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EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION OF PUPILS FROM DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

In this paper we aim to conduct a study on the implementation of educational projects and institutional partnership programs in Călărași County in order to reduce and prevent school dropout. Research objectives were the analysis of the effectiveness of educational projects and institutional partnership programs for the reduction and prevention of school dropout, at the level of Călărași county and reducing the percentage of school dropouts in educational units, from disadvantaged areas of Călărași County, involved in the institutional partnership projects and programs.

Key words: *social equity; educational system; educational inclusion;*

INTRODUCTION

I. ASPECTS OF SOCIAL POLICIES REGARDING VULNERABLE GROUPS IN ROMANIA

The term vulnerable group is used in legislative documents or research reports as similar to disadvantaged, marginalized, excluded or risk group. Vulnerable groups are underserved groups, often in chronic poverty, unable to take advantage of opportunities or defend themselves against inherent problems. Examples of this are the disabled, abandoned children, people infected with the HIV virus, the elderly, ethnic minorities, single-parent families, etc.

If we look at access to education from the point of view of equal opportunities, according to which any person is free to make choices, but also to

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develop his personal capacities, we can affirm the necessity of each person's participation in social life, without making distinctions related to ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, etc.

Romania, as a member country of the European Union, must promote fundamental rights, non-discrimination and equal opportunities for all.¹

With regard to access to education in the school environment, teachers have a fundamental role, namely they must identify means to prevent and eliminate discriminatory attitudes, encourage tolerance and provide equal opportunities for education for all students, from disadvantaged backgrounds and not only. In today's society, equality is being discussed and desired more and more, valuing diversity. Practically starting from the fact that society is made up of various segments, coming from environments more or less disadvantaged by society, there is the need to ensure six equals. Likewise, we must not neglect aspects related to equity, especially within the instructive-educational process.

To ensure equal opportunities, it is necessary to create the right context, so that those from disadvantaged groups can also benefit, perhaps not immediately, but gradually, from the same starting conditions within the inevitable competition between individuals.

We can include in the category of underprivileged children those children who live in rural, isolated or remote areas, who can only get to school if they have school minibuses intended for the transport of students, as well as Roma children, whom the collectives in the student classes still accept hard; also, children orphaned by one or both parents are part of this category.

We can identify three large groups of vulnerable categories in the educational environment, namely: students of Roma ethnicity, students with special educational requirements, students from rural areas, where we can identify vulnerable subcategories. The equalization of opportunities for all children, with the aim of achieving the educational ideal, can only be achieved if we start from ensuring equal access to the curriculum, to numerous educational materials, but also through the appropriate use of instructional strategies properly correlated with learning activities. It is a reality that currently, the Romanian school faces such problems. The important thing is to identify them and find solutions, consciously.

- *Students of Roma ethnicity*

Romania has a relatively high percentage of young Roma, which makes access to education an even more urgent need. Even if there are no exact official data, relevant information about the Roma population and aspects related to its level of education have been collected through some studies. The number of Roma enrolling in school has continuously increased, but the access of Roma

¹ The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union declared 2007 the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All.

children to pre-school education is still very low, even though it is known and promoted that kindergarten is of major importance in school success. In the educational environment and beyond, efforts are being made to eliminate inequities, especially for Roma children or those from rural areas, coming from vulnerable backgrounds. However, there is an impediment in achieving fair access to education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, namely the fact that a rather low percentage is allocated for education.

If we refer to the dropout rate in compulsory education, it is quite high for Roma children², according to the latest studies.

We can identify several reasons why the percentage of enrollment in preschool education is low and the school dropout rate is high, as far as Roma children are concerned, such as:

- There are Roma communities, in isolated areas, with difficult access to school;
- In areas with a high concentration of Roma, economic development is low;
- It is known that there are many Roma children who are used as labor force;
- Roma families have very low confidence in the education system;
- There is a fairly large number of unqualified teaching staff working in schools in Roma communities;
- Roma children encounter linguistic, but also traditional, difficulties in school;
- There are still discriminatory mentalities of the non-Roma population towards the Roma;
- The low level of enrollment of Roma children in preschool education, which has consequences for entering primary education and increasing the school dropout rate.

Belonging to the Roma ethnicity, along with poverty and rural residence, often correlates with low educational performance, poor participation in education, all of which lead to school dropout. According to a UNDP report on education, the Roma population is the most disadvantaged social category in Europe (Bruggemann, 2012). This situation is also specific for the Romanian space, the Roma being one of the most disadvantaged social categories within the educational system.

