

Analysis of the public policy changes regarding the special educational needs (SEN) concept in Romania

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ABSTRACT

The objective of our study is to assess the integration of the concept of special educational needs (SEN) retrospectively and analytically within the Romanian legal framework and its consolidation as a fundamental component of national education policy. Concurrently, we aim to evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive education for children with SEN within the public education system. Methodologically, our investigation begins with a documentary analysis, examining relevant strategic documents that elucidate the contemporary understanding of SEN. Subsequently, we provide an overview of the Romanian context, drawing upon accessible secondary data, supplemented by the outcomes of a quantitative research endeavor conducted in Bihor County. This quantitative phase offers insights into the practical realities of SEN within the Romanian education system. Additionally, we reflect upon the latest national strategy aimed at facilitating a societal paradigm shift towards SEN in the ensuing years. In conclusion, while SEN has been incorporated into the Romanian public education system, its implementation does not fully align with legislative requirements, necessitating smoother execution. We conclude our analysis by posing forward-looking research questions pertinent to future investigations in this field.

KEYWORDS

Special Education Needs (SEN), Inclusive Education, public education system, societal paradigm shift, Romania, public policy, public education

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INTRODUCTION

In our research, the primary aim is to examine the historical development of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) concept in the Romanian setting. In order to accomplish this goal, it is crucial to have a deep understanding of the theoretical foundations of the SEN framework. Therefore, our initial emphasis is on this pivotal element, requiring a concise examination of the global context in which the Romanian legislative structure and its application have evolved. It is essential to understand the historical progression and contextual factors that have shaped SEN policies and practices in Romania.

Globally, notable international entities have played pivotal roles in the inception of the SEN concept, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations (UN), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Bank (WB), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) etc (OECD, 2007).

Concerning the entitlement to education for all children, both strategic documents and international legislation, including those of the European Union and Romania (post-1990), explicitly acknowledge this right, encompassing children with special needs. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) acknowledges the right to education for all individuals, mandating that elementary education be compulsory and provided free of charge, with higher levels of education being accessible to all based on merit (performance). In 1960, UNESCO adopted the Convention against Discrimination in Education during a world conference. Additionally, the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the European Convention on Human Rights, represents a legal instrument safeguarding fundamental right, drafted by the Council of Europe. Signed on November 4, 1950, in Rome, it came into force on September 3, 1953 (Communication for Community, 2018).

The paradigm of the aspiration towards universal education for all people took shape and became a global reality in March 1990, with the launch in Jomtiem (Thailand), at a huge conference organised by the UN agencies (UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNEP and the World Bank), of the phrase *Education for All* (EFA) and a global plan of action to effectively achieve this complex goal. EFA constitutes a comprehensive international endeavor, functioning as both a paradigm and a formidable challenge within the realm of democratic educational systems development. Anchored in the principles of human rights as delineated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and children's rights as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), EFA is fundamentally rooted in the democratic ideal of ensuring equal opportunities, as codified in the legislation of numerous nations, and the pursuit of equity and social justice. It serves as a global imperative and mobilizing force for affirmative, proactive actions aimed at preempting and ameliorating enduring disparities and discrepancies in educational access and quality on both quantitative and qualitative fronts. Under the umbrella of EFA, notable international gatherings and initiatives have been organized, contributing significantly to the refinement and advancement of core educational concepts on national level (Almaşan, Dumitrache, Irimescu, & Vrăsmaş, 2016).

Romania acknowledges and integrates the legislation formulated by international entities regarding the education of individuals with special educational needs (SEN), legislation to which Romania has acceded by endorsing the following documents: the UN Convention on the Rights



of the Child, The Salamanca Declaration, Standard Rules on Special Needs Education, and the World Declaration on Education for All. In the subsequent analysis, we direct our attention to the pertinent synthesis within the context of Romania. The analysis is centered on the Constitution of Romania, the National Education Law (along with subsequent amendments and supplementary provisions), and several specific official documents aimed at implementing practices related to addressing special educational needs.

