Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională
ISSN: 2066-7329 | e-ISSN: 2067-9270
Abstracting & Indexing | Clarivate Analytics - Web of Science (WoS); EBSCO; Google Scholar; ICI Journals Master List - Index Copernicus; Ideas RePeC; Econpapers; Socionet; CEEOL; Philpapers; KVK; WorldCat; CrossRef; J-GATE

2025, Volume 17, Issue 4, pages: 538-554 | https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/17.4/1068
Submitted: September 16, 2025| *Accepted for publication:* October 2, 2025

Managing Risk Behaviour in Schools: New Trends in Prevention and Educational Practice

Alois DANĚK [1*]
Magdaléna URGOŠÍKOVÁ [2]

[1] Ph.D., AMBIS University, Department of Education, Lindnerova 575/1, 180 00 Prague, Czech Republic; alois.danek@ambis.cz; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0239-7358; Web of Science Researcher ID: HKP-1605-2023
[2] Mgr., AMBIS University, Department of Management and Administration in Public Sector, Lindnerova 575/1, 180 00 Prague, Czech Republic; 120255@mail.ambis.cz
**corresponding author: alois.danek@ambis.cz;*

Abstract: *This study explores the changing manifestations of risk behaviour among secondary school students, with a focus on the growing impact of digital addictions and cyberbullying alongside more familiar patterns such as substance use, aggression, and truancy. These forms of behaviour influence school climate, academic performance, and mental health, making prevention a pressing concern for educators and policymakers. The research draws on a qualitative design that integrates interviews, classroom observation, group discussions, and a case study, analysed through grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological approaches. The findings suggest that preventive strategies are effective only when embedded in the broader culture of the school, supported by trained staff, reinforced through cooperation with families, and linked to external expertise. Particular attention is needed in strengthening media literacy, enhancing psychological resilience, and sustaining preventive work within class groups. The study highlights the importance of systematic evaluation and positions prevention as an essential part of educational policy rather than a set of fragmented initiatives. In doing so, it contributes original insight into the relatively underexplored field of secondary education and offers guidance for more inclusive and responsive approaches to prevention.*

Keywords: *risk behaviour; prevention; school environment; digital addictions; cyberbullying; mental health; psychological resilience.*

How to cite: Daněk, A., & Urgošíková, M. (2025). Managing risk behaviour in schools: New trends in prevention and educational practice. *Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională, 17*(4), 538-554. https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/17.4/1068

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Introduction

Risk behaviour among students constitutes one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary education. Alongside familiar patterns such as substance use, aggression, bullying, and truancy, new phenomena associated with the digital era are becoming increasingly prominent. Cyberbullying, dependence on online games and social media, and excessive exposure to digital environments significantly affect adolescents' psychosocial development. These behaviours rarely occur in isolation; they intersect with broader societal transformations characterised by technologisation, performance pressure, and growing individualisation.

Research has shown that risk behaviour is a multilayered phenomenon whose dynamics evolve across developmental stages. However, much of the literature continues to focus on primary school pupils or attributes causal factors primarily to the family context. Secondary education, by contrast, has attracted far less systematic attention, despite the fact that this period is decisive for the formation of identity, peer relationships, and personal values.

The present study addresses this gap by examining risk behaviour within the setting of secondary education. Its objectives are to identify new trends in prevention, explore the factors that influence the effectiveness of preventive strategies, and propose recommendations applicable to educational practice and policy. The guiding assumption is that effective prevention requires a multi-level and interdisciplinary approach that integrates pedagogical, psychological, and social perspectives while remaining responsive to the rapidly changing conditions of contemporary society. In order to pursue these aims, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the current manifestations of risk behaviour among secondary school students?
- Which factors enhance or hinder the effectiveness of preventive strategies in this context?
- How can preventive approaches be developed to respond more effectively to the realities of secondary education?

