulsory schooling and to find out what circumstances help children at risk of school failure to thrive**. In other words, we were interested in discovering what functional practices teachers use to support the learning of children with learning disabilities so that these children do not fall into school failure". A team of experienced researchers from the Faculty of Education of Charles University, in collaboration with a smaller team from the Faculty of Education of the University of South Bohemia, consisting of Anna Páchová, Naďa Vondrová, Martina Šmejkalová, Jana Stará, Ida Viktorová, Olga Kučerová, Darina Jirotková, Jana Slezáková, Klára Eliášková, Gabriela Babušová, Veronika Francová, Jana Krátká, Lenka Zemanová, Zuzana Bílková, Zuzana Štefánková, Helena Havlisová, and Vlastimil Chytrý, under the leadership of Irena Smetáčková, collected a large amount of data, in terms of both breadth (the data covers cognitive, pedagogical, social, and other areas) and development (the data covers two years, allowing comparisons over time). The size of the research population (29 classes from the second and third years of basic school[1], numbering 580 pupils) and the concept of the research design are unique.

Four basic research questions provide the logical structure of the book.

1. Which children in the first stage of basic school can be considered at risk of school failure, both from the perspective of teachers and on the basis of objective indicators of disposition and performance?

2. What are the knowledge and skills of these children in Czech language and mathematics, measured by either school performance or by independent didactic tests?

3. What pedagogic approaches and practices do teachers employ in the classroom?

4. What pedagogical beliefs do teachers hold and what practices do they employ in relation to children at risk of school failure?

The research methods need only to be listed for the reader to understand that the authors' conclusions are not

[1] A school where most Czech children undergo their nine years of compulsory education.

DOI: 10.14712/23362189.2024.4846

the result of a mere "opinion survey" of teachers, students, or parents. And they are not just based on questionnaire or test data. The portfolio of methods included interviews with experienced and respected teachers about their pupils, curriculum, teaching methods, and pedagogical beliefs. The teachers also assessed their pupils using the Student Characteristics Questionnaire. Observations of teaching in the classrooms that focused mainly on the classroom climate and the specific teaching methods of the teachers were carried out. The observations then focused specifically on individual pupils who showed some weakness in tests or school performance. The authors of the research tested all the pupils' cognitive abilities (tests of intelligence, memory, and executive functions). They also analysed the pupils' performance and their results in Czech language and mathematics using a didactic test that was administered twice. The pupils'self-assessment in these didactic tests was then linked to the results. In the questionnaire the pupils also reported their attitudes towards school and distance learning. I provide this detailed account in order to illustrate the quality of the methodology, which led to quite powerful conclusions revising the conventional conception of school failure. Until now this has oscillated in a fruitless contrast: individual personality (usually genetically determined and not very changeable) causes vs. socio-cultural, especially family ones. The "open" concept of school failure/success presents a dynamic picture of the gradual "creation" of school failure in at-risk pupils with weakened aptitudes around a core, which is the pedagogical approach of teachers and more broadly of the school. Incidentally, the initial finding that teachers reject the label "school failure" as a stigmatising one with demotivating effects already provides empirical confirmation of the readiness of practitioners to be open-minded and also that they are aware of the importance of the linguistic construction of reality.

The monograph is a reader-friendly look at a traditional topic that has been much talked about recently, but analytically compelling insights into how students thrive or fail in school are lacking. The public debate and school policy are based on trends that show the impact of the selectivity of the education system on the quality of pupils' knowledge and educational inequalities or they note the strong influence of the family environment on pupils' educational outcomes. These considerations replicate the findings of international surveys such as PISA. In addition to the robust data, the motivation or attitude of the pupils towards the subject or their subjective perception of the teaching methods acts as an autonomous parameter, and these parameters correlate with pupils' proficiency test results. In recent decades, however, this sociological and school-political grasp of the topic has displaced the analysis of the pedagogical, didactic, and psycho-

logical core of school failure/success. The views of psychology, didactics, or pedagogy then appear in isolation and focus on sub-variables such as student motivation, interactive methods, or organisational concepts of differentiated instruction. What, then, do I see as the uniqueness of the research and therefore of the monograph under review?

