

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION - A CONDITION OF A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

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Abstract: *Ensuring equal opportunities in education is a basic principle of any education system, including the Romanian one, fact that is specified in the very fundamental document, which regulates the achievement of education in Romania, the Law of National Education. Looking at the school reality, there arises the question whether this wish remains only an ideal or a reality. Especially in the context of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV 2 virus, the problem of ensuring equal opportunities in education for all students, regardless of their level of education, background, social or financial status, is even more acute etc. The study aims to investigate how all students studying in Romanian schools are ensured equal opportunities, the problem being viewed from the perspective of a special category of subjects, namely students-future teachers, who are during their teacher training program. The investigation we carried out highlighted categories of discriminated students, pointed out possible causes of this situation, outlined viable solutions to reduce these shortcomings.*

Keywords: equality; equity; discrimination; equal opportunities in education.

1. Introduction

Every system of education or learning in any country of the world is based on the idea of free and unlimited, unconditional access to education, of all children and young people, of all citizens of that country. Education in Romania is no exception to this rule. Thus, the Law of National Education (no. 1/2011), which represents the fundamental document that regulates the functioning of the educational system, mentions, in article 3, a series of principles that express, directly or indirectly this idea: a) The principle of fairness, according to which the access to educational opportunities is made without discrimination; g) The principle of the guarantee of cultural identity for all Romanian citizens and intercultural dialogue; i) The principle of the recognition and guarantee of rights to those belonging to national minorities, the right to keep, develop and express their ethnical, cultural, language and religious identity; j) the principle of ensuring equal opportunities; n) The principle of the freedom of thought and independence towards ideologies, religious dogmas and political doctrines; o) the principle of social integration; s) The principle of the organization of confessional education according to the specific requirements of every acknowledged cult.

Although the idea of ensuring equal opportunities in education is legislated, the school reality demonstrates difficulties in applying the law, in compliance with the mentioned principles, it reveals different forms of inequality, discrimination, first of all in accomplishing formal education, but also of its other forms, nonformal and informal. Certain categories of beneficiaries of education are disadvantaged when it comes to access to educational resources, facilities, the provision of quality educational services.

The present study aims to capture the main forms of discrimination, to identify possible causes and to propose, why not?, solutions to reduce the shortcomings caused

by the unequal law enforcement. In order to achieve these objectives, we rely on the experience of a group of students, who are preparing to become teachers, while investigating their opinion on this issue of ensuring equal opportunities in education in Romania.

2. Equality, equity, discrimination

According to the Online Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language, equality is a “principle according to which all people and all states or nations have the same rights and the same duties, provided by the rule of law; in which case people enjoy the same rights and have the same duties” (<https://dexonline.ro/definitie/egalitate>).

The same Online Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language, mentioned above, says that equity is "an ethical and legal principle that underlies the regulation of all social relations in the spirit of fairness, equality and justice, collaboration and mutual respect" (<https://dexonline.ro/definizione/equitate>).

In the field of education, the term equality „refers to differences in educational outcomes between sub-populations, such as the difference in the literacy scores of boys and girls, or students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds” (Willms, Tramonte, Duarte and Bos, 2012: 3).

According to the Praxiological Dictionary of Pedagogy (Bocoş, 2016b: 83), equal opportunities in education “means the will to grant all children equal access and school treatment, regardless of their socioeconomic background, regardless of their physical potential or their intellectual abilities, ethnicity, religion, etc.

Instead, equity “refers to students’ access to school resources and schooling processes that affect educational outcomes”(Willms, Tramonte, Duarte and Bos, 2012: 3).

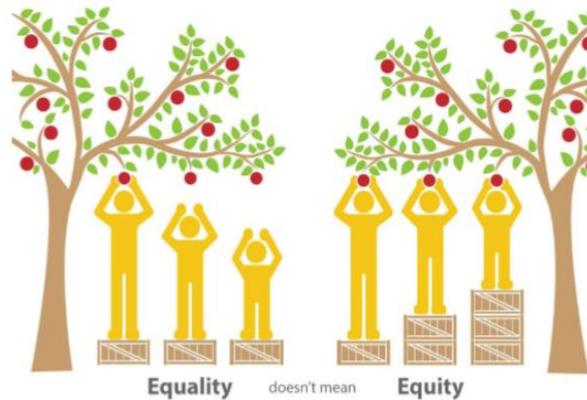
According to an OECD definition, quoted by Thomson, Thomson (2018: 36), “equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)”.

