

REASONS FOR INCREASED RISK OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT DROPOUT IN NORTHERN HUNGARY

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Abstract

In the study examine the causes of school dropout among students with special educational needs (SEN) in the upper grades (grades 5–8) in public elementary schools in the Northern region of Hungary, based on the perceptions of teachers from 126 institutions. The aims of the research was twofold: firstly, to examine the factors that influence how teachers interpret the phenomenon of student dropout, and secondly, to identify the structured patterns into which these interpretations can be organized. The findings of the present study indicate that teachers primarily attribute significance to individual factors, particularly learning difficulties, a decline in motivation, and a lack of success, while the role of institutional and structural dimensions is deemed less consequential. The cluster analysis identified four distinct interpretive patterns (multidimensionality, low achievement, ineffectiveness, and disinterest), which reflect different frameworks for understanding the problem, ranging from an individual deficit-focused approach to a complex, multifactorial interpretation. The study also reveals a significant correlation between teachers' perceptions and institutions' dropout rates, as institutions with higher dropout rates tend to place great

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emphasis on attributions based on student and family factors. The findings underscore the need for a complex, systemic understanding of school dropout, as well as the importance of shaping teachers' attitudes and strengthening inclusive pedagogical approaches.

Keywords: school dropout, special educational needs, inclusive education, teachers' perceptions

Discipline: education science

Absztrakt

A SAJÁTOS NEVELÉSI IGÉNYŰ TANULÓK LEMORZSOLÓDÁSI KOCKÁZATÁNAK NÖVEKEDÉSI OKAI ÉSZAK-MAGYARORSZÁGON

Tanulmányban a sajátos nevelési igényű (SNI) tanulók iskolai lemorzsolódásának okainak vizsgálatára kerül sor az Észak-Magyarország régió állami fenntartású, többségi általános iskoláinak felső tagozatán (5–8. évfolyam), 126 intézmény pedagógusainak percepciói alapján. A kutatás célja annak feltárása volt, hogy a pedagógusok milyen tényezőket tekintenek megmagyarázóknak a lemorzsolódás jelenségét, valamint, hogy ezek az értelmezések milyen strukturált mintázatokba rendezhetők. Az eredmények rámutatnak arra, hogy a pedagógusok elsősorban az individuális tényezőket – különösen a tanulási nehézségeket, a motiváció csökkenését és a sikerélmények hiányát – tekintik meghatározónak, miközben az intézményi és strukturális dimenziók szerepe háttérbe szorul. A klaszterelemzés négy elkülönülő értelmezési mintázatot azonosított (multidimenzionalitás, eredménytelenség, hatástalanság, érdektelenség), amelyek eltérő problémalátási kereteket tükröznek az egyéni deficitközpontú megközelítéstől a komplex, többtényezős értelmezésig. A vizsgálat továbbá szignifikáns összefüggést tár fel a pedagógusi percepciók és az intézmények lemorzsolódási mutatói között, ugyanis a magasabb lemorzsolódási aránnyal jellemezhető intézményekben erőteljesebben jelenik meg a tanulói és családi tényezőkre fókuszáló attribúció. Az eredmények hangsúlyozzák a lemorzsolódás komplex, rendszerszintű értelmezésének szükségességét, valamint a pedagógusi szemléletformálás és az inkluzív pedagógiai megközelítések erősítésének jelentőségét.

Kulcsszavak: iskolai lemorzsolódás, sajátos nevelési igény, együttnevelés, pedagóguspercepciók

Diszciplína: neveléstudomány

Introduction

The European Union's education policy guidelines for the future place a strong emphasis on strengthening the inclusiveness of education systems. The common goal of these strategic efforts is for Member States to develop public education structures capable of effectively managing the diversity of the student population and ensuring equal access to quality education for disadvantaged groups (Education and Training 2020). Policy documents (Education and Training 2020; Council of the EU, 2022) pay particular attention to social groups that are at increased risk of early school

leaving. A common characteristic of these groups is that, due to their marginalized social status, they are more likely to be excluded from the formal education system. The category of marginalized students includes all students who are at a disadvantage due to social, economic, health, linguistic, or cultural factors (Birinyi & Szabó, 2014). This includes, among others, students with special educational needs (SEN) and socio-economic disadvantage (SED) for whom the risk of educational inequalities is particularly significant.