- *Students with special educational needs*

Special education³, subordinated to the Ministry of Education, is one of the components of the Romanian education system; it offers children, according to

² About 12 to 20% of Roma children drop out of school.

³ Special education is organized according to the type of deficiency – mental, hearing, sight, motor and other related deficiencies.

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their needs, suitable educational programs. All employees of an educational unit must take special education into consideration and responsibility. The results come from the teamwork of teaching and non-teaching staff, from special education. Romania, as a member country of the European Union, offers access to education for children with disabilities; children have access to certain forms of education, in relation to the degree and type of deficiency; depending on these aspects, they can be enrolled in mainstream education or in special education. Children with medium disabilities can adapt to the educational process in mainstream schools, but it would be ideal to have support services, from an educational point of view.

The organization of special education is carried out according to the type of disability. The Commission for Child Protection, subordinate to the County Council, is the one that has the competence to identify the type of deficiency and its degree. Children in special education can follow the curriculum of mainstream schools, but adapted, or they can follow an adapted curriculum, specific to the special school; but if we refer to the duration, the schooling period, it may differ⁴. Children's access to rehabilitation and recovery resources is ensured, from a medical, psychological and social point of view, throughout their schooling; access is also ensured to other types of support services within the community or in collaboration with other specialized institutions. Special education is organized at all levels of pre-university education, starting with preschool, primary, secondary and lower secondary levels, but also educational centers, such as day care centers, etc.

The legal framework in the field of special education in Romania is in accordance with international legislation in relation to the education of children with special educational requirements, with which our country also agreed after signing some documents.⁵ If we talk about SEN, we are primarily referring to the educational needs, which complement the general objectives of education, regarding schooling according to individual characteristics or according to the child's deficiencies, respectively learning disorders; at the same time, SEN it is necessary to ensure the appropriate means, with the aim of appropriate recovery; we cannot talk about equity, equal opportunities regarding access to education, if certain children are not given educational attention and additional assistance.

II. THE SCHOOL IN THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT IN ROMANIA

In rural communities in Romania, we can start from the premise that Romanian villages can be microsystems dedicated to participation in lifelong

⁴ For example, for children with severe mental deficiencies, the duration of schooling in primary and secondary education can be 9-10 years, which means that it is 1-2 years more than the 8 years spent in mainstream education.

⁵ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; The Salamanca Declaration; The standard rules regarding special education; The World Declaration on Education for All.

learning, due to the fact that there is a high degree of cohesion between citizens. In order for this to become possible, it is necessary to coordinate the financial resources and, more than that, the human resources that Romanian villages need. Teachers must be encouraged to become vectors of change in these communities, true agents of change, and local public authorities to support these efforts, education to become a priority.

However, the most serious problems identified in the rural environment are early school leaving and functional illiteracy.

These situations are usually correlated and occur as a consequence of one another; that is why there are statistics that lead us to make this association, between school dropout and functional illiteracy, since one of the age groups that have not completed more than 8 classes are young people between 18-24 years old, and another age group is represented by those who are 15 years old, although most of them have already entered high school, so they have passed the stage at which dropout is measured; in addition, there is a higher probability that those who dropped out of education early are also functionally illiterate, than those who continue in high school education.

An increased school dropout rate is registered at the secondary education level, among children from rural areas. A number of reasons can be identified that lead to a high percentage of school dropouts, especially if we refer to children from isolated rural communities; among these could be: poverty, lack of means of transport, low motivation regarding financial gain, as a result of education, lack of qualified teaching staff in rural areas, a fact that leads to a relatively poor quality of education in rural areas.

III. EDUCATIONAL POLICIES REGARDING CHILDREN FROM VULNERABLE CATEGORIES

Ensuring equal opportunities regarding access to education, education for all children, represents an essential and defining requirement of the education process, closely related to the requirements of today's society. Educational policies, international and national, must contain solutions to ensure the future of education and implicitly of society.

In the vision of the educational policy of the Ministry of Education, any child can have the right to education; The Ministry of Education develops projects/programs regarding the education of these categories of children⁶. Therefore, the Government and all decentralized local authorities are forced to ensure all the conditions that can be imposed for the education of any child. Thus, any innovation in the field of education must also be centered on children with disabilities, respectively on children who cannot have access to education.

⁶ Such are the programs "Second chance", "Access to education of disadvantaged groups", "Together, in the same school", the National Strategy of "Community Action".

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Models of social integration can be created, through contents, strategies and teaching methods within the education system. Certainly the social environment, more specifically the family, the group of friends, social interactions, have a very important role, but still education remains the decisive role in ensuring equal opportunities.