Firstly, **it brings back into play a theme** that we know from the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, school success has become such a nebulous concept in recent decades as a result of the constant reforming and not always balanced student-centred turn that it needs to be defined. However, the concept of school success in the final third of the 20th century was chiefly influenced by psychologists. Vladimír Hrabal dealt with the difference between school aptitude and school success, with an emphasis on the child's intellectual, or, more broadly, cognitive disposition. The gap between their level as observed in the out-of-school environment and the pupil's performance in school then led to the expansion of the term "underachievers" – those whose performance is below their expectations. In collaboration with him, Zdeněk Helus emphasised personality, especially motivational, attitudinal, and identity factors. The concept of school failure/success in this conception represented a mosaic, a kind of "patchwork" of parameters correlated with pupils' school performance.

Secondly, a strength of the current monograph is its truly **systemic approach to school failure/success**. It connects the above domains that influnce school education and does not place them loosely next to one another: from the personal aptitudes of the students, through pedagogical practices, to the organisational characteristics of the school. From empirical data, it identifies seven principles of the teaching of effective teachers. Among these, their care for the classroom climate and relationships stands out for its centrality. This influences the social and cognitive support for learning, the promotion of the structuring and rules of the classroom, the promotion or rejection of the hierarchisation of pupils, the individualisation of teaching, and formative assessment. Through the statistical analysis of these "principles", the authors created four constellations of them, which they labelled as types of pedagogical approaches. Among them, there are two that merit special attention – what is termed Opposition and the approach characterised as Comprehesiveness. Opposition is typical of teachers who do not focus on peer relationships among students, do not employ social support for learning (small group work, sharing solutions, peer assessment, etc.), promote competition, and maintain a social-emotional distance from their pupils. In contrast, the Comprehensive approach clearly emerges as the most effective, especially in terms of the future thriving of students with impaired aptitudes in cognitive and other areas: a focus on the causes of pupils' behaviour,

not just the consequences; a definite culture of acceptance of difference combined with an individualised approach; an emphasis on both social and cognitive support for learning; proximity to students not as a strategy of pandering, but as the empathetic nurturing of relationships and climate. These labels may sound like empty clichés, but the detailed specific illustrations of them from the school environment sound convincing. In the description of cognitive support, the reader learns how to strengthen working memory, ask deep questions and teach students to question effectively, develop metacognition, etc. However, the authors emphasise that no one pure type of pedagogical approach leads to effective enhancement of pupils' achievement and thus it cannot be explained by the personality of the teacher only.

Thirdly, the research is unique in that, unlike most research on pupils' school achievement, it concentrates on **the early stages of school education**. There are disproportionately more studies that follow pupils in the second stage of basic school (years 6-9) or middle school. When pupils are at this age, however, analyses can at most contribute to a kind of "damage repair", while knowledge about the beginning of the risky path to school success can be of great preventive value if used appropriately. It points to the causes and does not focus on the consequences. Moreover, this is at least partly longitudinal research with the potential for the further monitoring of pupils' development.

Fourthly, the book makes an interesting **contribution to theory**. The authors do not provide a declaratively explicit critique of the so-called essentialist approach (school performance is the result of given and unchangeable genetic assumptions). This is something that is increasingly entrenched in the explanation of school failure/success by the public and also some professionals. The design of the research made it possible to distinguish the level of students' expectations about meeting the demands of teaching from their actual performance. The proportion of pupils with weakened assumptions on entry who thrive, and, conversely, of those whose assumptions have not been weakened but do not thrive, calls the essentialist approach into question. Therefore, school failure is not a predetermined characteristic of pupils' personalities, it is not necessarily unchangeable, and therefore early intervention is called for. Nevertheless, not every pedagogical approach, even if guided by goodwill, is functional. It is not enough merely to be a pedagogical optimist and seek individual support. The authors show that there has to be a truly comprehensive setting, from the climate of the school and the specific classroom to the collaboration with the family, the team support of the teachers, their pedagogical beliefs, and the specific teaching practices.