Reducing early school leaving cannot be viewed solely within the framework of education policy; it

is also closely linked to the issue of strengthening social cohesion (European Commission, 2013). Leaving school without a diploma has a significant long-term impact on individuals' prospects in the labor market, increases the likelihood of social exclusion, and contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities (K. Nagy, 2025). The literature clearly indicates that students with special educational needs are particularly at risk in this regard. Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren (2004), as well as Vargáné (2008) and Szekeres (2014), all note that the proportion of young people at risk of dropping out or leaving school without a diploma is exceptionally high among this group. One of the reasons behind this phenomenon is that these students often struggle to set realistic career goals, obtain marketable qualifications, and secure successful employment in the labor market. This study examines the risk of dropout among students with special educational needs (SEN) in the primary school stage of the public education system (grades 5–8), with a particular focus on institutions in the Northern Hungary region.

In the international literature, the term SEN (Special Educational Needs) refers to students who require individualized special educational support. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the meaning of the term SEN varies significantly from country to country and is interpreted within constantly changing definitional frameworks, which limits the direct comparability of different research findings (Banks & McCoy, 2012; Armstrong & Squires, 2012). In contrast, the Hungarian literature uses the category of “special educational needs” (SNI), which defines the group of affected students based on legal and diagnostic criteria. This approach provides a more uniform framework for domestic studies, but differs from international terminology and interpretive practices. Based on the above, it can be concluded that international differences in definitional and diagnostic systems pose a significant methodological challenge. In our study,

we used the category of SEN students when presenting international trends and the literature, while our analysis of the Hungarian context focuses on SNI students. This differentiated approach allows us to take contextual characteristics into account while also ensuring that comparability is maintained.

The international literature consistently points out that students with special educational needs (SEN) are more likely to drop out of school earlier than their typically developing peers (European Agency, 2016). According to an analysis by Limbach-Reich and Powell (2016), the early school leaving rate among people with disabilities in the European Union is nearly three times higher than that of students without disabilities. This correlation is further supported by empirical studies (Hakkarainen, Holopainen & Savolainen, 2016; Myklebust, 2012; Kemp, 2006), which unanimously conclude that SEN status in itself constitutes a significant risk factor for school dropout. All of this suggests that special educational needs are not merely reflected in individual learning requirements but also influence the success of educational trajectories at the structural level.

In Hungary, the proportion of elementary school students with special educational needs participating in inclusive education varies significantly by region (Figure 1). Districts with higher proportions are concentrated primarily in the southern, southwestern, and eastern regions of the country. A contiguous zone with consistently high values is particularly evident in Southern Transdanubia and the southeastern part of the Great Plain, where several districts fall into the highest category. In contrast, lower rates are primarily found in the northern, northeastern, and, to some extent, central regions of Hungary, where several districts fall into the lowest or second-lowest categories. The Budapest metropolitan area and its immediate surroundings present a mixed picture. The regional pattern shown in Figure 1 suggests that the participation of

students with special educational needs in inclusive education is not evenly distributed across the country, but may be closely linked to the socio-economic characteristics of the regions, the varying capacities of the educational system, and the accessibility of diagnostic and support services. This diversity justifies region-specific educational policy interventions, particularly in those districts where the proportion of affected students is exceptionally high; consequently, ensuring the conditions for inclusive education requires increased professional and infrastructural support.