We can affirm the fact that most of the responsibility for complying with these principles rests with school institutions, but they do not have the necessary administrative and financial preparation, nor qualified personnel in the field of inclusive education.

From a theoretical point of view, it has been found that equal opportunities are sufficiently ensured in the educational process, in most countries of the world, but the implementation of this particularly important aspect continues to remain one of the causes of the current reforms. In the current context, the concept of "equality" has a much broader meaning than equal rights for all citizens, but it represents a real equality of changes regarding social promotion, and the most appropriate tool is education.

We can list some of the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, in the field of respecting equal opportunities: it has the obligation to ensure the training and information of all teaching staff, from all forms of education, on the subject of equal opportunities; through the county school inspectorates, must ensure the correct application of the education plans and other curricular tools, as well as in the current activity of the educational units, of the measures to implement the principle of equal opportunities.⁷

If we talk about the inclusive school, it is known that it is based on the type of curriculum suitable in relation to the needs of the children, based on certain contents of the general curriculum, which can be adapted to the level of children with special requirements; also, the inclusive school uses methods, didactic techniques, intuitive teaching aids to adapt the curriculum within it.

At the European and national level, there is legislation on equal opportunities, namely: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention; UNESCO Convention on the fight against discrimination in the field of education (1960); Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000); Council Directive 2000/78/EC; The Romanian Constitution; Law 202/2002; Government Ordinance no. 137/2000 on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination⁸; Law no. 48/2002 for the approval of Government Ordinance no. 137/2000 on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination; Government Decision no. 1194/2001 regarding the organization and operation of the National Council for Combating Discrimination; Notification no. 29323/2004 regarding the

⁷ <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/38614298.pdf>

⁸ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011H0701\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011H0701(01))

promotion of inclusive school principles, as an intercultural school, open to all, where every child benefits from equal access to a quality education and the National Education Law no. 1 of Jan. 2011, art. 2 (4)⁹, Law on pre-university education 198/2023.

The educational policy at the level of the Ministry of Education is centered on the reorganization and modernization of the special education area, based on achieving the goal of educational and social integration of children with special needs, and the purpose being their adaptation in society. In order to achieve this goal, a series of action directions have been identified, among which the schooling of children from the beginning in a school belonging to mainstream education, with qualified and dedicated support services¹⁰. The Ministry of Education, in partnership with the county school inspectorates and educational units, have also carried out many programs and projects in this direction.

IV. EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

The study of the implementation of educational projects and institutional partnership programs, at the level of Călărași County, with the purpose of reducing and preventing school dropouts

4.1. Research objectives:

- Analysis of the effectiveness of educational projects and institutional partnership programs for the reduction and prevention of school dropout, at the level of Călărași county.

- Reducing the percentage of school dropouts in educational units, from disadvantaged areas of Călărași County, involved in the institutional partnership projects and programs.

4.2. Research hypothesis:

"The students' completion of the activities within the institutional partnerships¹¹, based on a psycho-social-educational intervention plan, will lead to a decrease in the school dropout rate in disadvantaged communities in Călărași County."

At the level of Călărași County, a series of educational partnerships and projects were carried out, with the aim of ensuring equal opportunities regarding

⁹ The state ensures Romanian citizens equal rights of access to all levels and forms of pre-university and higher education, as well as lifelong learning, without any form of discrimination.

¹⁰ Recent changes concern the creation of support services for children in difficulty. The expectations, in terms of increasing the quality of education for these children, will include the training of teachers from mainstream education in the field of education for children with special needs and inclusive education, educational psycho-pedagogical and specialized support services, home schooling, schooling with reduced frequency and specialized services for speech therapy and psycho-pedagogical counseling.

¹¹ Institutional partnerships have a very important role in terms of identifying problems that can lead to school dropout, situations of ensuring equity and equal opportunities in the school environment.

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acSENs to education and reducing the school dropout rate; I personally initiated and coordinated many of these.

The activities carried out in the framework of these projects and partnerships aimed to increase the motivation of students for learning, with the aim of preventing and reducing the school dropout rate. The partnerships started from the premise that a student who gets involved in his education will certainly be a motivated student and will continue or complete his studies.

There are many disadvantaged communities in Călărași County. I've been able to get involved in projects, programs and partnerships in just about every such community. At the level of the municipalities, Călărași and Oltenița, we have also coordinated and implemented such projects, we have initiated partnerships with the main connecting institutions, such as educational units with the Special School, DGASPC, Associations and NGOs, local authorities, etc.