Literature review

The debate on inclusion and exclusion in secondary education highlights a persistent tension between proclaimed inclusive policies and everyday practices that may result in the marginalisation of students with

challenging behaviour (Stanforth & Rose, 2020). This paradox is particularly salient at the secondary level, where identity formation and the consolidation of peer norms are at their peak.

Research in special education has consistently demonstrated the high prevalence of problematic behaviour and its multifaceted associations with communication deficits, cognitive limitations, and contextual conditions (Hofmann & Müller, 2022; Nicholls et al., 2020). Studies on giftedness and dual exceptionality in residential care further illustrate that both prevention and inclusion must encompass a broad spectrum of learner needs (Daněk, 2024). Longitudinal evidence indicates that the accumulation of risk factors tends to stabilise challenging behaviour over time (Nicholls et al., 2022). These findings are transferable to secondary education, where peer interactions function simultaneously as risk enhancers and protective resources.

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping preventive practice. Novice educators frequently perceive classroom management as a key professional competence, yet their confidence is contingent upon institutional support and opportunities for professional growth (Zahr, 2022). Research also shows that the ways in which teachers attribute responsibility for problematic behaviour directly influence their chosen interventions (Patnaik et al., 2022). Building reflective practice thus emerges as a necessary foundation for effective prevention (Dolejš & Orel, 2017).

The physical and digital environments of schools have likewise proven influential. Studies demonstrate that architectural design and spatial organisation can promote collaboration and positive interaction or, conversely, intensify frustration and aggression (Fang et al., 2023; Hallworth, 2024; Hawkins et al., 2023). A lack of communal spaces constrains the development of socio-emotional competencies (Pervez & Galea, 2024). At the same time, digital contexts bring about new forms of risk behaviour, most notably cyberbullying and online dependency (Ding & Li, 2023; Kopecký et al., 2015). Preventive efforts must therefore address both dimensions—by enhancing digital literacy and by providing meaningful offline alternatives (Emerson, 2001).

Ecological perspectives reinforce the view that student behaviour is embedded within classroom climate, institutional rules, and broader social norms (O'Brennan et al., 2014; Racz et al., 2016). Family dynamics, including the destructive impact of parental alcoholism on relationship values, represent an additional factor shaping adolescents' behaviour (Daněk et al., 2024). Socioeconomic and ethnic factors further shape teachers' interpretations of student conduct, often leading to disproportionate

referrals to special education (Acker & Wehby, 2000; Hibel et al., 2010). Academic success plays an equally decisive role in adolescents' self-concept. Understanding underlying motives—whether striving for attention, asserting dominance, or compensating for skill deficits—is indispensable for effective pedagogical responses (Sun & Shek, 2012).

Recent contributions from secondary school contexts underscore emerging challenges. Authoritative approaches, still prevalent in many institutions, are often perceived by students as unfair and counterproductive (Jones et al., 2023). More recent scholarship calls for alternative models of authority that combine firm boundaries with respect and may be more effective than traditional disciplinary strategies (McGillicuddy, 2024).

Despite these valuable insights, current research has notable blind spots. The majority of studies remain concentrated on primary or special education (Nicholls et al., 2020, 2022; Nunan, 2024), while secondary education remains underexplored. There is a lack of longitudinal data capturing contemporary shifts in adolescent behaviour, ecological frameworks that explicitly address peer dynamics, and nuanced analyses of teacher self-efficacy within secondary schools. Addressing these gaps provides the rationale for the present study, which contributes new insights into the prevention of risk behaviour, specifically in the context of secondary education.

Methodology

The study was designed as qualitative research framed within Participatory Action Research (PAR). This approach emphasises the active involvement of participants in the process of knowledge creation while simultaneously aiming at practical change in the studied environment (Baum et al., 2006; McIntyre, 2008; Cockerham, 2024; Cornish et al., 2023). In the context of secondary education, where prevention of risk behaviour requires both immediate responsiveness and long-term change, PAR is particularly appropriate as it combines inquiry with reflection and direct support for school practice (Flicker, 2008).

