

Services for Young Children with Disabilities in Romania in the Post-Communist Era

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Abstract

In this paper, we will discuss the historical impact of communism on services for children with disabilities in Romania and the efforts made to support young children with disabilities and their families in the post-communist era. The results of the qualitative study focus on attitudes and beliefs of current special education teachers in Romania, and linkages with DEC Recommended practices when envisioning a brighter future for young children with disabilities in Romania.

Historical Context

From 1947 until 1989, Romania was under the Communist Regime. During this time, most children with disabilities were institutionalized or lived at home with limited or no education or professional assistance. Over the past twenty years, great strides have been made in Romania to improve educational services for children with disabilities, however, like in many developing countries, services for young children with disabilities have lagged behind those for older and typically developing children. The Romanian special education policies and practices have begun to evolve towards inclusion and integration in general education classrooms. However, there are still a series of challenges that impede the implementation of high quality special education services for young children with disabilities.

Located in the southeastern part of Europe, Romania has an area of 92,043 square miles, slightly larger than the state of Minnesota. With a population of about 20 million people, Romania is one of the most densely populated countries in East Central Europe. Approximately 31% of the population are under the age of 5 (CIA, 2018). According to Kitchen (2017), out of the total number of people with disabilities (i.e., 784,527), about 12% are children ages 0-4, and 18.9% are children ages 5-9.

During the 41-year Communist Rule, Romanians were forced to follow all Communist rules, enroll in the communist party, and praise the president without question (Marga, 2002). People with disabilities were not included in society. Thus, most people with disabilities were placed in institutions or stayed home without any appropriate medical and/or educational supports. The transition from the Communist Regime after 1989 has had a positive impact on children with disabilities and their families. Teachers' practices and perceptions of working with children with disabilities has improved over the years, but there are still some cultural, economic, and political influences that can negatively impact services and supports for these children and their families (Ives & Howell, 2011).

After the fall of the Communist Regime in 1989, Romania and the educational system entered an era of drastic improvements. Essentially, the goal for the country was to become modernized and

follow the principles of developed countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Ives, Runceanu, & Cheney, 2007). Inclusion and best teaching practices in special education became a priority for schools, policy makers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Nevertheless, although progress has occurred, Romania has been slower to adopt and implement new policies to support students with disabilities than other European countries (Walker, 2010). Some of the newly implemented policies were related to the terminology used in special education. According to Nica (2005), “Inclusive education means an ongoing process of upgrading the school institution, with the aim of exploiting (valuing) the existing resources, particularly human resources, in order to support the participation in learning of all pupils from inside a community” (p. 4). Furthermore, special education has become part of the national education system and is comprised of schools that serve students across all age levels (Ives, et al. 2007).

In Romania, students with disabilities can attend public schools, also known as public special schools or private schools, also known as private special schools. In order for public schools to enroll students with special needs, there must be a special education classroom where students with disabilities go to receive requisite supports and services. These classrooms tend to only serve children with disabilities, being taught by a special education teacher. In addition to special education classrooms, children with disabilities in public schools also spend a portion of their day included in general education settings. Although public special schools are free and accessible, and tend to be more inclusive, these schools usually have fewer resources and supports for all children, including children with disabilities (Nicolescu, 2003). On the other hand, private special schools tend to have more resources and supports to offer all children, including those with disabilities. One challenge with private special schools is that they are less inclusive than public schools. Also, as is true in many countries, not all families of children with disabilities can afford to send their children to private schools and generally these schools are located only in urban areas (Nicolescu).

In an effort to improve high-quality inclusive opportunities for children with disabilities, all teachers in Romania, public and private, are required to complete at least a bachelor’s degree and attend ongoing professional development opportunities provided by schools to help teachers develop new competencies and effective teaching strategies. Although teachers are required to complete a bachelor’s degree and attend a variety of ongoing professional development, Romanian teachers’ abilities to implement best teaching practices are still below average compared with other EU countries (OECD, 2006).

Early Childhood Education in Romania

The Romanian school system consists of nurseries or crèches (ages 0-3), kindergarten (ages 3-7), primary (ages 7-11), lower secondary (ages 11-14), and upper secondary schools (ages 14-18). A report conducted by Stativa and Angheliescu (2002) showed that Romania has 287 nurseries and 3,759 kindergarten classrooms. In Romania, nursery and kindergarten are optional. According to the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2007), 86% of Romanian children enter primary education (at age 8) with previous preschool experience. Therefore, when schooling becomes mandatory at the primary level (age 8), a great deal of time is spent getting children accustomed to being in school, this is especially true for the children who did not attend a nursery or kindergarten.

