

ACCESS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS TO EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS: REALITIES AND DIRECTIONS FOR INTERVENTION

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Abstract: *The paper analyzes the access of children with special educational needs (SEN) to education in Romania's rural areas, highlighting the main difficulties and directions for intervention aimed at increasing school inclusion. Starting from the principle of equal opportunities enshrined in national and international legislation, the research emphasizes the existence of significant disparities between urban and rural areas regarding educational infrastructure, human resources, and available support services. The methodology combined documentary analysis, interpretation of official statistical data, and the application of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with teachers from rural schools. The findings indicate that although teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are generally positive, the shortage of support teachers, the absence of school counselors, and insufficient equipment represent major barriers to the integration of children with SEN. The paper proposes several directions for intervention, such as expanding the network of educational support services, continuous professional development for teachers in rural areas, equipping schools with adapted materials, and encouraging local partnerships between schools, families, and communities. The main conclusion underlines the need to strengthen inclusive education policies so that the rural environment becomes an equitable and accessible educational space for all children, regardless of their special needs.*

Keywords: *inclusive education; special educational needs; rural environment; school integration.*

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the fundamental pillars of human and social development, and the right to education must be guaranteed to all children, regardless of their background or individual characteristics. The importance of inclusive education for the social and educational development of rural areas lies in its ability to ensure equal opportunities, reduce social exclusion and support the integration of children with special educational needs into local communities [3]. By promoting inclusive education, rural schools become an essential factor of social cohesion, contributing to reducing educational inequalities between rural and urban areas and increasing school participation. At the same time, inclusive education stimulates the development of students' social, civic and emotional skills, fostering the formation of human capital adapted to the requirements of a modern and equitable society. In this context, children with special educational needs (SEN) constitute a vulnerable group that requires educational, psychological and social support adapted to their needs [1].

The importance of inclusive education for the social and educational development of rural areas lies in its ability to ensure equal opportunities, reduce social exclusion and support the integration of children with special educational needs into local communities [12, 13, 14].

In Romania, the implementation of inclusive education principles has intensified in the last decade, in accordance with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the National Education Law no. 1/2011, which enshrines the principle of equal opportunities in education [9, 10].

In Romania, disparities exist between urban and rural areas that manifest themselves on multiple levels – economic, social and educational – reflecting significant differences in terms of access to public services, infrastructure, educational services, living standards and development opportunities [7,15, 16]. Rural areas are generally characterized by a lower level of investment in infrastructure, a limited offer of educational and social services, as well as reduced access to specialized human resources. In contrast, urban areas benefit from a higher concentration of educational institutions, qualified personnel and support services, which leads to a higher quality of the educational act and higher chances of social integration. However, disparities between urban and rural areas remain significant, especially in terms of infrastructure, human resources and access to support services [2,4,5].

The rural environment faces multiple challenges: shortage of support teachers, absence of school counselors, lack of psychopedagogical specialists and difficulties in social integration. For these reasons, the analysis of access of children with SEN to education in rural areas becomes essential for identifying directions of intervention that can lead to an equitable and inclusive education.

The purpose of this research is to assess the degree of inclusion of children with special educational needs in the Romanian rural area, to identify the main barriers to access to education and to formulate concrete recommendations for improving the situation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper is based on descriptive and comparative research, with a predominantly qualitative character, complemented by quantitative analyses of existing statistical data.

The objectives of the research are:

- analyzing the distribution of children with SEN between rural and urban areas.
- identifying the main difficulties in accessing education in rural areas.
- evaluating the educational resources available to support students with SEN.
- formulating proposals for increasing school inclusion in rural areas.

Methods and tools used

- Documentary analysis – was carried out based on data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, the Ministry of Education, UNICEF Romania and Eurostat, which provide an overview of the situation of children with SEN in the Romanian educational system [7, 10,11, 14].

- Questionnaire and semi-structured interview – applied to a sample of 50 teachers from rural areas (from Timiș, Caraș-Severin and Hunedoara counties), to identify perceptions on the integration of children with SEN.

- The questionnaire applied to teachers consisted of 15 items, structured on three main dimensions:

- perception of the level of inclusion of children with SEN in rural schools;
- educational resources and support services available;
- difficulties and needs identified in the school integration process.

Most of the items were formulated as closed questions, using a 5-point Likert scale (from "to a very small extent" to "to a very large extent"), complemented by open questions that allowed the collection of relevant qualitative data.

- Comparative analysis – between rural and urban areas in terms of educational resources and support infrastructure.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The paper aims to analyze the degree of school integration of children with special educational needs in rural areas and identify the factors that favor or limit their access to quality education. Statistical data available in Romania show that the absolute number of children with special educational needs (SEN) is higher in urban areas, but their share compared to the total number of children in the school population is higher in rural areas.

The general situation of children with SEN. Data provided by the Ministry of Education (2023) show that in Romania there were approximately 75,000 students with special educational needs, of which approximately 30,000 (40%) live in rural areas, but over 52,500 (70%) of them attend educational units in urban areas. This fact highlights the deficit of adapted school units in rural areas and the tendency of families to enroll their children in urban schools [10].