Research process

The inquiry followed a cyclical sequence: identification of the problem, design, data collection, interpretation, and the joint sharing of findings with participants. This iterative process ensured continuous feedback, which itself became part of the collective learning experience. Four principal techniques were used for data collection:

- Observation in classrooms and common spaces, focusing on teaching processes and the dynamics of peer interaction.
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers and specialist staff provided insight into their experiences with prevention and intervention.
- Group discussions, designed to foster collective reflection and exchange of effective practices.
- A case study, which enabled an in-depth understanding of the social and pedagogical dynamics within a single class.

Participatory action research

The PAR framework stressed the participation not only of students but also of teaching staff, who were invited to co-shape the research process and propose practical adjustments. In the secondary school context, this approach made it possible to uncover the tensions between teachers' expectations, institutional rules, and the actual needs of adolescents. The ethical principles of PAR further ensured transparency and collaboration, reducing the risk of research becoming detached from practice (Maglio & Pherali, 2020; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

Data collection

Observation provided a basis for capturing manifestations of risk behaviour, teachers' responses, and the contexts in which such behaviour occurred. Potential observer bias was mitigated through systematic reflexive note-taking (Chappell, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school prevention specialist, teachers, and other professionals, focusing on their experiences, strategies, and support needs (Demirci, 2024; Dunwoodie et al., 2023; Espedal, 2022). Group discussions enabled participants to co-develop recommendations and critically assess the effectiveness of preventive measures. The case study offered detailed insight into the functioning of one specific class, including peer and teacher–student relationships (Crowe et al., 2011; Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013).

Data analysis

Analysis combined Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Grounded Theory (GT). IPA provided a lens for exploring the subjective experiences and interpretations of teaching staff (Alase, 2017; Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Rajasinghe, 2020; Van Manen, 2018). GT complemented this by enabling the identification of patterns and categories

that transcended individual accounts, allowing for broader conclusions about factors shaping school prevention (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Makri & Neely, 2021). Validity was strengthened through triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, group discussions) and consultation with external experts.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards for educational research. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Special attention was devoted to respecting the professional autonomy of teachers and creating a safe environment in which they could share their experiences without concern about repercussions.

Research setting and sample

The study was conducted at a secondary technical and vocational school located in a small town in the northern region of the Czech Republic. The institution provides both academic programs leading to the school-leaving examination and vocational training, with a mission to prepare students for professional employment at home and abroad. It is equipped with technical and study facilities, a student dormitory, a cafeteria, and a wide range of sports activities. International internship opportunities further extend students' professional competences and exposure to global contexts.

In the academic year 2023/2024, approximately six hundred students were enrolled. Academic tracks included technical and security-oriented fields as well as service, tourism, and hospitality programs. Vocational training covered, for example, professions in the beauty and styling industry. This diversity created a heterogeneous school environment, bringing together students from different social and cultural backgrounds and reflecting the wider variety of pathways in contemporary secondary education.

A distinctive feature of the institution was the contrast between its two main sections, which also reflected the gender composition of students. In the humanities and service-oriented tracks, girls predominated, and the environment was stimulating and aesthetically cultivated. In contrast, the technical section was dominated by boys, with a more austere and functional atmosphere. These contrasts offered a unique opportunity to examine how the physical and social environments shape school climate and potentially influence manifestations of risk behaviour.

The school's philosophy is encapsulated in its motto "You are never alone," underscoring its commitment to prevention, mental well-being, and interpersonal relationships. With its emphasis on modern teaching methods, formative assessment, and student participation in decision-making, the institution provided a particularly suitable context for participatory research.

The selection of this school was deliberate. Much of the existing research on student risk behaviour has been conducted in large urban areas, where institutions benefit from greater access to specialised staff and external support services. By contrast, this study focused on a regional secondary school with more limited resources, where preventive and inclusive strategies often emerge in distinct forms. This perspective provides original insight into how local schools adapt to the challenges of a changing society and respond to the emergence of new forms of risk behaviour.