By analyzing comparatively the two terms, equality and equity, Harerimana (2019: 216), quoting Nedha (2011), considers that “Equality can be defined as treating every individual in the same manner irrespective of needs and requirements” and “Equity can be defined as the quality of treating individuals fairly based on their needs and requirements.”

The same author uses two famous images, regarding the difference between the two notions, created by Kuttner in 2015 (figure 1).

Figure 1. Equality and equity in images

Equity vs Equality Images



Source: Kutter, 2015, apud Harerimana, 2019: 216

Regarding the term *discrimination*, closely linked to the concepts of *(in) equality* and *(in) equity*, Dex online mentions one of the meanings as “A policy whereby a state or a category of citizens of a state are deprived of certain rights based on illegitimate considerations” (<https://dexonline.ro/definitie/discriminare>).

The authors of the Praxiological Dictionary of Pedagogy (Bocoş, coord, 2016a, p. 346) define *discrimination* in education as “any difference, exclusion, limitation or preference, which, being based on the criteria of race, color, sex, language, religion or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, aims at destroying or compromising equal treatment in the field of education”.

3. Forms of inequality/ discrimination

Equal opportunities in education imply (Guide for the promotion of equal opportunities in education, 2010: 20):

- Eliminating all forms of discrimination based on ethnic or social origin, gender, disability, age;
- Supporting the social integration of certain categories of people with special needs discriminated on the basis of ethnic or social origin, gender, disability, age;
- Removing stereotypes based on ethnic or social origin, gender, disability, age;
- Guaranteeing the rights of any person to social integration and professional training, regardless of their ethnic or social origin, gender, disability, age;

However, there are still forms of discrimination or inequality of opportunity at the level of educational institutions. We mention some important categories:

- Social
- Cultural
- Ethnic
- Religious
- Of gender
- Determined by deficiencies

Social discrimination is determined by the financial situation of the children's families, by the family belonging to a social class, considered to be of a low level. This usually includes children from low-income families.

In a 2012 study, the OECD (pp. 11-12) proposes several solutions to help disadvantaged schools and students in difficult situations:

1. Strengthen and support school leadership
2. Stimulate a supportive school climate and environment for learning
3. Attract, support and retain high quality teachers
4. Ensure effective classroom learning strategies
5. Prioritise linking schools with parents and communities

Cultural inequality is determined by the situation in which children belonging to cultures other than the majority may be marginalized or excluded, thus, in a word, disadvantaged. The same situation arises in the case of belonging to a certain ethnic or religious community. For example, in Romania, Roma communities or those of national minorities have frequently accused state institutions of not providing equal opportunities for education for children belonging to these communities.

Regarding gender discrimination, it “means that males and females have equal opportunities in terms of economic, social, cultural, and political developments” (Sahin, 2014: 60).

The importance of gender equality is supported by UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 (2016, apud Esteves, 2018: 895):

- Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.
- Providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large.

There is also a form of discrimination that occurs in the case of children with disabilities, who have special educational needs and who need differentiated support.

Johnstone, Shuelka, Swadek (2020), citing Megret (2008), consider the concept of inclusive education to be defined by two essential characteristics: first, “it focuses on plural rights (Mégret, 2008), meaning that the concept of 'all' is held in tension with the acknowledgment that particular populations need specific attention because of the historic exclusion from the benefits of universal rights ”(p. 99), and, secondly, “inclusive education is characterized by a focus on systemic barriers that deny opportunities for presence, participation, and achievement in schools ”(p. 99).

Heick (2018, apud Thomson, Thomson, 2018: 40-42) mentions 29 characteristics of a school that ensure equal and equitable opportunities for education for its students (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of a good school
Heick Characteristics of a Good School

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1	A good school can adapt quickly to human needs and technology change.
2	A good school produces students that not only read and write but choose to.
3	A good school sees itself.