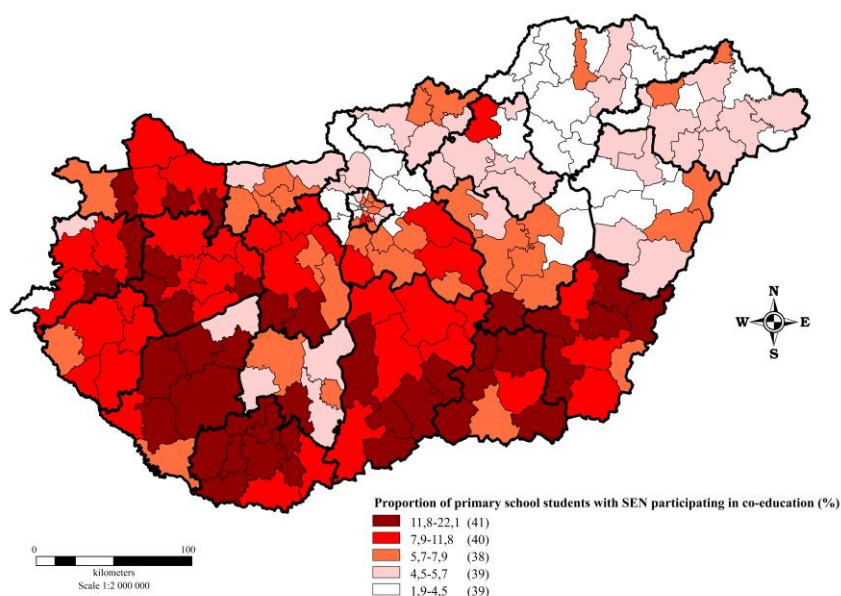
Method and Results

Our research focused on students in the upper grades of elementary school (grades 5–8), given that both previous empirical studies and policy recommendations have identified this stage of education as the most at risk for dropout. Based on data provided by the 126 public education institu-

tions surveyed, it can be concluded that the proportion of students with special educational needs among students in grades 5–8 is 7.13%. This finding suggests that the concentrated presence of students with SEN in upper elementary grades represents a significant risk factor for school dropout. Social disadvantage, in and of itself, increases the likelihood of academic failure, which in the long term leads to an increased risk of dropping out of school without a diploma (Hegedűs, 2024). Accordingly, it can be concluded that, due to the cumulative, mutually reinforcing effects of disadvantage and learning difficulties, preventing dropout requires complex, system-level interventions.

The dropout rate among students with special educational needs has been considered one of the most critical issues in inclusive education for decades. In our analysis, we classified schools into three categories based on their dropout rates: schools with low, medium, and high dropout rates.

Figure 1. Percentage of elementary school students with special educational needs participating in intergrated public education programs by district (Compiled by the authors)



Our study aimed to investigate how teachers working in institutions with different dropout rates assess the role of the factors we identified in making students with special educational needs particularly vulnerable to dropping out, and whether significant differences can be detected in the assessment of individual factors across different types of institutions. Teachers rated the factors they considered relevant to the dropout rate among students with special educational needs using a four-point Likert scale.

The data clearly show that teachers identify the cognitive abilities and learning difficulties of students with special educational needs as the primary cause of dropout. The highest average score was given to the statement “harder time understanding the curriculum” (2.74), which proved to be particularly high across all school types, especially in schools with high dropout rates (2.79) (Figure 2). Although this difference cannot be considered statistically significant, it allows for relevant pedagogical conclusions to be drawn. The perceived discrepancy between students’ cognitive capacity and their academic performance fundamentally influences teachers’ attitudes.

Similarly high scores were obtained for the variables “decreased motivation to learn” (2.60) and “fewer experiences of success in school” (2.52), which indicate a weakening of students’ internal resources (Figure 2). Overall, our results confirm the assumption that teachers primarily interpret the dropout of students with special educational needs in terms of individual and psychological factors, while they consider the role of structural and environmental influences to be of lesser importance.

The dimension of family background is also prominently reflected in teachers’ perceptions. The average score for the “low parental expectations” variable (2.59) and its notably high value (2.98) in schools with high dropout rates are noteworthy (Figure 2). A statistically significant difference can

be observed between institutions along this factor ($p = 0.005$), suggesting that teachers interpret student groups from different social backgrounds differently in terms of parental attitudes. At the same time, they tend to interpret the lack of parental involvement as an individual or family deficit rather than as a result of insufficient support provided by the system.

The social and relational dimensions, which are identified in the international literature (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Florian, 2008) as key barriers to inclusive education, are not a primary focus in the present study. Statements such as “more marginalised” (1.81) or “social relationships are poorer” (1.90) received relatively low scores (Figure 2), and no significant differences were observed between institutions along these factors. This suggests that teachers do not view issues related to student socialization and a sense of belonging to the school community as significant risk factors for dropping out.

A similar underrepresentation can be observed in the case of institutional and systemic factors. The low scores for “shortage of teaching assistants” (1.98) and “large class sizes” (1.76) suggest that teachers make little connection between the school-related difficulties of students with SEN and problems with institutional structures or the educational system’s resources (Figure 2). In contrast, international research (EASIE, 2018) emphasizes that one of the key conditions for the success of inclusive education is ensuring an adequate professional and infrastructural framework.