The research sample consisted of members of the school's prevention team: the prevention specialist, guidance counsellors, class teachers, and the school psychologist. These respondents were purposefully selected as they constitute the core of the school's preventive system and hold direct experience in managing risk behaviour. Their accounts offered insight into the mechanisms of prevention and simultaneously revealed perceived barriers and opportunities in everyday practice. The research sample consisted of five key members of the school community who were directly involved in prevention and student support:

- Respondent R1 – School Prevention Specialist: Coordinated preventive activities across the institution, with long-standing experience in working with at-risk students and in collaboration with external professionals.
- Respondent R2 – Guidance Counsellor: Provided academic and personal support to students, emphasised cooperation with families, and reflected on the pandemic's impact on students' mental health.
- Respondent R3 – Class Teacher: Represented everyday classroom practice, highlighted existing preventive measures, and pointed to time constraints that limit broader engagement in prevention.
- Respondent R4 – School Psychologist: Focused on the diagnosis and support of students with psychological difficulties, identified self-harm and anxiety as key issues, and underlined the need for class-based preventive work.
- Respondent R5 – Class Teacher: Brought perspectives from another department of the school, noted differences in student behaviour linked to vocational orientation and family background, and

emphasised the importance of linking school and out-of-school activities.

All respondents were purposefully selected as they represent the core of the school's prevention system and possess direct experience with managing risk behaviour. Their diverse professional roles enabled a multifaceted view of both preventive mechanisms and the barriers encountered in everyday school practice.

Results

The qualitative analysis generated a set of recurring themes that reflect both the manifestations of student risk behaviour and the conditions shaping the effectiveness of prevention. Respondents' accounts revealed strong consensus on certain issues but also pointed to important divergences that illuminate the complexity of preventive work in secondary education.

- **Types of Risk Behaviour**

Interviews and observations showed that risk behaviour among secondary school students takes diverse forms. The prevention specialist explained: *"Strategies need to be adjusted every year because student behaviour keeps changing—cyberbullying has now become a greater problem than traditional bullying"* (R1). This shift to the online environment was confirmed by the guidance counsellor, who noted: *"Students now approach me with issues that used to be solved at home—the school has become the first place where they seek support"* (R2). Class teachers agreed that, alongside digital risks, truancy and experimentation with addictive substances persist. As the class teacher 1 put it: *"Differences between study programs are visible, but in the end it comes down to communication and consistency"* (R3).

- **Contextual Factors and the School Environment**

The importance of school climate emerged across all accounts. The school psychologist emphasised: *"Prevention has to target entire classes, not just individuals"* (R4), underlining the role of peer groups as both protective and risk factors. The class teacher 2 highlighted the lasting impact of the pandemic: *"The pandemic weakened relationships among students, and it is now harder to rebuild trust and cooperation"* (R5). Respondents agreed that the absence of communal spaces and engaging activities reinforces negative patterns, whereas a participatory climate contributes to reducing problematic behaviour.

- **Teachers' and Students' Attitudes**

Teachers reported increasing pressure related to discipline management. The prevention specialist described workload and limited

resources as a major source of stress (R1). The guidance counsellor highlighted the importance of family involvement in preventive work (R2). The class teacher 1 emphasised supportive collaboration: *"I value that we can rely on the prevention specialist and the school psychologist—together we solve problems much faster"* (R3). The school psychologist noted that students are increasingly willing to share their difficulties but expect concrete help rather than abstract advice (R4). The class teacher 2 reflected on students' attitudes: *"Traditional prevention programs do not attract them; they prefer interactive workshops where they can play an active role"* (R5).

