

CHALLENGES IN ENSURING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *The theme of this paper is the knowledge of the difficulties in promoting inclusive education in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Among the groups of students at risk, we will focus on students from rural areas and those with special educational needs (SEN). We will mainly refer to the situation in Romania, but we will also consider models of good practice from other European countries. Children with special educational needs face a number of problems when it comes to their access to the education system. Their integration in a normal school or in a special one is a real challenge for those in this field. The issue of integrating children diagnosed with a disability of any kind is an intensely debated topic both at the political level and in the public space. As for children in rural areas, their access to education is often restricted due to the poverty in which they live.*

Keywords: *inclusive education; Covid-19 pandemic; pre-university education; children from rural areas; children with SEN.*

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has completely changed the classic paradigm of the teaching-learning process, by moving all activities to the online environment. Research reports prepared so far, the results of which will be presented below. We draw attention to the difficulties that most students have faced in adapting to the new context.

It is known that, in rural communities, the difficulties in carrying out the teaching activity are completely different, due to the depopulation of these communities, the decrease of the school population, the lack of necessary equipment, etc. In such a context, dominated by major crises, the situation of children with SEN becomes even more problematic. We will focus on the specific problems of rural education, with an emphasis on how these problems manifest and overlap in the case of students with SEN.

2. Access to education in rural communities in Romania

When it comes to school success, regardless of the indicators we use to define it, schools in urban communities invariably have better results. For example, dropout rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas. We will use the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (Institutul Național de Statistică), presented in table 1.

Table 1. Dynamics of school dropout rate in Romania in the period 2008-2018 in primary and secondary education - distribution by areas of residence

School year	Environment of residence	
	Urban	Rural
2008-2009	1,5	1,9
2009-2010	1,5	1,6
2010-2011	1,8	1,8
2011-2012	1,7	1,8
2012-2013	1,1	1,6
2013-2014	1,3	1,8
2014-2015	1,5	2,2
2015-2016	1,4	1,9
2016-2017	1,3	1,8
2017-2018	1,5	1,9

Source: National Institute of Statistics

With the exception of the 2010-2011 school year, in which rural and urban dropout rates reach similar values, in all other cases most students leaving school come from rural areas. Obviously, we are not talking here about a determining factor, but about a correlational one, considering that the village is, in general, much more dominated by refractory attitudes towards formal education, and the economic situation is often precarious. In general, interest in education and culture is lower in rural communities and traditionalist mentalities are dominant.

Engaging students in agricultural and household activities is still a current practice, given the profile of activities in this community: “agricultural activities practiced by members of rural households are mainly for self-consumption, 68% of households raising animals and 59% growing vegetables. for family consumption.” (World Vision Romania, 2020: 193) During the first seven years of life, children acquire the values and fundamental norms of living in society. The process is called primary socialization (Otovescu, 2009: 230). At this stage, children can be taught whether or not school is a priority. It is certain that, in rural communities, the valorization of the school is rarely an element of the primary socialization. The situation becomes even more difficult for children with special educational needs, who, not infrequently, remain in the care of grandparents, other relatives or even alone.

Increasing the chances of school success in rural areas starts from identifying and solving problems specific to these communities, of which stimulating interest in education and increasing opportunities for socio-economic development are just two of the many imperatives that are not the subject of our study.

Undoubtedly, the family situation cannot be analyzed separately from the social context of which it is part and in which the education of the descendants is carried out. And in terms of social and economic factors, international literature abounds with research relevant to understanding the mechanisms that make school failure a feature of rural communities. The correlation between the low level of income in the family of origin and school failure is a certainty, and prolonged unemployment, even if it occurs in the case of a single parent, is

associated with school leaving by minors. In most cases, the model from the family of origin is taken over and reproduced by the student, resulting in maintaining a precarious economic and educational level at the time of founding the new family. The concept of "culture of poverty" describes precisely this vicious circle, in which both microsociological and macrosociological variables intervene. So far, neither the welfare state nor the mechanisms of the market economy have offered viable solutions for breaking the "circle of poverty", in which school failure is only one of the many facets. Geographical mobility also correlates with school failure. The stress caused by moving the family to another community negatively influences the student's school results. In this situation, the reluctance of the reception environment, including the school environment, which is much more pronounced in the case of the student with SEN, may also show hostility towards newcomers, with negative effects on participation, identification and, implicitly, on performance.