4	A good school has diverse and compelling measures of success—measures that families and communities understand and value.
5	A good school is full of students that don't just understand "much," but rather know what's worth understanding.
6	A good school knows it can't do it all, so seeks to do what's necessary exceptionally well.
7	A good school improves other schools and cultural organizations it's connected with.
8	A good school is always on and never closed. (It is not a factory.)
9	A good school makes certain that every single student and family feels welcome and understood on equal terms.
10	A good school is full of students that not only ask great questions but do so with great frequency and ferocity.
11	A good school changes students; students change great schools.
12	A good school understands the difference between broken thinking and broken implementation.
13	A good school speaks the language of its students.
14	A good school doesn't make empty promises, create noble-but-misleading mission statements, or mislead parents and community-members with edujargon. It is authentic and transparent.
15	A good school values its teachers and administrators and parents as agents of student success.
16	A good school favors personalized learning over differentiated learning.
17	A good school teaches thought, not content.
18	A good school makes technology, curriculum, policies, and its other "pieces" invisible. (Ever go to a ballet and see focus on individual movements?)
19	A good school is disruptive of bad cultural practices. These include intolerance based on race, income, faith, and sexual preference, aliteracy, and apathy toward the environment.
20	A good school produces students that know themselves in their own context, one that they know and choose. This includes culture, community, language, and profession.
21	A good school produces students that have personal and specific hope for the future that they can articulate and believe in and share with others.
22	A good school produces students that can empathize, critique, protect, love, inspire, make, design, restore, and understand almost anything—and then do so as a matter of habit.
23	A good school will erode the societal tendency towards greed, consumerism, and hoarding of resources we all need.
24	A good school is more concerned with cultural practices than pedagogical practices—students and families than other schools or the educational status quo.
25	A good school helps student separate trivial knowledge from vocational knowledge from academic knowledge from applied knowledge from knowledges-wisdom.
26	A good school will experience disruption in its own patterns and practices and values because its students are creative, empowered, and connected, and cause unpredictable change themselves.
27	A good school will produce students that can think critically—about issues of human interest, curiosity, artistry, craft, legacy, husbandry, agriculture, and more—and then take action.
28	A good school will help students see themselves in terms of their historical framing, familial legacy, social context, and global connectivity.
29	A good school will improve the community it is embedded within and serves.

Source: Heick, 2018, apud Thomson and Thomson, 2018: 40-42

It is obvious that between these forms of inequality/ inequity in education there are minglings, extrapolations. Thus, an inequality determined by belonging to a minority religion or an ethnic category can also determine cultural inequality.

4. Research design

In the present study, we aimed to investigate the issue of equal opportunities at the level of the Romanian education system, from the perspective of the types of forms of discrimination that are most frequently encountered. The population we acted on was made up of students in the process of training as future teachers, who would work in an education system and who would help reduce any form of discrimination against the students.

The **objectives** pursued were:

- Identifying the main categories of discrimination in the Romanian education, depending on the frequency of their manifestation
- Knowing the students' opinion on the etiology of discrimination in education
- Elaborating a list of proposals to reduce discrimination in Romanian schools

The essential question of our investigation was the following: What are the most common forms of discrimination in Romanian schools? And it led to the formulation of a fundamental hypothesis, which guided the entire approach of our research:

Hypothesis: Are there solutions to reduce the forms of discrimination that are most frequently found in the Romanian education system?

The research method used was the focus-group interview, in which 22 subjects participated.

The tool used was an interview guide that included 7 questions that wanted to cover the issue of the main existing forms of discrimination, arguments and possible causes, possible solutions or possible forms of positive discrimination, present in schools in Romania.

The interview was conducted online, through digital platforms, on Google Meet and lasted 1 hour.

The sample of subjects consisted, as mentioned above, of 22 students in the process of training to become teachers. The sample was heterogeneous, in terms of age categories, place of residence (rural-urban), sex (M/ F) or the quality of being a teacher or not. Thus, in terms of the age of the subjects, it is between 22 years (18.8%) and 47 years (1%). Most subjects (37.5%) said they were 23 years old. All participants in the interview were female, the majority (75%) residing in urban areas. Also, 40.6% declared their quality of being a teacher.

5. Results and discussions

The answers provided by the participants in the focus group conducted on the Google Meet platform confirmed the hypothesis of our research. We are presenting, below, a synthesis of the subjects' opinion, regarding the equal opportunities in the Romanian education system, trying, at the same time, a grouping of their answers by categories.