Nurseries for children under 3 were established in the early 1980s to provide child care for working parents. Stativa and Anghelescu (2002) found that most children attending nurseries were between 19 and 36 months, with only 5% under 8 months. Over the past 30 years, the number of nurseries and children in care has decreased due to fewer parents in the workforce and increased costs of child care (UNICEF, 2005). Over time indicators of staff quality in nurseries, such as child ratios have improved, however, most children are still not taught how to initiate interactions and are not provided with activities that are age and/or developmentally appropriate (UNESCO, 2006). Before 1989, the average staff-to-child ratio was 1:30. Currently, in 80% of the nurseries, the ratio is 1 caregiver for every 8 children. Regarding caregiver/child relationships, the lack of interactions and exposure to age appropriate activities is limited, and thus, may impact children's overall development (Stativa and Anghelescu).

The next level in the Romanian school system is kindergarten (ages 3–7). In contrast with nurseries, kindergarten enrollment has increased in the last decade. The higher enrollment rate was a result of a new national program launched by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2011. The goal of this program was to enhance the quality of educational services for all children birth to 7 years of age, including providing early intervention for children at risk, and to creating resource centers for parents who have children with disabilities. Additionally, the new program aimed to enhance the quality of professional development for all providers who serve children ages birth to 7 (UNESCO, 2006). However, approximately 20% of eligible children do not attend kindergarten due to low funding and parents' lack of understanding of the importance of early education (Nica, 2005). Unfortunately, many children who do not attend early childhood program are those that need it most, including children who come from low-income families or are children with, or at risk for, a disability. In theory, Romanian policy supports mainstream education for all children but in practice mainstreaming of children with disabilities is very limited.

Most of the nurseries and kindergarten programs in Romania are trying to integrate children with disabilities. However, in many cases, teachers do not have the necessary skills and knowledge needed to support full and meaningful inclusion in general education classrooms. Often parents of young children with disabilities choose to enroll their child in a private kindergarten where the personnel are qualified and educational materials are more accessible and abundant. However, access to private schools is generally limited to wealthier families and families who live in urban areas. Young children with disabilities from rural areas in Romania are often taught at home by their parents and do not receive any formal preparation before entering school at age 7 (Iucu, Manolescu, Ciolan, & Bucur, 2008; UNESCO, 2006).

Other options for the education of young children with disabilities in Romania are Waldorf, Step by Step, and Montessori programs. These alternative education programs are part of the state-funded educational system and are recognized by the Ministry of Education as a form of alternative education through an agreement signed in 1996. Because of this agreement, teachers in these schools need to follow the state curriculum and provide individual accommodations for children with disabilities just as they would in public schools. Waldorf kindergarten classrooms are often part of larger public schools in which not all classrooms practice Waldorf education.

Romanian Educators' Attitudes Toward Inclusion

In an effort to better understand the services that are provided to children with disabilities in Romania, the first author conducted a study with Romanian educators to learn more about inclusion. Five special education teachers from two schools; one public and one private, participated in this study. Each teacher had diverse experiences working with children with multiple disabilities starting at age 5. Four out of the five teachers had more than 20 years teaching experience and only one teacher had less than ten years.

Findings from interviews revealed several concerns that Romanian special teachers have about including children in general education classrooms. First, the participants expressed concerns about a *lack of funding for the support of children with disabilities to be successful in general education classrooms*. Teachers who were interviewed believed that special education is still a newer field in Romania and many schools have limited or no funds to support students with disabilities. One participant stated, “there are no funds from the state to pay for the textbooks or for the teacher’s assistant, parents need to pay if they want their child to have an assistant.” Another participant strongly believed that, “especially when you work with children with severe disabilities, you need an assistant, and the assistance truly benefits the child.”

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was about *including students with disabilities in general education classrooms*. All five interviewees noted that including a child with disabilities in general education classrooms depends on many factors, including: a) the level of severity, b) the type of disability, c) the quality and the number of services provided by that school, and d) the families’ beliefs about inclusion. Two teachers stated that inclusion in public schools should only be for children with mild disabilities because of lack of services provided by the public schools.

All participants reported that they felt that students in special schools without inclusion receive a “better and more intensive” quality education. For example, one teacher believed that “special schools have more qualified professionals” and students with disabilities have access “to more and better services throughout the whole school day.” Additionally, one teacher noted that currently in Romania, special education laws “are flexible” and as a result, special educators can integrate new and innovative methods to support students with disabilities, but this tends to happen in non-inclusive special schools.

