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## The Educational Failure of Pupils and Students as a Social Phenomenon: A Research Methodology

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**Abstract.** The article sets and characterizes the social diagnosis of a significant part of pupils and students, which is defined by the authors as educational failure. It manifests itself in a low level of educational motivation, blurred professional orientations and self-determination, and a weak desire to accumulate human capital and social achievement. This diagnosis can be traced all the way through the transfer of human capital of the unsuccessful educational communities – from school to college and university, and then to the labor market. The article identifies the main lacunae and consequent methodological problems in the study of educational failure. The phenomenon of educational failure is considered in terms of four stages of emergence and development. The features of an interdisciplinary methodology of its research are shown. The authors reveal the potential of the interdisciplinary use of sociological, economic, psychological, socio-psychological, and pedagogical approaches in the study of educational failure and ways to overcome it.

**Keywords:** educational failure, pupils, students, human capital, stages of educational failure, educational motivation, professional self-determination, interdisciplinary methodology

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### Introduction

The opportunities for economic and socio-cultural development of modern society are associated with improving the quality of human capital of the younger generation of Russians. The main area in which this is formed and developed is education. Educational communities of schoolchildren, college and university students are carriers of human capital that determine the historical prospects for the development of our country. Part of these communities show sig-

nificant achievements in education and convert their human capital into social success – educational, personal, and professional. Another (very large) part does not have such high results and is experiencing serious problems in education and further professional work.

A significant increase in the proportion of failures or low-performing learners is occurring at all levels of education. This trend is clearly beginning to manifest itself already in schools. Thus, in group of 15-year-old pupils, the per-

centage of unsuccessful schoolchildren reached 30% [1, p. 20]. In 2017, two-thirds of school parents (70.4%) believed that the knowledge provided by Russian schools is not enough for entering university, so they are forced to solve this problem by involving tutors<sup>1</sup>.

According to researchers, the system of secondary vocational education has been flooded with unsuccessful students in recent years. The least socialized and least successful schoolchildren enter colleges and technical schools [2, p. 21]. It is no accident that modern colleges have a high dropout rate (up to 30%) [3, p. 6]. The main function of colleges in these conditions is to compensate for the schools' dysfunctions – the socialization and advancement of unsuccessful students. In this regard, media representatives have called secondary vocational education a social «reservoir» for failed students<sup>2</sup>.

The results of our research conducted over recent years among students in the Ural Federal District showed a high level of educational failure. Only 15% of students in provincial universities are fully ready and willing to study in the higher education system [4, p. 38].

Representatives of all educational communities clearly manifest the deformation of educational motivation. This leads to a decrease in the educational activity of students, their academic achievements, and the appearance of imitation educational strategies. Graduates are characterized by a blurring of professional orientations and professional self-determination, and a weak desire for social achievement. Meanwhile, studies show that even a small decrease in the failure of educational communities leads to a significant increase in GDP [1, p. 20].

We diagnose the problem being suffered by a considerable proportion of educational communities as educational failure. We understand

this as a qualitative characteristic of the educational activities of pupils and students, reflecting the measure of discrepancy between their personal achievements and public expectations of their activities in education. Educational failure includes manifestations of academic, professional, and personal failure in education. This diagnosis can be traced throughout the transfer of human capital of significant part of educational communities – from school to college and university and then to the labor market.

The situation is complicated by the fact that resources in education are directed mainly to support successful, gifted, and talented young people, which increases inequality at all levels. In addition, schools and colleges are lagging behind universities in terms of their requirements for the quality of human capital of educational communities. Colleges and universities are lagging behind the requirements of the labor market.

These negative trends indicate the presence of risks that accompany the «production» of human capital in education. They serve as a basis for very pessimistic scientific forecasts of the socio-economic and socio-cultural development of a country lacking high-quality human capital of the younger generation. Therefore, one of the most important conditions for the development of human capital in education is to overcome the failure of a significant part of educational communities.