Thus, to question no. 1, regarding the existence of discriminated categories of students in Romania, the subjects answered almost unanimously in the affirmative

(94%). Half of the students participating in the interview mentioned, as a form of discrimination, ethnic discrimination, more than a third referred to the category of children with disabilities, and over 15% mentioned social discrimination. In the opinion of the subjects, gender and cultural discrimination are not found in the Romanian education system.

The subjects argued their choice, mentioning arguments such as:

- discrimination is generated by behavioral and attitudinal differences;
- students are influenced by the social and/ or financial status of the family they belong to in order to communicate with each other, to make friends or, especially, to be treated with due respect (for social discrimination);
- social discrimination is most common in schools because children value financial status, therefore, focus on material or superficial things;
- not all students have the financial resources to learn in a good school, even if it is in the state and is free;
- students with certain deficiencies/ disabilities (especially cognitive) are often labeled as not only different (as students of other ethnicities/ nationalities or as those who come from a social environment full of shortcomings);
- the discriminatory attitude towards some categories of students is also caused by the teachers, their lack of experience, insufficient involvement, etc;
- the refusal, both of some teachers and of the students, to accept that students with disabilities study in public schools.

Regarding the possible causes, which determine a certain form of discrimination, the students mentioned:

- ignorance of the culture and traditions of the minority group;
- the tendency to generalize, to label according to the actions of some individuals not representative of the minority group;
- lack of education for those who discriminate;
- verbal and physical violence, but also the label set by the society;
- the negative image based on stereotypes, promoted from an early age in the family, but also by the media regarding people of a certain ethnicity;
- lack of desire of children belonging to an ethnic group to get involved in teaching activities, to integrate into the community and to demonstrate their qualities and talents;
- lack of promotion by teachers of tolerance, ethnic diversity and the traditions and customs of the students belonging to certain ethnic groups;
- fear of not being marginalized if they have such people in their circle of friends, who belong to disadvantaged categories;
- overcrowded classes make it difficult/ impossible to respect diversity;
- lack/ insufficiency of specialization courses for teachers;
- schools do not have the necessary infrastructure for certain categories of children with disabilities.

The participants in the interview believe that there are solutions to reduce/ eliminate these forms of discrimination. We have made a selection of the identified solutions:

- teachers should encourage the participation of children with disabilities or other disabilities, make them come to school;
- meetings/ events organized in schools where people of different ethnicities, known and appreciated in the Romanian society, could speak to students;
- organizing comforting activities with the whole class of students, to eliminate social differences;
- integrating ethnic students in various cultural programs to demonstrate the contrary prejudices;
- programs to raise community awareness of minority group issues;
- the solution could be imposed by the parents on the children through an open mentality without making any difference regardless of the social status or skin color;
- involvement of the community and local leaders in supporting the students belonging to ethnic groups, changing the attitude of the parents towards the school;
- support to increase literacy (for children belonging to certain ethnic groups).

The last question of the interview sought to know the opinion of the subjects on the existence of some forms of positive discrimination. The students listed some situations which they consider to be about positive discrimination: between the students who perform and the other classmates; special places allocated to the pupils/ students belonging to certain ethnic groups (for example, for Roma children); gender discrimination (for example, in a class made up mostly of girls, boys in small numbers are favored).

All the aspects presented confirm the idea according to which, although there are several forms of discrimination in Romanian schools, solutions can be identified to reduce them.

6. Conclusions

Any education system aims to ensure unrestricted access to the resources provided, but sometimes this goal remains only a projection. Equal opportunities refers to granting equal opportunities to all categories of students. Equity, on the other hand, seeks to provide support, assistance, access, depending on the needs, necessities and possibilities of each one.

The study aimed to investigate the representations of students who are preparing to become teachers on equality and equity in the Romanian education system, on existing cases and situations of discrimination. The answers given by the students to the interview conducted in the online version highlighted some forms of discrimination, which have a higher frequency in school. Thus, ethnic and social discrimination have a higher incidence. The category of children with disabilities is also considered a discriminated category in the Romanian school. The students identified both the causes underlying these forms, but also proposed solutions to reduce their effects. The school outlined by the students' opinions should be one in which each student finds his place, regardless of his/ her social, ethnic, religious status, needs and possibilities.

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