Fifthly, the book again subtly offers **overlaps with current issues in education policy**. It shows how the issue of

early risk of school failure is related to pro-inclusion policies or to the treatment of the postponement of school attendance, not as a figure of speech or as a politically topical order to solve an isolated problem but as a logical or "natural" consequence of the pedagogical approach. The comprehensive approach to an open concept of the path to school success that is taken by the authors puts efforts to make schools more inclusive in a new light. It puts it at the heart of effective education for all. It thus goes beyond the mystifyingly disparaged inclusion in the Czech environment, which is understood as unrealistic education of disadvantaged pupils (with special educational needs – SEN) with others. Relating this to research data on students with impaired aptitudes and at risk of underachievement and the case studies presented shows that successful education is based on similar principles. These are the timeliness of diagnosis and the first measures, the teamwork of pedagogical work with them, and the consistent evaluation of support measures. Thus, the authors show that it is not necessary to draw a sharp line between SEN and impaired aptitudes, as well as between counselling support measures and pedagogical practices aimed at children at risk of underachievement.

Regarding the postponement of the start of school attendance, again it appears that there are indeed more students with this who are not doing well in school. However, it was also confirmed that the group of pupils with postponement of the start of school attendance is not homogeneous and that other factors, particularly the reason for the deferral, should be considered when considering school risk. Czech practice is concerned with two reasons – the maturity of the child and their readiness for school. Once again, two basic poles of the risk of school failure emerge. On the one hand, there is essentially the biological maturation of the child (this typically concerns concentration of attention or working memory). On the other, there is the matter of language skills (vocabulary), communication skills, or independence. Research on the effectiveness of deferrals is scarce. Neither do the results of the present authors' research allow for an assessment of the effectiveness of the postponement of the start of school attendance. However, they do contribute to understanding how these pupils fare once they start school and how their early educational trajectory develops (in their cohort there were about 20% of such pupils). They looked at how often such pupils were in the at-risk and underperforming groups in grades 2 and 3 and divided them into two groups – younger (those who started at from 7 to 7.4 years of age) and older (who were over seven years and four months old when they started). They found a significant difference: children in the older group met the criteria for being at risk and failure significantly more often than the younger ones, and the increase in their vulnerability occurs mainly between

the second and third grades. The younger pupils with postponement gradually become the equals of pupils without postponement in terms of performance in cognitive and didactic tests in Czech language and mathematics. However, in the areas of relationships, emotions, and family background, teachers rate them slightly lower than pupils without postponement. The book also includes recommendations of both a systemic nature (to strengthen the transfer of information and cooperation between kindergartens, basic schools and counselling centres) and pedagogical and psychological measures ("it would be advisable to consider whether postponement makes sense for children with more significant deficits"). For immature children, it recommends not only postponement, but also individualised support in the form of a pedagogical care plan in the kindergarten (or some other variant of a support measure of the first level).

In my review, I have not gone through the individual chapters, their content, or the specific authors. Readers should not miss the chapter on Czech language and mathematics. It provides insights into the critical points of the curriculum from the perspective of at-risk students and points out teacher strategies to overcome the difficulty of the curriculum. The chapter on teacher-parent collaboration is likewise useful. However, I believe that it is more important to highlight what this work does to fill the gap in our understanding of the origins of school failure and the ways in which it can be reduced. The monograph "Pathways of Children at Risk of School Failure" is primarily intended for the teaching population. It strikes a good balance between being a professional publication and being in a genre understandable to the general public. It offers the findings of current research and positions them in the context of current theories. It can thus become an important resource for strengthening teachers' professionalism. It can, of course, also be recommended to professionals in educational sciences and to students.

This monograph on school failure has certainly paid off for the Ministry of Education as a supporter of the OP VVV (Operational Programme Research, Development, and Education) project *Teacher' understanding of the causes of school failure and the effectiveness of pedagogical interventions.*

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