This process in scientific terms attracts the attention of different specialists – in the field of sociology and economics of education, pedagogy, psychology, in the applied sense – theorists and practitioners of education. Therefore, the study of the way of transition of educational communities from failure to success should be carried out in the interdisciplinary field of the sociological, economic, psychological, and pedagogical sciences, whose representatives are able to adequately comprehend and investigate this complex process. It is an interdisciplinary approach that will allow us to highlight the problem due to its multidimensional study of a single issue for schools, colleges, and universities. Meanwhile, the elaboration of an interdisciplinary methodo-

<sup>1</sup> Only 17% of Russians are satisfied with school education. Available at: <https://iz.ru/654338/nataliia-berishvili/shkolnym-obrazovaniem-dovolny-tolko-17-rossiiian> (In Russ.)

<sup>2</sup> Four myths about colleges and technical schools. Available at: <https://ioe.hse.ru/news/197472124.html> (In Russ.)

logy for the study of complex problems always provokes a large number of questions. The quality of the research results and the practical solutions based on them depend on the answers to these questions. In this regard, the authors have made the subject of this article a methodology for analyzing the educational failure of pupils and students as a complex social phenomenon that hinders the development of their human capital.

### Literature review

The interdisciplinary study of educational failure in the context of the human capital transfer of educational communities was prepared by foreign and Russian studies in philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, economics, and sociology. Note that the study of educational failure has often been associated with the study of educational success as the opposite state.

The Western tradition of studying educational failure/success is based on the philosophy of pragmatism from J. Dewey, W. James, and Ch. Pierce, in which human activity is viewed through the prism of its usefulness and success. Another fundamental basis is constructivism, as interdisciplinary paradigm that has developed in the social sciences (J. Piaget, J. Kelly, N. Luhmann, P. Berger, T. Lukman). It explains the possibility of constructing the social reality of success and goal-achieving activity. An important contribution to the development of research on social success was made by J. Homans' theory of exchange, with his axiom that success is the result of human interaction through mutually acquired benefits.

On this fundamental basis, various disciplinary studies on failure/success have developed in modern foreign scholarship. Highlighting intellect, creativity, emotional stability, and psychological well-being as its factors, foreign psychologists consider motivation for achievement as the most reliable predictor of success in various activities [5].

International studies on the economic aspects of educational failure/success are based on the theory of human capital (T. Schultz, G. Becker). Economists have introduced such

aspects as the role of school and production in the process of knowledge transfer; parents' economic resources and their impact on the transfer of human capital throughout a person's life cycle; the ratio of parental and state investments in education [6]; and the formation of an optimal educational policy for the transfer of human capital [7].

In international interdisciplinary studies, educational failure is considered in a broad social, socio-economic, political, and socio-cultural context. Thus, the problem of student success/failure is associated with the general crisis of education, the transformation of the world economy and global society [8]. The interdisciplinary «retention theory» reveals a wide range of reasons for the formation of student failure, its transfer from school to university, the elaboration of measures for the academic, social, and psychological support of unsuccessful students [9].

In Russia, the conceptual foundations of the study of learning success/failure are related to humanistic pedagogy and psychology (L.S. Vygotsky, S.L. Rubinstein, A.N. Leontiev, D.B. Elkonin). Thanks to this, a theoretical and methodological canon was formed. One of its postulates was an unquestionable belief in the positive potential of pedagogical technologies to construct the «right» environment and learning conditions in which the «wrong» schoolboy will overcome his academic failure and become successful [10]. In higher educational pedagogy, an analysis of the success of university students was carried out within the framework of the conception of forming student subjectivity [11].

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the human potential of theoretical pedagogy and pedagogical psychology in relation to the studied problem has exhausted itself; in a practical sense, it has proved helpless in the face of the new challenges faced by education [12]. The problem has left the framework of the school education system, with a steady transfer to the next levels of education – vocational and higher education [13–16].

In response to the challenges described above, new psychological approaches to the interpretation of educational success have been

formed in Russia and abroad. As factors of academic and professional success, it was suggested to consider tolerance to uncertainty, «antifragility», post-traumatic growth, coping strategies, and non-adaptive activity [17–19].

The Russian sociology of education has made a great contribution to the analysis of human capital transfer of educational communities. Sociological conceptions of inequality in education [20], continuing education and self-education [21], educational communities and non-linear higher education [22], transformation of higher education [23], the educational and professional trajectories of educational communities [24], and their problematic interactions [25] have led to the need for a systematic analysis of its social aspects.