One teacher concluded that including students with disabilities in general education classrooms occurs in Romania but often it depends on the general education teacher’s willingness or readiness to take on extra responsibilities. Another participant noted that some general education teachers are, “unqualified, don’t have the skills to connect with students with disabilities, and they don’t know how to establish a positive climate in their classroom.” She went on to explain that, “children with special needs are made fun of, placed in the back of the class and other kids use rude language with them.”

All five teacher participants agreed that inclusion is beneficial for both students with and without disabilities, but it requires hard work, effective collaboration, and ongoing professional development for all school professionals. One seasoned teacher expressed major concerns about lack of collaboration in public schools: “There is no connection between teachers and teachers,

or teachers and students, there is a big disconnection. Here [in the special, less inclusive school] we work closely together and help the students.”

Although, all five special educators agreed that inclusion can benefit students with disabilities, they also reported that for some students, special schools may be a better choice. In special, non-inclusive schools, due to a smaller number of students, teachers can provide more specific instruction to meet all individual needs. For example, one participant believed that “special schools have more qualified professionals” and students with disabilities have access “to more and better services throughout the whole school day.” Additionally, as noted in the previous section, special schools are more likely to have funds to provide teaching assistants. One teacher stated that, “there are no funds from the state to pay for the textbooks or for the teacher’s assistant, parents need to pay if they want their child to have an assistant.” She went on to express that, “especially when you work with children with severe disabilities, you need an assistant, and the assistance truly benefits the child.” She also added, “Lack of funds impacts the specific training that we need.”

In conclusion, the five interviewees believed that including students with disabilities in general education classrooms is beneficial for both students with and without disabilities, but that general educators in public schools are not yet prepared to work with children with disabilities. The academic demands in public schools are high and general educators are pressured to meet academic standards by the end of every school year. Even though some general educators may have the skills to support students with mild disabilities in their classrooms, they do not have the time or materials necessary to provide the appropriate services and supports to students with more significant disabilities. As a result, the participants believed students with disabilities still face many challenges regarding receiving an appropriate education in a public, general education setting.

DEC Recommended Practices and Future Directions for Romania

Although many positive changes have occurred in the Romanian educational system in the post-communist era, a great deal of change is still needed, especially when it comes to supporting young children with disabilities. As indicated in the findings presented, participants felt that including children with disabilities in general education classrooms is good, in theory, however, they do not feel inclusion is always realistic due to a lack of resources and supports. Based on interview responses, Romanian special educators possess the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully support young children with disabilities, however, they feel that more needs to be done to educate general education teachers and administrators about the importance of inclusion.

Specifically, using the DEC Recommended Practices (Division of Early Childhood, 2014) as a framework, courses related to educating and supporting children with disabilities should be built into teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development for general education teachers. While challenges remain, we strongly believe that this is the perfect time for Romania and other developing countries to adopt the DEC Recommended Practices as a framework and catalyst for positive change, bringing together policy makers, researchers, school administrators, educators, and families to ensure equal educational opportunities are available for all students with disabilities through the development of efficient and comprehensive inclusive programs.

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Timeline of Historical and Educational Events in Romania

Timeline	Historical and Educational Events
1945	The Yalta Agreement made Romania part of the Soviet Union. The Communist-dominated government was installed.
1968	The Communist Regime passed the first Education Act. This Education Act extended the compulsory education from 8 to 10 years of education.
1980	President Ceausescu ordered a ban on importation of any consumer products and commanded exportation of all goods produced in Romania except minimum food supplies. Severe restrictions of civil rights were imposed, and starvation was rampant.
1989	Romanians protested the Communist Regime and started a national uprising that finally ousted the communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his cabinet. The President was assassinated.
1990	Romania signed new international documents focused on educating children with special needs: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
1991	The Romanian Parliament has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Romanians voted for a new Constitution (Article 46 focuses on the rights of people with disabilities).
1994	A new international document was signed: The Salamanca Statement focused on children with special needs.
1995	The new Education Law was passed. This law allows inclusion of special education; all Romanian citizens have equal right to education, at all levels, and all forms.
1997	The Teachers' Statute was passed and determines the provisions for all teachers and modalities to enroll students with disabilities.
1999	Romanian Government set up the National Agency for the Protection of Children's Rights.
2002-2003	Ministry of Education launched a program called: A School for All, aimed to raise awareness about integrating students with special disabilities in schools.
2004	Romania joins NATO. Romania developed a National Action Plan on Education for Children with Special Needs (focus on training programs and educators and creating awareness).
2006	The law (No. 448) regarding the protection and promotion of the rights of people with disabilities was passed.
2011	The Education Law was revised and included a new chapter on the education of children with disabilities and ways to ensure equal opportunities.