The Constitution of Romania (2003) gives priority to treaties international human rights through Article 20, as follows:

“International treaties on human rights

(1) Constitutional provisions concerning the citizens’ rights and liberties shall be interpreted and enforced in conformity with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the covenants and other treaties Romania is a party to.

(2) Where any inconsistencies exist between the covenants and treaties on the fundamental human rights Romania is a party to, and the national laws, the international regulations shall take precedence, unless the Constitution or national laws comprise more favourable provisions.”

Article 16 of the Constitution introduces another crucial aspect, emphasizing the principle of equality of rights and the prohibition of discrimination.

“Equality of rights

(1) Citizens are equal before the law and public authorities, without any privilege or discrimination.

(2) No one is above the law.”

Article 32 explicitly mentions the right to education.

“Right to education

(1) The right to education is provided by the compulsory general education, by education in high schools and vocational schools, by higher education, as well as other forms of instruction and postgraduate improvement.”

Another important provision within the Constitution addresses the rights of children and youth in Article 49:

“Protection of children and young people

(1) Children and young people shall enjoy special protection and assistance in the pursuit of their rights.

(2) The State shall grant allowances for children and benefits for the care of ill or impaired children. Other forms of social protection for children and young people shall be established by law.”

Article 50 is specifically devoted to individuals with disabilities.

“Protection of impaired persons

Impaired persons shall enjoy special protection. The State shall provide the accomplishment of a national policy of equal opportunities, disability prevention and treatment, so that impaired persons can effectively participate in community life, while observing the rights and duties of their parents or legal guardians.” (*The Constitution of Romania, 2003*)

The *National Education Law* (No. 1/2011 accompanied by subsequent amendments and supplementary provisions) delineates in Article 2 the fundamental ethos of the Romanian educational system, where inclusion holds importance on par with other fundamental principles: “(3) The educational ideal of the Romanian school consists in the free, integral and harmonious development of the human individuality, in the formation of an autonomous personality and in



the assumption of a system of values that are necessary for personal fulfilment and development, for the development of an entrepreneurial spirit, for active citizenship in society, for social inclusion and for employment in the labour market.”

The law defines the structure of public education, including compulsory schooling, the required education levels, the methods for transitioning between levels, and the financing options. School choice is decentralized, allowing for free and high mobility conditions for students. Decision-making about schooling is transferred to parents. The law also includes provisions for special situations, such as minority education, special education needs, support for Roma students, and overage students.

To meet special education needs, alternative forms, such as special education programs and private student status, are available for students who cannot participate in mainstream education due to health conditions. These students are enrolled in an educational institution but do not attend regular classes. Instead, their teachers provide individual lessons in their homes ([Parliament of Romania, 2022a](#)).

The Education Act 1/2011 delineates the structure of the educational system into three distinct levels: basic, lower, and upper intermediate. These levels are aligned with the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) categories as follows:

- **Early and Kindergarten Education (ISCED 0):**
 - Early education for children aged 0–3
 - Kindergarten education for children aged 3–6
- **Elementary Education (ISCED 1):**
 - Comprising a preparatory class (Grade 0) followed by Grades I–IV
- **Primary Education (ISCED 2):**
 - Spanning Grades V–VIII
- **Secondary Education (ISCED 3):**
 - Lower secondary level encompassing Grades IX–X
 - Upper secondary level covering Grades XI–XII or XI–XIII, which may be oriented towards theoretical, vocational, or technical vocational education
- **Vocational Education:**
 - A specialized 3-year training program
- **Post-Secondary Education (ISCED 4)**
- **Higher Education (ISCED 5–8)**, which falls outside the realm of public education.

Mandatory education extends through the completion of Grade X. The secondary school system is bifurcated into two phases: the initial phase includes Grades IX–X, while the subsequent phase includes Grades XI–XII or XI–XIII, depending on the inclusion of vocational high school tracks. The structure adheres to a sequential model of 1+4+4+2+2+1.

At the upper secondary level, educational institutions are classified into three categories:

- **Theoretical institutions**, offering curricula in humanities and sciences.
- **Technical institutions**, providing specialized education in technical disciplines, services, natural resource extraction, and environmental protection.