#### **«White spots» in studies of educational failure**

A review of educational failure studies shows lacunae in scholarly knowledge about this phenomenon. The first lacuna is the lack of interdisciplinary knowledge about unsuccessful educational communities. This situation shows a lack of attention to them both from education itself and society as a whole. Instead of treating all subjects of education equally, the policy and practices of Russian education are focused on supporting successful students, gifted and talented young people (many of whom have recently left the country), elite schools, and leading universities. This is a systemic error in Russian education from top to bottom, since the scale of the problem, its development trends, and risks to Russian society are not taken into account. And this is a question of national security for a country that risks being left without educated and talented young people.

The second lacuna is the lack of fundamental research in modern science that is devoted to overcoming the failure of educational communities, including the process of transferring their human capital from one level of education to another. There are local, narrowly disciplinary studies of this phenomenon. There is not enough empirical material, the accumulation, generalization, and conceptualization of which

are necessary prerequisites for the formation of fundamental knowledge about a complex social problem. It is necessary to elaborate an interdisciplinary methodology for studying educational failure. This will serve as a serious step in creating fundamental knowledge about the human capital of educational communities as a strategic resource for the country's development.

The third lacuna is the lack of an interdisciplinary conceptualization of the problem of educational failure as a complex phenomenon that includes manifestations of not only academic performance, but also educational motivation and professional attitudes. At the same time this is necessary because it reflects the integrative nature of interaction between the social, psychological, socio-psychological, pedagogical, and economic components of educational activity.

The fundamental nature of the study of educational failure and ways to overcome it are determined by three directions. The first is characterized by the orientation of researchers and practitioners to solve the problem of failure of a significant part of mass educational communities. The second means identifying opportunities for rediscovering and transforming the human capital of these communities in complex economic and socio-cultural conditions through the use of new social, educational, psychological, pedagogical, and economic resources. The third direction involves the search for interdisciplinary, general scholarly, and disciplinary principles and approaches to the elaboration of scientific problems, and social, educational, psychological, pedagogical technologies, mechanisms and ways to improve the quality of the human capital of unsuccessful educational communities.

In this regard, we turn to the first consideration of the principles of constructing a methodology for the study of educational failure, and then to an analysis of methodological approaches to its study.

#### **Principles of constructing the research methodology**

In our opinion, the problem of the educational failure/success of educational communities

should be closely linked to the presence of certain characteristics of human capital. On the one hand, the success of educational activities of pupils and students depends largely on the content, structure, and level of the development of their human capital when entering the educational system (at one or another of its levels). On the other hand, the formation of certain qualities of the human capital of schoolchildren and college and university students is the main indicator of their success or failure in education. These qualities are formed or changed in the process of transferring the human capital of educational communities from one level of education to another. The relation between the success of educational communities and the quality of their human capital is a fundamental principle of the authors' approach to the study of educational failure.

Another important principle of our approach to the study of the stated problem is the need to consider it through the prism of the interaction of paired educational communities: students – teachers, pupils – teachers, children – parents, parents – teachers. The actions and interactions of these communities determine the quality and results of general and professional (secondary vocational and higher) education. Therefore, we consider the idea of educational failure/success, first of all, as a result of the interaction of key educational communities at each stage of the transfer of human capital in the educational system.

Summarizing the successful experience of international educational studies shows how productive it is to create interdisciplinary research teams. In this regard, it is possible to put forward interdisciplinarity as the most important principle of building a methodology for analyzing educational failure/success. Consideration of this principle raises the question of creating a single subject field for the study of educational failure/success. But will this process lead to the loss of the specifics of each discipline? Some researchers warn that this risk exists, and it entails a sharp decrease in the cognitive potential of disciplines due to the often vulgar understanding of interdisciplinarity [26, p. 3]. Other researchers, on the contrary, recognize the possibility and necessity

of interdisciplinary integration [27]. Moreover, they believe that modern educational studies will focus on interdisciplinary or super-disciplinary areas. We will discuss this principle in more detail in the final sections of the article.

It is necessary to note another methodological principle of our research – consideration of educational failure/success through the prism of dynamics. This forces us to look at the studied phenomenon in terms of a coordinate system. Some coordinates are constant, but others are rapidly changing, transforming the conditions and criteria for educational failure/success. Educational communities themselves are becoming extremely mobile in modern society: their number, composition, socio-cultural and mental characteristics, and academic and social status are changing. In our opinion, it is not possible to adequately interpret the process of the human capital transfer of educational communities and their educational failure/success without taking into account the intertwining statics and dynamics of the educational system and its main subjects – educational communities. This principle is implemented in the analysis of the stages of educational failure.