Based on the results, it can be concluded that teachers primarily attribute the dropout of students with special educational needs to individual learning difficulties and family background factors, while underestimating the role of social and institutional dimensions. The statistical analysis (ANOVA) confirms that a significant difference is primarily evident in the assessment of parental expect-

tations across institutions, which points to the selective sensitivity of teachers' attitudes. At the same time, the marginalization of systemic causes suggests that teachers' perception of the problem does not fully reflect the complex, multifactorial approach of inclusive education, which interprets dropout not merely as a result of student deficits, but also as a consequence of institutional and social constructs. Based on all this, it seems justified to give greater prominence to the inclusive educational approach in teacher training, with particular regard to the recognition of structural inequalities. Programs aimed at strengthening assistant and other professional support systems, as well as those designed to foster motivation to learn, can only be effective if they are implemented through a systemic approach rather than focusing exclusively on the student level.

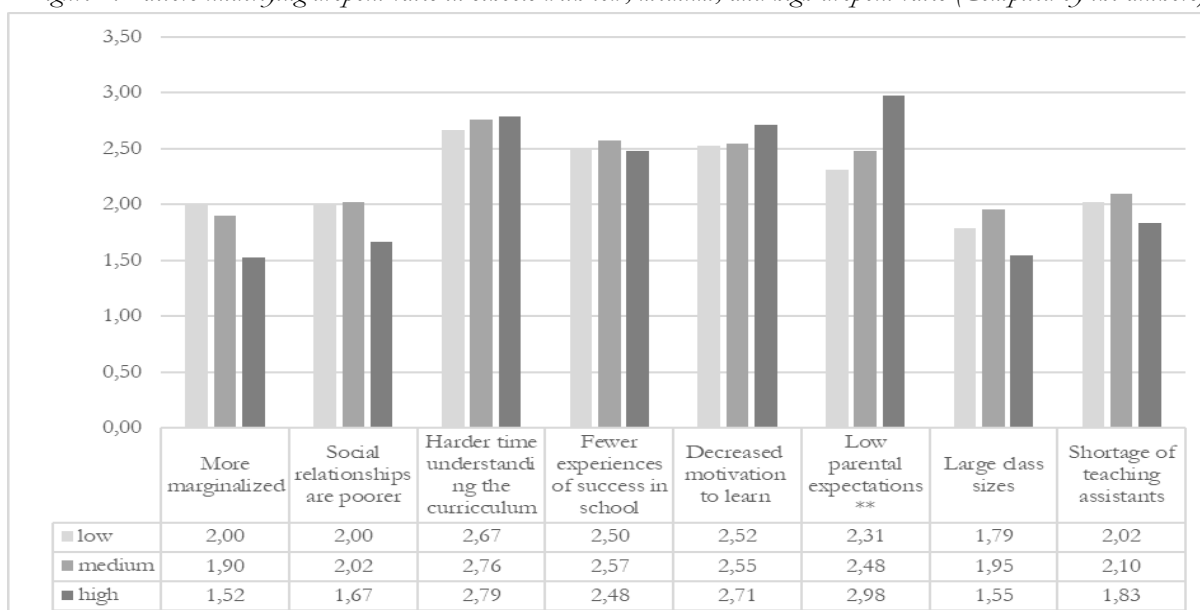
We supplemented this analysis with cluster analysis (Table 1), which identified four distinct clusters: multidimensionality, low achievement, ineffectiveness and disinterest.

The cluster labeled "multidimensionality" (N = 32) comprises the results of those institutions that,

based on teachers' perceptions, interpret the causes of dropout among students with special educational needs in the most complex manner. Average scores above 3.0, particularly in categories such as "harder time understanding the curriculum" (3.28), "decreased motivation to learn" (3.22), and "shortage of teaching assistants" (3.13), suggest that in these institutions dropout rates are driven by the combined effects of interactional and structural factors (Table 1). This interpretive framework is consistent with the inclusive pedagogical approach found in the international literature (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), which emphasizes the combined role of student, pedagogical, and institutional dimensions.

The "low achievement" cluster (N = 33) focuses on academic performance and cognitive adjustment. The highest mean scores in categories such as "harder time understanding the curriculum" (2.82) and "fewer experience of success in school" (2.64) suggest that in these institutions, the difficulties of students with special educational needs are primarily interpreted as learning and performance deficits (Table 1).

Figure 2. Factors underlying dropout rates in schools with low, medium, and high dropout rates (Compiled by the authors)



This approach attributes the causes of dropout largely to a lack of student competencies, while giving limited consideration to the role of the learning environment and institutional adaptability.