Educational infrastructure and resources. In order to find out the answers of the teachers surveyed in order to identify the perception on the integration of children with SEN, a semi-structured questionnaire and interview were applied – on a sample of 50 teachers from rural areas (from Timiș, Caraș-Severin and Hunedoara counties). Thus, the following results were obtained:

- only 28% of rural schools have a support teacher;
- 17% benefit from a school counselor or speech therapist;
- over 60% of respondents consider that the equipment and teaching materials for working with SEN students are insufficient or non-existent.

These data confirm that the rural educational infrastructure is not adapted to the requirements of inclusive education, and the lack of specialized human resources accentuates inequalities.

Qualitative results show that most teachers in rural areas are willing to integrate children with SEN, but they face a lack of professional training and institutional support.

Also, in some communities, reticence persists on the part of parents of other students, which limits the inclusion process.

Urban-rural disparities. Compared to urban areas, where there is a network of special schools, resource centers and support services, rural areas remain deficient at all levels:

- adapted educational infrastructure;
- qualified support staff;
- partnerships between school, family and community.

In rural areas:

- limited access to early diagnosis services;
- lower level of parent training and difficulties in integration into mainstream schools;
- lack of support staff and specialists (speech therapists, psychopedagogues, counselors).

In urban areas:

- more specialized institutions (school centers for SEN);
- more officially identified cases due to more frequent diagnosis.

Table 1.

Indicators for comparative analysis

Indicator	Rural environment	Urban environment
Number of SEN children / 1000 students	35	25
Proportion of units with support teacher	22%	78%
Access to school counselor / educational psychologist	15%	80%
Participation rate in extracurricular activities	40%	70%

Source: own processing after [6, 7, 10, 14].

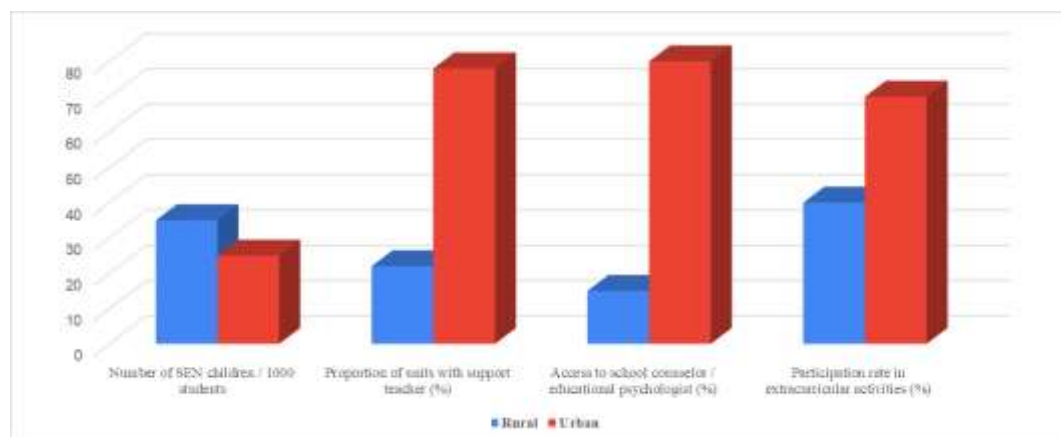


Figure 1. Comparison of indicators regarding access of children with SEN to education in rural and urban areas

These differences result in an increased risk of school dropout and lower educational performance for students with SEN in rural areas. In absolute terms, most children with special needs are registered in urban areas, due to the existing educational infrastructure and services. In relative terms (percentage), rural areas have a higher incidence of children with special needs compared to total students, reflecting social vulnerability and lack of support services.

Also, in a constantly changing society, where digital technology is constantly redefining the way we communicate, learn and interact, the school has the responsibility to adapt to meet the needs of each student. Educational inclusion can no longer be conceived without the conscious and effective integration of digital tools in the teaching-learning-assessment process (which must also be present in rural areas).

Thus, digital technology can offer students the opportunity to learn and practice skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and creativity. At the same time, they can develop their digital skills so necessary in everyday life. In the classroom, students can experience new situations that they would not normally have the opportunity to access (especially those in rural areas): visiting historical monuments, remote geographical places or museums, simulating scientific experiments and exploring virtual worlds.

CONCLUSIONS

The research confirms the initial hypothesis that access to education for children with special educational needs is lower in rural areas. The disparities between rural and urban areas are not only due to the lack of material resources, but also to the shortage of specialized personnel, the lack of continuous training of teachers and poor community involvement.

To reduce these inequalities, the following areas of intervention are required:

- Expanding the network of educational support services (speech therapy centers, counselors, itinerant teachers).
- Continuous training of teachers in rural areas in the field of inclusive education.
- Equipping school units with adapted materials and assistive technologies.
- Creating partnerships between schools, local authorities and NGOs to support vulnerable families.
- Awareness campaigns in the community to combat prejudice and encourage acceptance of diversity.

The implementation of these measures can contribute to reducing educational gaps and strengthening the principle of equal opportunities, transforming the rural environment into a more equitable and inclusive educational space.

To reduce these inequalities, a series of measures are required that can contribute to reducing educational gaps and strengthening the principle of equal opportunities, transforming the rural environment into a more equitable and inclusive educational space for these children.

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