#### **The phenomenon of educational failure: from stage to stage**

Educational failure is a dynamic phenomenon. It has the characteristics of development and transition from one level of training to another. It seems to us, based on the analysis of real practices at all levels of education, that the academic failure of educational communities goes through a number of stages (in some cases, the transition to success).

Studies (psychological, pedagogical, sociological) have shown that many children develop symptoms of educational failure as early as primary school. It begins with the simplest phenomenon in terms of its observation and fixation, but also the most difficult in terms of resisting it – the reluctance of many children to attend school, do homework, and generally learn. We call this well-known situation a gradual decline in educational motivation.

The deformation of educational motivation interests us as an initial stage and as an important element of educational failure. Once formed, the reluctance to learn and assimilate knowledge and skills reaches a peak in some schoolchildren already in secondary school. This can be facilitated by objective and subjective factors, including family, school, environmental, socio-economic, psychological, and pedagogical ones. The study of their influence on the personality and social community of schoolchildren is a large scientific and practical problem that requires the attention of representatives from various scholarly disciplines.

At the second stage of educational failure, the accumulation of schoolchildren's human capital in its educational and general cultural components is limited due to poorly expressed educational motivation. The educational and cultural space of the second stage (as well as the first) is the family and school. At this stage, human capital is formed not only in the process of studying, but also in other forms of activity (intellectual, cultural, artistic, sports), in the field of additional education. However, the basis of the considered process is still educational activity in school. Therefore, the lack of motivation for learning and corresponding developmental activities in the educational space of family and school increases educational failure and moves it to a new stage.

At the third stage, the sphere of pupils' development continues to be the family-school educational space. However, the educational community itself is «growing up»: it is now made up of schoolchildren in grades 10–11. Approaching the end of school is associated with the choice of future profession, the level and form of education, and, therefore, with the choice of further life path. The educational failure of schoolchildren in the third stage is manifested in the lack of formed ideas about their nearest and long-term future in terms of professional self-determination and in the lack of readiness to choose an educational program. The coincidence of the moment of choosing a profession with the moment of falling educational motivation leads to a new round of failure.

Unsuccessful students can choose only the area, level, and form of education, but find it difficult to choose its content (profile). In this case, school often has a negative impact, determining the further educational trajectory of graduates by the level of development in only some school subjects. Typical arguments are: «Why do you go to university? Look at your grades. Go to college»; «Why do you need a liberal arts education? Your grades are bad in history and literature». As a result, the choice is made not between educational programs (which requires clear professional orientations and self-determination), but between levels of education – secondary vocational or higher, most often in favor of the former.

The fourth stage of educational failure begins in pre-university education, but manifests itself fully in universities. It is characterized by a lack of readiness to learn, a lack of the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies, unformed ideas about education as a type of work, and the absence of orientation to education as a value and sphere of personal development. These signs of educational failure are inherent in many problem students, especially in regional universities.

Thus, the dynamics of educational failure of schoolchildren and students has a cumulative effect, testifies to the complexity of the process under consideration and the difficulties of overcoming it. We call this process the failure transfer, which hinders the gradual development of the human capital of educational communities.

#### **Interdisciplinary research of educational failure**

To solve the problem of analyzing educational failure, the methodological arsenal of interdisciplinary approaches like community-based, activity-based, resource-based, and temporal-based ones should be employed. *The community approach* allows us to link the micro and macro levels of human capital's functioning in the educational system. It serves as a «bridge» between the individual, personal, organizational, institutional, and societal levels of educational failure, and raises this problem to the rank of socially

significant risks. The community approach also reveals the human capital of failing/successful youth as a result of multidimensional social, socio-psychological, and economic relations, as well as the interrelationships of various subjects of education – students themselves, teachers, educational management, and parents.

*The activity approach* allows us to consider the problem of educational failure of schoolchildren and students depending on the quality of the main forms and types of their educational activities and lifestyle. It makes it possible to combine the consideration of various elements of the human capital of educational communities (cognitive, emotional, motivational and behavioral). From its methodological positions, this approach develops ideas about the behavioral strategies of failing/successful educational communities as ways to adapt to the requirements of the modern system of education.