The report on the well-being of rural children, prepared by World Vision at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, draws attention to the fact that "access to and participation in education of rural children are still unequally distributed according to available family resources, involvement parents, but also the relationship with the school and the teachers" (World Vision Romania, 2020: 19). At the same time, as we pointed out above, it is not educational problems that are responsible for this state of affairs, but social problems, especially the precarious economic situation: "the level of poverty is the main obstacle to children's participation in education" (World Vision Romania, 2020: 193)

Another research report, prepared by World Vision in collaboration with Vodafone Romania, presents other problems that students in rural areas face. The report draws attention to the lower level of professionalism of teachers in rural areas, much less trained to meet the challenges of all kinds that appear inherent in the school space (World Vision Romania, Vodafone Romania Foundation, 2020: 16). This is not about a value judgment, but about an educational reality. The report includes comparative analyzes on the distribution by teaching staff among teachers by area of residence, which demonstrates a greater concentration of professional skills in urban areas (reference is also made to the growing share of substitute teachers in rural areas). This reality raises big questions when it comes to integrating children with SEN. Promoting the social inclusion of children with SEN has been the basis of the current educational policy, which discourages the so-called "special school", arguing (justified, up to a point) the risk of segregation and encouraging social exclusion among these categories of students.

On the other hand, there is the issue of the extent to which teachers, especially those in rural areas, have the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the very particular needs of these students. In recent years, especially in rural areas, "the integration of children with disabilities / special educational needs (SEN) has led to a significant number of requests for teacher training on how to work with these students" (World Vision Romania, Vodafone Romania Foundation, 2020: 110). We must not lose sight of the fact that students with special educational needs (SEN) are an extremely vulnerable category. Teachers working with such students must take into account the educational needs complementary to the general educational objectives, which requires the adaptation of schooling

to the particularities of the learning disability or learning disorder of the child (these may be, for example: autism, language disorders, neuro-motor or mental deficiencies, behavioral disorders, multisensory deficiencies, etc. and may be individual or associated). These requirements create a difficult situation for the affected child, who cannot fully capitalize on his intellectual and attitudinal potential and who thus develops a feeling of inferiority that accentuates his condition as a person with special needs. " SEN expresses an obvious need to give some children additional attention and educational assistance (affirmative, positive measures, due to the need to compensate for one/some disadvantages), without which one cannot effectively talk about equalizing the chances, access and school and social participation. The SEN sintagm is more relevant in psychopedagogical plan than that of deficiency, incapacity/disability or handicap" (Constantinescu, 2019: 64) This process of adaptation requires a continuous improvement and qualification of the teacher, the opportunities in these directions being particularly limited in rural areas.

Demographic problems further complicate the implementation of the educational act in rural communities. After 1990, the Romanian population entered a process of permanent decline, which also left its mark on the volume of students. The continuous decrease of the school population and the abolition of some schools and didactic norms is a phenomenon that has grown especially in the rural environment. Here, in 2017, for example, according to the data of the National Institute of Statistics, there was a reduction of the total population in 2,269 rural localities, affecting in the long run the process of perpetuation of rural communities. The current population of Romania was, on March 4, 2020, 19,237,691 people, representing 0.25% of the world's population and with an average age of 43.2 years. More than half of them, ie 54.6%, were living in urban areas, and 45.4% lived in rural areas.

A study by the Romanian Academy proposes a long-term education development plan (until 2035). This plan includes measures for all important areas, including education. Referring to the issue of education in rural areas, the study points out the importance of access to the national education system and increasing the school success of all students in rural communities. "Students in rural areas are characterized by a lower participation rate at all levels of education, by a stronger orientation towards the professional route compared to the academic one. Although the school should ensure upward social mobility, at present it seems to fulfill rather the function of social reproduction" (Vlad, 2016: 22)

2. Challenges and barriers to the inclusion of students with SEN in online education

In March 2020, online teaching and learning was introduced, initially as a recommendation, becoming mandatory in April of the same year, in the context of the outbreak expansion. The most used e-learning platforms for online teaching and learning were Google Classroom, Google Meet, Google Hangouts, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Webex Meetings, etc. The tools of the Google platform were offered free of charge to teachers, through the ADMA application synchronized with SIIIR (www.adma.ro, 2021).