- **Professional or Vocational institutions**, catering to fields such as military, theology, sports, arts, and pedagogy.

The diversification of educational levels and training pathways has complicated the process of selecting appropriate routes for further education. Additionally, the traditional role of schools in fostering educational equity has not been adequately addressed in the current framework.

The eighth grade of elementary school concludes with an aptitudetest functions as a subject-specific examination. Students are assessed in the Romanian language and mathematics. Additionally, students in minority education are tested on their knowledge of their mother tongue. The results of these exams influence which school the student can attend for further studies. Only those who pass the competency exam in their respective language are eligible to apply for minority mother tongue training programs ([Parliament of Romania, 2022a](#)).

The present iteration of the national education legislation, as articulated in Law 198/2023 concerning pre-university education, allocates a comprehensive chapter to the subject of inclusive education under the heading “Quality Inclusive Education for All Primary Beneficiaries of Education.” Beyond the general provisions and definitions, the second section of this chapter details all aspects of special education. In addition to laying out general provisions and establishing definitions, a subsequent section of this chapter provides a comprehensive examination of various aspects of special education. This includes elucidations of key terms, descriptions of the organizational structure of educational initiatives, delineations of institutional frameworks, and discussions concerning the provision of support for children with Special Education Needs (SEN), among other pertinent considerations ([Parliament of Romania, 2023a](#)).

In accordance with directives from the Ministry of Education, special and integrated special education forms are an indispensable component of Romania’s national education system. Its primary objective is to furnish educational programs tailored to the individual needs and disabilities of children, students, and youth across all levels of pre-university education. These programs are specifically designed to accommodate various types and degrees of disability, including mental, auditory, visual, locomotor, and associated impairments. Since the 1990s, Romania has embraced the principles of inclusive education, emphasizing the recognition of diversity and the facilitation of equitable access and participation in educational and social realms for all children, irrespective of their backgrounds. Legislative measures governing special education are crafted to address a broad spectrum of unique circumstances. Consequently, special, special integrated, and inclusive education initiatives are systematically integrated into all levels of pre-university education, contingent upon the specific nature and severity of the disability. Upon completion of their educational journey, students from specialized educational institutions undergo national examinations, such as tests, baccalaureate exams, or graduation assessments, similar to mainstream graduates ([Parliament of Romania, 2023b](#)). Detailed provisions are in place to ensure that specific accommodations and adaptations are made during examinations to cater to the individual needs of these students. Furthermore, students with special educational requirements benefit from accommodations in examination procedures for ongoing assessments ([Florian, 2019](#)).

Numerous supplementary documents such as laws, governmental decrees, and ministerial orders play a pivotal role in facilitating the implementation of legal stipulations. Romanian legislation has brought about changes in the perception of individuals with disabilities, especially in terms of social support and social inclusion. The terms have become less discriminatory. With



the emergence of inclusive education policies, the term ‘disability’, which is exclusionary, is being replaced by terms like ‘person with disabilities’ and ‘special educational needs.’ The practical implementation of acceptance and inclusion is also reflected in the promotion of accessibility and integrated education (Belényi, 2018). In Romania, children’s special educational needs can be confirmed either through the social assistance system or the national education system. Special educational needs refer to educational needs that arise due to intellectual, sensory, psychomotor, physiological dysfunctions, or other psycho-affective, socio-economic conditions. These special educational needs require specific pedagogical approaches to ensure that learners with disabilities or difficulties understand and benefit from the educational content. The main sources of SEN can be: a) disabilities caused by deficiencies or diseases; b) learning difficulties and speech disorders (MEC, 2011).

There are several laws and regulations that address the rights and protection of individuals with disabilities. Law no. 448/2006 (amended in 2008) regulates the rights and social protection of persons with disabilities. Under this law, individuals with physical, sensory, psychological, mental, and/or associated disabilities are entitled to special social protection if their needs are not met by their social environment, thereby hindering or restricting their equal participation in social life. The amendment refers to the provision of accessibility and integration opportunities. This right applies to all children and adults with disabilities, whether they are Romanian citizens, citizens of other states, or stateless persons, provided that they have legal residence or domicile in Romania. The law also regulates the type and classification of disabilities, categorizing them as mild, moderate, and severe (Parliament of Romania, 2008). As opposed to previous relevant law, the current law views disability as both a social and individual issue (Belényi, 2018).