The cluster labeled “ineffectiveness” (N = 20), which comprises the smallest group, is characterized by extremely low mean values (1.00–1.35). This suggests that in the institutions classified here, teachers do not consider the examined factors to be relevant to the dropout of students with SEN (Table 1), which implies a low level of problem awareness or its diffuse nature.

The cluster with the largest number of items (N = 41) is the “disinterest” category. In the institutions belonging to this cluster, the causes of dropout are primarily attributed to student and parental attitudes. The high scores for “low parental expectations” (3.12) and “decreased motivation to learn”

(3.00) indicate that teachers place the responsibility primarily on family background and individual attitudes (Table 1).

The results of the cluster analysis indicate that the interpretation of student dropout rates among students with special educational needs is not uniform across the institutions studied, and that differing teacher perceptions significantly influence the pedagogical practices employed. Consequently, the effectiveness of inclusive education policy interventions depends largely on whether they are able to take these differences in perception into account and provide targeted responses to them. In light of this, it seems justified to develop teacher training programs that promote a complex, multifactorial understanding of student difficulties and place greater emphasis on the pedagogical potential of parental cooperation.

Table 1. Reasons for dropout among students with special educational needs, based on cluster analysis (Compiled by the authors)

Cluster	Multidimensionality	Low achievement	Ineffectiveness	Disinterest
More marginalized	2,75	2,12	1,00	1,22
Social relationships are poorer	2,69	2,33	1,05	1,34
Harder time understanding the curriculum	3,28	2,82	1,25	2,98
Fewer experiences of success in school	3,13	2,64	1,10	2,63
Decreased motivation to learn	3,22	2,39	1,10	3,00
Low parental expectations	2,97	2,30	1,35	3,12
Large class sizes	2,69	1,85	1,00	1,34
Shortage of teaching assistants	3,13	1,85	1,25	1,56
N	32	33	20	41

We further broke down the results presented above by the three counties included in the study: Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Heves, and Nógrád (Table 2). Our analysis aimed to explore how institutions in each territorial unit can be assigned to the established clusters, and whether differences can be identified in institutional attitudes and interpretive frameworks regarding the dropout of students with special educational needs. The regional analysis of cluster affiliation provided an opportunity to identify patterns that may influence institutions' attitudes toward students with special educational needs and their pedagogical practices.

In Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, the largest proportion of institutions falls into the “disinterest” cluster (41.2%), which significantly exceeds the proportions of the other clusters. In contrast, the presence of the multidimensionality cluster is the lowest (17.6%) (Table 2). This distribution suggests that a significant proportion of institutions address the pedagogical challenges associated with students with special educational needs with limited commitment or low problem awareness.

In Heves County, by contrast, the “multidimensionality” cluster dominates (38.2%), while the proportion of “disinterest” is relatively low (20%)

(Table 2). This suggests that a higher proportion of institutions operating here view dropout as a complex, multidimensional problem. The lower rate of indifference can be interpreted as an indicator of higher levels of pedagogical commitment and a reflective approach.

In Nógrád County, which has the smallest sample size, the proportion of the “disinterest” cluster is exceptionally high (45%), while the presence of multidimensionality is low (10%) (Table 2). Although the limited sample size must be taken into account when interpreting the results, the distribution may indicate structural and conceptual shortcomings. The low level of multidimensionality suggests a lack of a complex understanding of student needs.

The regional differences between clusters are likely due to variations in institutional cultures, levels of resource availability, and differences in teachers' professional preparedness.

In particular, the higher rate of „multidimensionality” observed in Heves County may indicate the presence of more differentiated and innovative inclusive pedagogical practices. In contrast, the high rate of „disinterest” observed in Nógrád County may point to structural and human resource deficiencies.

Table 2. Cluster classification of institutions by county (Compiled by the authors)

County	Multidimensionality	Low achievement	Ineffectiveness	Disinterest	Total
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	9 17,6%	13 25,5%	8 15,7%	21 41,2%	51 100,0%
Heves	21 38,2%	14 25,5%	9 16,4%	11 20,0%	55 100,0%
Nógrád	2 10,0%	6 30,0%	3 15,0%	9 45,0%	20 100,0%
Total	32 25,4%	33 26,2%	20 15,9%	41 32,5%	126 100,0%

Overall, the results suggest that there are significant regional disparities in the understanding and management of dropout rates among students with special educational needs. This justifies the development of targeted, differentiated policy interventions, with particular attention to regions where a lack of interest is prevalent. Based on the results of the cluster analysis, it is necessary to develop support strategies that can address the pedagogical differences arising from perceptual differences and promote the wider adoption of an inclusive approach.