The Ministry has introduced a digital platform (www.digital.educared.ro, 2021), offering applications and online learning resources centralized in one place. It hosts tutorials and other learning materials designed to train and support teachers to design, implement, evaluate and organize technology-assisted learning and to manage student activities on online learning platforms. The platform leverages the experiences and results of CRED (European Social Fund funded project) which aims to provide open educational resources for learning communities and ensure a real contribution to the widespread use of new teaching and learning technologies. CRED and other European-funded projects, NGOs, universities, IT companies and freelancers, learning and business communities have organized webinars for teachers on the use of online teaching and learning platforms and tools.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry of National Education conducted a rapid survey in primary and secondary schools (Digi24, 2021). This helped to identify students who lacked electronic devices and internet connection, especially in rural areas. MEN took the initiative to support online learning and invited sponsors, mobile and internet providers, various private companies and NGOs to get involved. The survey revealed that 250,000 students (9% of the total population of students in state pre-university education) do not have devices and internet connection to implement e-learning at the national level (Digi24, 2021). While the Euro 200 program offers financial support (200 euros) for students who buy a computer, only those from very poor families can benefit, the eligibility criteria being particularly restrictive (<https://www.edu.ro/etichete/euro-200>, 2021). Students' access to technology is neither uniform nor universal, which contradicts the universal nature of the right to education. School inspectorates and school institutions, in cooperation with local authorities, can also support the provision of access to online learning for students in difficulty.

According to the Ministry's statistics, as mentioned, 9% of all pre-university students do not have the necessary equipment to participate in online learning. An IRES survey (2020), conducted last year, 2 months after the introduction of distance learning, presents a much darker reality: "Only 68% of students in Romania have access to electronic equipment for online school, according to a study conducted by IRES between April 27-30 and only half of the students attended the online school." (Radio Europa Liberă, 2020) The study also shows that the problems in implementing online learning are much more complex and require a deeper approach than the one initially proposed by education officials: "According to the IRES study, 36% of families with children have two or more children at school, and participation in online schooling is often done after a schedule that most often involves all students attending classes (different classes), which requires each child to have his own equipment, allocated for school online." (Radio Europa Liberă, 2020)

The study also revealed that the biggest difficulties in implementing online learning are faced by rural families, due to the lack of necessary technological equipment, respectively the knowledge of their use, if they were provided with the necessary material resources. It is also worth mentioning that "only 63% of primary school children have exclusive access to functional equipment, while 72% of children have equipment in high school, and 70% in high school. Urban students are more gifted in this respect (76%) compared to their rural counterparts (62%)." (Radio Europa Liberă, 2020)

The forced transition to exclusively digital education, under the imperative of the pandemic, has only amplified pre-existing inequalities, especially when it comes to vulnerable students. In this context, the quality of education, not only in Romania, was negatively affected by the closure of schools and the relocation of online activities. In addition to the fact that access to distance education is limited for some students, the pandemic has accentuated, through its consequences, issues of equality and equity in education. In addition, the pandemic has significantly reduced the support services provided to students with special needs by qualified specialists, such as speech therapists, psychoeducational professionals and qualified professionals in the field of working with these children.

The main purpose of the teaching-learning process, in the case of SEN students, is to ensure their integration into society by providing equal and efficient educational services both in the so-called special schools and by inclusive education, by integrating them into secondary education. During the pandemic, in addition to the issue of accessibility and the possibility of using new technologies, collaboration between families and teachers has become even more important than ever. Satisfying the special needs of the child, a position taken over until then by the school, was spent overnight in the family. Of course, professional and household activities do not always allow time management in the interest of meeting the needs of the child, and hiring a specialized person who can take on this role requires significant financial costs, difficult to bear by rural families. Not to mention the fact that, in the case of the latter, it becomes difficult, almost impossible, to find a qualified person in this regard at the community level, even when the family budget allows the hiring of a professional to assist the student.

The neglect of the student is doubled by other problems that many families faced during this period - prolonged quarantine, job loss, reduced income, etc. In this context, the family becomes an institution unable to fulfill its functions, just like the educational institution (Mustafa, 2020). The few empirical research conducted so far draws attention to the fact that negative changes in education, economics, politics and in everyday life as a whole increase the level of anxiety of families with children with SEN, but also of children (Mustafa, 2020). In addition, it is found that the duration and quality of family support in distance learning varies depending on the socio-economic structure and level of education of the family, the most disadvantaged being low-income families in rural areas (World Bank, 2020).