Law no. 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of child rights expressly guarantees children with disabilities the right to special care adapted to their needs, as well as access to education, rehabilitation, compensation, recovery, and integration, adapted to their abilities, for the development of their personality. Special care must ensure the physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development of children. Social care means that children and their parents or, if necessary, those entrusted with the children’s care receive appropriate support free of charge whenever possible. This facilitates non-discriminatory and effective access to education, vocational training, medical and rehabilitation services, employment training, recreational activities, and other activities enabling full social integration and personality development. Children with disabilities are provided non-discriminatory education within the national education system (Parliament of Romania, 2014).

The state ensures that individuals with special educational needs receive “special and integrated special education at all educational levels, considering the type and degree of disability” (Law no. 1/2011 on National Education, amended in 2024). Inclusive education centers¹ are institutions within the public education network with legal personality, operating under the Ministry of Education. These institutions provide a framework that promotes equal access to formal education and educational services for all children, including those with special educational needs, attending either special or general education schools. Certificates for special educational needs can be issued to children with disabilities requiring targeted assistance.

¹CJRAE, Centrul Județean de Resurse și Asistență Educațională/County Center for Educational Resources and Assistance.



Children, pupils, and young people with special educational needs integrated into mainstream education receive educational support on a case-by-case basis through support and itinerant teaching staff. Educational support services are provided by CJRAE. Their goal is to ensure access to quality education for everyone and provide the necessary support. They also provide support to professionals involved in the education and training of these children ([Parliament of Romania, 2011a](#)). Appropriations for the educational-material and human resources of the centers are regulated ([MEC, 2011a](#)).

The Order of the Ministry of Education no. 5573/2011 regulates special and integrated education. It defines special and integrated special education as differentiated, adapted forms of education, as well as complex educational, social, and health support for individuals with special educational needs (CES). It specifies the responsibilities of educators (teachers, therapists), supplementary educational staff (librarians, IT specialists, laboratory technicians, social workers, etc.), and non-educational staff (procurement officers, cooks, caregivers, etc.) ([MEC, 2011b](#)).

Law no. 292/2011 on social assistance also makes reference to the care of persons with disabilities. Children with disabilities and their parents, as well as those with whom the child has been placed or entrusted, are entitled to social services that promote non-discriminatory access to education, vocational training, medical care, rehabilitation, employment training, recreational activities, and any other activities enabling full social integration and personal development. Furthermore, children are entitled to personal care services determined by social, psychological, and medical assessment, as well as the need for individual assistance for daily activities ([Parliament of Romania, 2011b](#)).

Despite the extensive legislative framework on inclusive education, there is a lack of coherent, unified, decisive approach due to the shortage of financial and human resources in the field of special education ([Parliament of Romania, 2022b](#)). Despite the emergence of a positive attitude shift, achieving inclusive goals has not been smooth. One reason is the inadequate preparation for the changes ([Belényi, 2018](#)). Consequently, the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities in Romania remains a partially enforced fundamental right. Persons with disabilities face significant challenges regarding physical accessibility in public buildings. In Romania, the lack of recognition of the legal capacity of some individuals with disabilities hinders their exercise of rights. Employment rates for persons with disabilities are lower, and existing jobs are of low prestige and inadequately adapted to their needs. Persons with disabilities in Romania experiences a greater degree of poverty than the EU average, often facing severe material deprivation. Community services for persons with disabilities are underdeveloped, and some still receive institutional residential care. Few children with special educational needs receive necessary support services to participate in quality inclusive education, resulting in an educational attainment well below average. Persons with disabilities feel isolated to a greater degree and are unable to participate in public and political life on equal terms ([Grigoraş, Salazar, Vladu, & Briciu, 2021](#)).