*The resource approach*, closely related to the elaboration of the concept of the human capital of educational communities, allows us to understand resource deficits (personal, community, organizational, systemic) as a prerequisite for educational failure and its growth in the educational system. Resources are understood as a mandatory element in mechanisms for transferring the human capital of educational communities; in this sense, they require study from a quantitative and qualitative point of view.

The use of *the temporal approach* is due to the need to consider the emergence of educational failure/success, the transformation of the human capital of educational communities, and its transfer as processes of formation and transition, the change of one stage to another, one state to another. All such processes have their own stages, speed, and rhythm: they depend on the temporality of modern education and are tied to socio-cultural dynamics. The etymology of the keywords «success»/ «failure» shows that the problems under consideration belong to a number of temporal phenomena (an unsuccessful person is someone who does not succeed). This approach leads us to understand the cumulative effect of educational failure/success.

### Potential of different methodological approaches

The complexity of the studied phenomenon determines the configuration of the methodology, which is formed by three levels of approaches – general scholarly, interdisciplinary, and disciplinary. We refer to general scholarly approaches as systemic, institutional, socio-cultural, and spatial-temporal ones. We consider the theory of human capital, along with community-based, activity-based, axiological, resource-based approaches, as interdisciplinary: sociological, pedagogical, psychological, socio-psychological, and economic approaches are considered disciplinary approaches.

We do not aim to consider the totality of all the above-mentioned approaches, deliberately limiting our task in this article to determining the possibilities of combining disciplinary approaches in the interdisciplinary field of research on the educational failure of pupils and students and ways to overcome it. We will show the potential of methodological synthesis in the framework of three segments of interdisciplinary research – institutional, community, and individual.

In the institutional segment, the most productive is a combination of sociological and economic approaches. On the one hand, this shows the deep connection between education and social and economic institutions involved in the «production» of the human capital of educational communities. On the other hand, this combination allows us to establish zones of deep institutional gaps (between the levels of education and the requirements of society to them, education, and the labor market), an imbalance in the «portfolio» of social and economic investments in the human capital of failing/successful educational communities. The interdisciplinary unity of the sociological and economic approaches is found in the identification of institutional «traps» that create conditions for increasing educational failure. It allows us to predict the expected and latent «outputs» of institutional destructions at various levels of the educational system.

Along with the areas where methodological approaches are interfaced, each still has

opportunities for use in disciplinary analysis. Thus, within the framework of the sociological approach, the human capital of educational communities is considered through its inclusion in the structure of public relations, through the development of which these institutional gaps can be leveled. This approach makes it possible to characterize education as one of the most important institutional resources needed to bridge the gaps in the quality of the human capital of various groups of pupils and students.

The economic approach, being closely related to the sociological approach, is aimed at assessing the costs associated with bridging these gaps, the cost of human capital in conditions of economic and social uncertainty, and identifying the economic characteristics of students passing various certification «filters» for success. The economic approach becomes relevant in the conditions of changing supply and demand in the market of entrants, since this factor affects the quality of acquired human capital. It shows how educational failure and accompanying imitation strategies of behavior in educational communities and the activities of educational organizations lead to economic losses.

The theory of human capital plays an important role in the integration of sociological and economic approaches. Its significance for the analysis of the problem is not limited to referring to the key concept of «human capital of educational communities». This theory does not just provide a system analysis of other important categories and concepts (investment in human capital, costs of human capital, capitalization of education, models and technologies of human capital formation, human capital transfer, human capital exhaustion). It makes it possible to use well-established and proven principles for transferring research methods and evaluating the human capital of educational communities from economics to sociology, social psychology, and pedagogy, and, vice versa, to transfer the results of these disciplines to the economics of human capital and the economics of education.

In our opinion, the combination of sociological and socio-psychological approaches is pro-

ductive within the boundaries of the general segment of problem analysis. Owing to this methodological integration, the study of the human capital of unsuccessful educational communities can be transferred from the individual and institutional levels to the community (group) level. The principles of these approaches allow us to interpret educational failure as a social and socio-psychological construct that is formed under the influence of the closest environment – teachers, parents, and peers. Besides this, such a methodological framework makes it possible to reveal the mobile essence of the phenomenon under study, placing it in a system of normative and value coordinates. This perspective determines the interconnectedness of the most important social and socio-psychological determinants of forming and evaluating the human capital of educational communities – group norms, values, decisions, group comparison and group pressure.