- **Effective Elements of Prevention**

The findings suggest that effective prevention requires a complex and multi-level approach. The class teacher 1 stressed: *"For me, the most important thing is having a good relationship with the class—problems are solved much more easily then"* (R3). The school psychologist underlined the lack of concrete tools: *"We are missing practice-oriented programs that would teach students how to cope with stress or conflict"* (R4). The guidance counsellor emphasised the need for broader interventions, stating: *"Workshops on stress management and communication should be much more frequent and systematic"* (R2). The prevention specialist pointed to the importance of coordination, remarking: *"Prevention only works when it is planned as a system that engages the whole staff, not isolated activities"* (R1). The class teacher 2 confirmed: *"Prevention cannot be universal; it has to be tailored to specific programs and classes"* (R5).

- **Limitations of Current Prevention**

Respondents consistently identified barriers that restrict the effectiveness of prevention. The prevention specialist stressed: *"The time demands are enormous, and I often face the problem of not having enough capacity for coordination"* (R1). The guidance counsellor reiterated: *"Without cooperation with parents, our options are limited, and prevention cannot be sustained"* (R2). The class teacher 1 reflected the everyday reality of time pressure: *"There is little space left for prevention, even though we see its importance"* (R3). The school psychologist highlighted the growing demand for support: *"The number of students who need psychological help is rising faster than our capacity to provide it"* (R4). The class teacher 2 pointed to structural barriers: *"We are willing to look for new solutions, but without greater support and more time, it is very difficult"* (R5). These accounts suggest that the limitations stem not only from individual attitudes but also from structural conditions within the school system.

- **Outlook for Further Research**

The qualitative findings provided a detailed picture of both risk behaviour and preventive practice in secondary education. They confirmed that effective prevention requires layered support, ranging from class-level

relationships to sustained cooperation between school and family. A quantitative study, planned as the next phase of this research, will test these conclusions on a larger sample and generate generalisable evidence to inform educational policy.

Limits and discussions

The findings confirm that risk behaviour among secondary school students is shaped by an interplay of individual characteristics, peer dynamics, and institutional context. Previous research has pointed to the tension between proclaimed inclusive policies and the everyday reality in which students with challenging behaviour are often marginalised (Stanforth & Rose, 2020). In the secondary school environment, peer relationships emerge as a central factor, functioning both as a powerful protective resource and as a potential source of risk (Nicholls et al., 2022).

The study also highlighted the growing impact of digitalisation, which proved to be one of the main determinants of student behaviour. Digital environments open opportunities for learning but simultaneously create new risks, particularly in the form of cyberbullying and addictive use. These ambivalent effects are consistent with studies suggesting that digital technologies may enrich learning while at the same time exacerbating difficulties in the domain of social relations.

School climate was shown to play a decisive role. As earlier studies have indicated, student behaviour is not solely a function of individual predispositions but also of institutional norms and the quality of classroom interactions (O'Brennan et al., 2014; Racz et al., 2016). The influence of the physical school environment, such as architectural layout and the availability of communal spaces, has also been documented (Fang et al., 2023; Thomas & Bierman, 2006) and was confirmed in our study.

Supportive reflections from students contrasted with teachers' perspectives, indicating differences in how preventive strategies are perceived. Teachers stressed the need for methodological support and systematic preventive tools, aligning with studies that highlight the role of self-efficacy in classroom management (Zahr, 2022). Student observations, captured indirectly through classroom activities, suggested that traditional programs are often regarded as unappealing, with a stronger preference for participatory approaches (Nunan, 2024). These supportive insights point to the value of innovating preventive strategies and considering the student perspective in future research.

This study was primarily designed to capture the perspectives of teachers, prevention specialists, and school psychologists. Students

contributed in a supportive capacity through classroom reflections and observations, but their voices were not the central focus of data collection. Parents were not included, since the research aimed to document professional views and institutional practices. The findings therefore reflect a professional lens that is essential for understanding how schools interpret and manage risk behaviour. Future research will build on this foundation by systematically comparing professional perspectives with those of students and parents.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged. Geographically, the research was carried out in a limited sample of schools in the Czech context, which calls for caution in applying the findings to other regions. While the Czech case reflects broader Central European trends, national and regional specificities must be taken into account (Daněk et al., 2023). Epistemologically, the qualitative nature of the study provided deep insight but does not allow for statistical generalisation. Methodologically, potential bias must be considered in interviews as well as in classroom observations influenced by the presence of the researcher.