In the next phase of the study, we classified the responding institutions into three categories based on the dropout rate of students with special educational needs: none, low, and high. We then analyzed the proportion of institutions in each category that could be assigned to the previously identified clusters (multidimensionality, low achievement, ineffectiveness, disinterest) (Table 3). The aim of the analysis was to explore the relationship between perceptions (clusters) regarding the causes of dropout among students with special educational needs and the actual dropout rates at the institutions ($p = 0.014$).

In schools where no students with special educational needs at risk of dropping out were identified ($N = 62$), teachers primarily consider factors falling

into the “low achievement” (29.0%) and “ineffectiveness” (27.4%) clusters to be decisive. This suggests that these schools interpret student performance problems and the limited effectiveness of educational interventions as potential risk factors that are not currently manifesting.

The "disinterest" (22.6%) and "multidimensionality" (21.0%) clusters appear at lower rates in this group (Table 3). Among institutions with low dropout rates ($N = 32$), disinterest (37.5%), while the multidimensionality (31.3%) and „low achievement” (25.0%) clusters also account for a significant proportion. The prevalence of the “ineffectiveness” cluster in this group is marginal (6.3%) (Table 3). The distribution suggests that these institutions attribute the causes of dropout partly to student attitudes and partly to more complex, multifactorial relationships.

In the case of institutions characterized by high dropout rates ($N = 32$), the dominance of the "disinterest" cluster is further reinforced (46.9%). The “multidimensionality” (28.1%) and “low achievement” (21.9%) clusters are also present, while the proportion of the “ineffectiveness” cluster is negligible (3.1%) (Table 3). This suggests that institutions actually facing the dropout of SNI students primarily attribute the problem to a lack of student motivation and interest.

Table 3. Distribution of institutions grouped by dropout rates among students with special educational needs (none, low, high) by cluster (Compiled by the authors)

Cluster	Multidimensionality	Low achievement	Ineffectiveness	Disinterest
Non	13	18	17	14
	21,0%	29,0%	27,4%	22,6%
Low	10	8	2	12
	31,3%	25,0%	6,3%	37,5%
High	9	7	1	15
	28,1%	21,9%	3,1%	46,9%

The correlations between the distribution of clusters and institutions' experiences with dropout rates indicate that, as dropout rates rise, teachers increasingly attribute the phenomenon to students' lack of interest. In contrast, institutions that do not experience dropout rates place greater emphasis on the effectiveness of the educational process and the issue of academic achievement. This trend also raises the possibility of perceptual bias, since in institutions where the problem is already clearly evident, teachers' interpretations are more likely to emphasize student responsibility, while less affected institutions may be more open to recognizing and integrating the role of systemic and institutional factors.

Summary and Recommendations

The findings of the present study demonstrate that teachers' interpretations of student dropout, particularly among students with special educational needs, are not uniform but are organized along distinct patterns. Our results indicate that individual factors, such as learning difficulties, decreased motivation, and a lack of successful experiences, exert a predominant influence on teachers' perceptions. In contrast, the impact of social, institutional, and systemic influences appears to be less substantial.

The cluster analysis identified four distinct interpretive frameworks that reflect the complex nature of dropout to varying degrees, ranging from an individual deficit-focused approach to a multidimensional interpretation. One of the most salient findings of our research is that there is a demonstrable link between teachers' perceptions and the actual dropout rates at their institutions. In institutions with higher dropout rates, there is a stronger tendency to attribute the problem primarily to student and family factors. In contrast, institutions with more favorable indicators are more open to more complex, systemic interpretations. This difference suggests that dropout is not merely an objective institutional phenomenon; rather, it is also a

matter of interpretation that is closely connected to teachers' perceptions of the problem and their professional attitudes. The regional analysis highlighted further inequalities, which are presumably attributable to variations in institutional resources, professional support, and pedagogical culture. Our findings confirm that addressing dropout among students with special educational needs cannot be addressed solely at the individual level, but requires complex, multi-level interventions.

In light of these findings, it would be appropriate to reform teacher training and school improvement programs. Furthermore, the development of training approaches that promote a more nuanced understanding of the factors underlying student dropout rates and strengthen the practical application of an inclusive pedagogical approach is recommended. It is imperative to enhance structural conditions, including the establishment of professional support systems and the provision of resources, in order to optimize the impact of pedagogical innovations.

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