3. International models of good practice for the inclusion of students with SEN in online education

Education systems in developed countries saw the current situation not only as a challenge, but also as an opportunity to place a stronger emphasis on reducing existing educational gaps, including before the pandemic, by implementing initiatives to promote equality and inclusion. What in some states, such as Romania, was only a risk, in the sense of accentuating inequalities, in other states the risk was turned into an opportunity.

Through inclusive education, students with SEN must develop a sense of belonging to the learning community, communicate effectively with colleagues and teachers and acquire, as far as possible, the content of each subject. The pandemic has made it particularly difficult to achieve these goals, not only because of the reasons outlined above. Adaptive strategies to the new context developed for the large mass of

students are not always appropriate for those with SEN. We mentioned the case of computer devices, very difficult for the latter to use. Even in terms of health, it should be borne in mind that regular masks, although necessary to limit the spread of the virus, are poorly designed for certain categories of students with SEN (for example, hearing-impaired, speech-impaired or students who learn by observing the movements of the mouth). For this reason, as a first model of good practice, it is necessary to use transparent masks in classrooms with students with hearing / visual impairments, as an essential inclusive practice to facilitate communication and inclusion processes. Such masks have already begun to be marketed and used in Western states (<https://www.bellelily.com>, 2020).

The direct physical interaction between the teacher and the student with SEN cannot be replaced by the indirect interaction, mediated by the new technological means. Teachers, through daily contact with students, are among the most important agents for ensuring inclusion in education. In addition, teachers are the people most likely to be close to students' families and can play a major role both in integrating the most vulnerable among students and in monitoring and ensuring a constant level of family involvement in their education. Taking into account the importance of teachers in the process of integrating these students, most of the best practice models implemented at international level focused on optimizing teacher-student interaction in the context of physical distance. Among them, we mention the following:

- The Portuguese Ministry of Education has developed the Apoio às Escolas website, which includes a set of resources to support schools in using distance learning methodologies for students with special educational needs. The site includes content adapted to these students, noting that in the Portuguese state, most students with SEN study in schools adapted to their needs (<https://apoioescolas.dge.mec.pt>, 2020);
- In Uruguay, community social workers, carers of children with SEN and their families worked together to ensure that (1) all actors involved have the tools to move teaching online and (2) all students, including those vulnerable, have the opportunity to participate in online courses. Among the various initiatives implemented is the creation of WhatsApp groups managed by teachers, to discuss in real time with students' families. The teacher has the obligation to directly monitor the situation of each student, notifying him when problems arise or when the student is absent from online classes. If, following the discussion with the child's relatives, it is found that he is not able to participate in the courses, the teacher has the obligation to prepare a report, which he submits to the competent authority (the competent institution for each situation is explicitly specified in the legislation). For example, in the case of students with SEN, if it is found that he needs a person to physically assist him during the online activity, the teacher notifies this fact to the authorities of the local community, which, based on the notification, have the obligation to intervene by hiring a person to assist the student so that he enjoys the right to education (Deutsche Welle, 2021).
- In the UK, the Ministry of Children and Families has consistently funded the Family Fund, a charity that provides grants to families raising children and young people with disabilities or the seriously ill. The value of the financing exceeded 37.3 million dollars. Based on social surveys conducted by local

authorities, or upon notification by schools, the Fund supports children with SEN in terms of paying the costs of necessary equipment and services, including permanent specialist assistance (Gov.uk, 2021).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the rural environment represents the social framework for manifesting major social and educational problems, with direct negative implications on school success among most students in general, but especially on students with SEN. These problems, which had been highlighted by research conducted well before 2020, were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In such a context, dominated by inequalities and conflicting data, it becomes debatable to what extent ensuring the right to education is compatible with the widespread imposition of e-learning systems. Without disputing in any way their usefulness and reliability, we consider that, before imposing them as a norm, and not as a recommendation, a serious social diagnosis is necessary, based on which to implement educational policies consistent with the realities on the ground, through which to ensure real equality of opportunity for all participants in the training process.

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