Despite these constraints, the study makes an original contribution. Much of the existing research has focused on primary or special education (Nicholls et al., 2020), while the secondary level has remained relatively neglected. This work offers a new perspective on secondary schools, showing that risk behaviour is being reshaped by digitalisation and acquiring new forms. Furthermore, the adoption of a participatory methodology enabled the active involvement of teachers and the supportive engagement of students in the research process. These features lend the study significance not only for the Czech context but also for the broader international debate on inclusion, prevention, and the shaping of school climate.

Practical recommendations

Based on the findings and their contextualisation within the scholarly literature, several recommendations can be formulated for school practice and educational policy.

- **Strengthen participatory approaches**

Supportive student reflections, captured through classroom activities, indicated that preventive programs are more engaging when they include participatory elements. While student input was not the central focus of this study, these insights suggest that prevention can benefit from formats that combine professional expertise with structured student involvement (Nunan, 2024). Such approaches enhance motivation, encourage peer learning, and strengthen responsibility for behaviour.

Develop a comprehensive school climate

A positive school climate, grounded in respect and mutual support, functions as a crucial protective factor (O'Brennan et al., 2014; Racz et al., 2016). Schools should therefore work systematically with entire class groups, encourage cooperation, and strengthen teachers' competences in inclusive pedagogy.

- **Address the impact of the digital environment**

Preventive strategies must take into account the increasing prevalence of digital dependencies and cyberbullying, which represent dominant forms of contemporary risk behaviour (Ding & Li, 2023). Alongside the development of digital literacy, schools should offer attractive offline activities that foster social skills and promote balanced lifestyles.

- **Enhance methodological support for teachers**

Teachers frequently lack clear guidance and tools for dealing with risk behaviour (Zahr, 2022). Targeted training, supervision, and accessible materials are necessary to build their confidence and ensure consistent implementation of preventive measures across the school.

- **Strengthen school–family–community cooperation**

Risk behaviour arises from the interaction of school and out-of-school environments. Prevention should therefore include close collaboration with families and external professionals (Nicholls et al., 2022; Royston et al., 2024). A strong family–school partnership is vital for the sustainability of preventive efforts and for supporting adolescents' value formation.

- **Implement systematic evaluation of preventive programs**

The effectiveness of prevention depends on regular monitoring and evaluation. Without reflective assessment, programs risk becoming formalistic and ineffective. Schools should therefore introduce mechanisms for evaluating the impact of preventive activities and for adjusting them to the evolving needs of students.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated that risk behaviour in secondary schools is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interplay of digital environments, peer relations, and institutional conditions. While traditional forms such as truancy and aggression remain relevant, digital dependencies and cyberbullying are increasingly influential, reshaping both school climate and preventive priorities. The findings highlight that prevention is most effective when conceived as an integral part of school culture rather than as

a set of isolated programs. The research was primarily focused on the perspectives of teachers, prevention specialists, and school psychologists, whose insights were central to understanding how schools address risk behaviour. Students provided only supportive input, and parents were not included, since the design was aimed at documenting professional views and institutional practices. The originality of this research lies in its focus on secondary schools, a level of education often marginalised in studies of risk behaviour, and in its participatory methodological design. These elements provide insights not only into the Czech educational context but also into broader debates on inclusion, prevention, and school climate. Future research should expand the scope to a larger sample of schools and incorporate the voices of students and parents to allow systematic comparison across perspectives, supported by quantitative methods to verify and generalise the findings. Such an approach can contribute to the systematic development of preventive strategies that are responsive to the evolving challenges of contemporary education.

Acknowledgements

This article was created at AMBIS University within the project "Risk Behavior Models in Education – Economic Benefits of Preventive Activities" number SVV/2024/6103, supported by funding for Specific University Research provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in 2024 and 2025.

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