4.3. The experimental batch

In the present research, we referred to the projects and institutional partnerships between the "Ștefan Bănulescu" Pedagogical High School in Călărași and the Special School in Călărași, with Associations, respectively NGOs, but also with educational units from the rural environment (the "Iancu Rosetti" from Roșeți, the Secondary School from Dragoș-Vodă, the Secondary School from Unirea), the Day Center for school and preschool children from Dragoș-Vodă, Călărași county (can be found in the annexes), thus targeting all categories of vulnerable children.

4.4. Educational projects and programs

Educational projects and programs, institutional partnerships, volunteer activities, for vulnerable groups (from isolated areas, very poor children, abandoned and/or children in the protection system, children with disabilities and/or SEN, children with parents who have gone abroad, children of immigrants, etc.) at the level of Călărași county.

4.5. Research results

a) The analysis of the achievement of the objectives proposed within the partnership was carried out by means of a questionnaire, applied to a sample of 5 teaching staff (2 from the Pedagogical High School and 3 from the Special School) and 10 practicing students from the Pedagogical High School. To the question "Argue if such a Partnership is necessary", all 15 subjects said that it would be very useful, especially in the context of ensuring equal opportunities regarding access to education.

b) The PEST analysis is a tool that focuses mainly on the political, economic, social and technological aspects - sometimes also on the ecological ones. (Niculiță Lidia, 2009)¹²

¹² Hence the name PEST(E) analysis

Aspect	Comments
Political	From a political-strategic point of view, the partnership responds to the educational policies of the EU.
Economic	The Ministry of Education is relieved of the financial support of this program, it being carried out in partnership with local communities.
Social	The partnership strengthens relations in the community, supports students from disadvantaged backgrounds from an educational and occupational point of view.
Technological	The educational units within the partnership, in collaboration with the local community, ensure the spaces and facilities necessary to carry out the activities in the program
Ecological	The same human and material resources from the school program are used, and through the activities carried out, ecological education is developed and strengthened, taking into account the period in which the partnership is carried out.

Table 1. PEST analysis of the implementation of the Partnership

c) The SWOT analysis highlights the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the partnership.

Internal aspects	External aspects
<p>Strong points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - it is a form of education and culture - welds school-family, student-student and teacher-student relationships - uses material and human resources economically and ecologically - the activities are optional, not required - supports the community and is supported by the community 	<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adaptation to EU educational policies - increasing the visibility and attractiveness of the school in the local community - attracting financial resources from national and European funds - development of individual skills and talents
<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the use of technological resources at an accelerated rate -lack of funding, economic agents being legally unmotivated to support educational programs 	<p>Threat</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - program termination due to lack of funding or space - lack of motivation on the part of teaching staff; - lack of motivation from the parents

Table 2. The SWOT analysis

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Comparative study of school dropout rate

In relation to the second objective of the research, a comparative study of the percentage of school dropouts for students enrolled in educational units from underprivileged environments, where the activities of educational projects and institutional partnerships were carried out, was carried out.

County	Initial dropout rate (sept.2021)	The subsequent dropout rate (sept.2022)
Roseți	4%	3,2%
Dragoș-Vodă	3,6%	2,9%
Unirea	3%	2,1%
Sohatu	4,8%	3,9%

Tabel 3. Initial and subsequent dropout rate

Interpretation of the results and validation of the hypothesis

It is known that the evaluation process is a complex one, from a didactic and psycho-pedagogical point of view, and it must be integrated from a functional point of view, but also structurally, in the instructive-educational process; later, the child is known and his progress is followed in relation to himself¹³.

Following the research applied to the experimental group and the interpretation of the recorded data, we came to the conclusion that the educational projects and the institutional partnership programs implemented between the "Ștefan Bănuțescu" Pedagogical High School in Călărași and other school institutions in Călărași county, are very useful and can lead to the reduction, namely the prevention of school dropout, but also the provision of equal access to education for all children, regardless of the environment they come from, their type of disability or their ethnicity.

CONCLUSION

There are a lot of factors that lead to school dropout, but most of them are of a social nature, such as poverty, social vulnerability, limited education, but also individual factors, such as: difficulties in mastering the subject, lack of self-esteem self and low motivation, etc. Among the causes related to the characteristics of the students, who may be in a situation of dropping out of school, are: health, lack of motivation for school activities, learning difficulties, high absenteeism.

It has been shown to be a beneficial collaboration between the school, social assistance and other public services with attributions in the field of child protection, including through specialized projects and commissions, such as the

¹³ <https://www.mecc.gov.md>

Council for Child Protection. However, there are not enough resources to carry out more educational and social activities with children, with the aim of preventing school dropout and ensuring access to education for all children.

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