Socio-psychological and sociological approaches bring together the study of educational failure as a state of experiencing social emotions (resentment, joy, satisfaction, confidence, etc.). On this basis, it becomes possible to design social technologies to overcome failure through changing social emotions and the formation of educational interests and educational motivation. This design is based on the important idea of connecting individual and social changes, which brings both approaches together. Its meaning is that changes in the individual lead to changes in the social environment and, conversely, that the transformation of the social environment transforms the individual. The problem of improving the quality of the human capital of pupils and students from such theoretical and methodological positions is solved by changing the system of motivation of the individuals who make up unsuccessful educational communities. At the same time, we are also talking about the transformation of the socio-cultural context of the functioning of social communities interacting with them.

In the individual segment of research, the most popular approaches, alongside the sociological, are the psychological and pedagogical ones. The psychological approach is aimed at studying



psychological components in the structure of the human capital of educational communities. This allows us to identify the psychological prerequisites for the emergence of educational failure and overcoming it. It is aimed at searching for psychological resources to improve the quality of the human capital of educational communities. The described approach has the necessary methodological arsenal for studying phenomena that can be important predictors of the transition of educational communities from failure to success. Pedagogical and psychological approaches combine the possibilities of studying intrapersonal mechanisms in the formation of failure/success in educational communities, as well as searching for unique variations of educational failure in typical educational processes.

Therefore, a pedagogical approach is also necessary in the interdisciplinary study of unsuccessful educational communities. It allows us to consider the problem of forming and enriching human capital in terms of content, forms, and technologies of training and education. In combination with sociological and psychological approaches, the pedagogical approach forms a more complete knowledge of the impact of the educational environment and the various pedagogical conditions, professional readiness, and pedagogical culture of the teaching community on its interaction with various educational communities, including unsuccessful ones.

The importance and necessity of combining all the above approaches is shown in the study of such a problem as the effectiveness of educational management, in which a high level of student success is achieved with minimal costs (material, financial, personnel, psychological). In addition, the synthesis of these disciplinary approaches has a considerable effect in the study of various groups of factors for overcoming educational failure and promoting the human capital of educational communities by stages and levels of education, when entering the professional and labor sphere.

### Conclusions

The principles and approaches discussed above form the methodological core of an inter-

disciplinary conception of the transition of educational communities from failure to success in the process of transferring their human capital. It intends to justify the possibilities of overcoming the educational failure of a significant part of educational communities of schoolchildren and college and university students, rediscovering their human capital in difficult socio-demographic, socio-cultural, and economic conditions. The practical significance of developing such a conception is related to the prospects for reorienting the state's educational policy and all institutions of general and professional education towards equal support for all groups of young people – both successful and unsuccessful.

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Образовательная неуспешность учащихся и студентов  
как социальный феномен: методология исследования

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*Аннотация.* В статье ставится и характеризуется социальный диагноз значительной части учащихся и студентов, который определяется авторами как «образовательная неуспешность». Она проявляется в низком уровне образовательной мотивации, размытости профессиональных ориентаций и профессионального самоопределения, слабом стремлении к накоплению человеческого капитала и к социальной достижительности. Поставленный диагноз прослеживается на всём пути осуществления трансфера человеческого капитала неуспешной части образовательных общностей – от школы к колледжу и вузу и далее к рынку труда. Выявляются основные лакуны и вытекающие из них методологические проблемы исследования образовательной неуспешности. Феномен образовательной неуспешности рассматривается в рамках четырёх стадий возникновения и развития. Показываются особенности междисциплинарной методологии её исследования. Раскрывается потенциал междисциплинарного использования социологического, экономического, психологического, социально-психологического, педагогического подходов в изучении образовательной неуспешности и путей её преодоления.

*Ключевые слова:* образовательная неуспешность, учащиеся, студенты, человеческий капитал, стадии образовательной неуспешности, образовательная мотивация, профессиональное самоопределение, междисциплинарная методология, социологический, экономический, психологический, социально-психологический, педагогический подходы

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