Romania has fully assimilated all international directives and has established its own legal and institutional framework to ensure the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) across all tiers of public education. The pertinent institutions are:

- Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities (national level)
- National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption (national and county level)
- National Agency for Social Payments and Inspection (national and county level)



- General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (county level)
- County Centre for Educational Resources and Assistance (county level)
- County Centre for Psycho-pedagogical Assistance (county level)
- Inter-school Speech Therapy Centre (county level)
- School and Vocational Evaluation and Guidance Service (county level)

In the light of the formal parameters delineated above, it can be posited that Romania has established the necessary legal and institutional infrastructure to enable the effective implementation of inclusive education practices. The forthcoming discourse engages in critical examination of two studies that serve to introduce nuanced considerations to the established construct outlined within the formal framework.

Stăiculescu, Dincă, and Andreea Gheba (2022) conducted a study analyzing the status of students with special needs in Romanian higher education. Their research paper delves into inclusive education within Romanian universities, examining the factors influencing the active participation of students with special needs. Employing a quantitative methodology, the study gathered data from fifteen universities across Romania. The findings elucidated that university policies and structures, curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, community integration, and the availability of resources significantly impact the willingness and openness to inclusive education within Romanian higher education institutions. Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of implementing special educational measures, including curriculum adaptations, support services, community-building initiatives, and ensuring accessibility for students with disabilities. Additionally, the research underscored the necessity for university policies to prioritize the inclusive participation of students with special needs and to provide adequate training for academic staff. The study's outcomes suggest that advancing inclusive education in Romanian higher education requires a concerted effort to improve campus accessibility, adapt curriculum content, and enhance communication and transparency with students. The study offers valuable insights for university stakeholders and policymakers, emphasizing the imperative of ensuring equal opportunities and social participation for students with special needs. The authors recommend implementing measures to enhance accessibility, support services, and monitoring mechanisms for students with disabilities, while also advocating for the development of inclusive curriculum designs. These findings are instrumental in striving towards sustainable development goals and fostering an inclusive educational environment for all students (Stăiculescu et al., 2022).

Another significant perspective is provided by Tudorache and Foloștină (2017), whose study delves into the issue of special educational needs within the framework of Romanian public education, with a focus on quality assurance. The research examines the trajectory of special education over the past three decades, delineating the shift from the 'Access and Services' paradigm to the 'Outcomes and Accountability' paradigm, alongside the adoption of the 'Quality Model'. The analysis underscores apprehensions regarding the displacement of nominal access and integration barriers, progressively supplanted by a preoccupation with assessing academic performance and narrowing the learning disparity. Legislation in Romania defines educational quality as the composite of attributes within a study program and its provider that align with beneficiaries' expectations and established quality benchmarks. Furthermore, it probes the delineation of quality within the realm of special needs education and emphasizes the imperative of fostering ownership and backing for quality initiatives among all pertinent stakeholders.



The discourse scrutinizes the genesis, progression, and enactment of quality management and assurance protocols in pre-university education in Romania. It underscores the roles and obligations of national bodies, such as the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education, in spearheading quality assurance and evaluation endeavors in pre-university education. The study also underscores the significance of self-evaluation in ensuring quality in schools and outlines the various methods for evaluating quality in special and integrated special education. Moreover, it sheds light on the challenges faced by special education in adopting an integrated approach to quality that is aligned with mainstream educational standards and other social services for children with special needs. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining an optimistic outlook and realizing the potential of each child, despite their individual differences. In conclusion, the study highlights the key dimensions of quality education and underscores the importance of consultation and involvement of stakeholders, alignment between standards, curriculum, and assessment, and governmental financial support for special education initiatives (Tudorache & Foloștină, 2017).

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Our research methodology is grounded in multiple pillars. It incorporates several scientific methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of the integration of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) concept within the Romanian educational system. The aim of the study is to describe the current state and integration of Special Educational Needs (SEN) within the Romanian educational system, highlighting challenges, resource adequacy, and alignment with international standards.

Firstly, document analysis has been used where relevant strategic documents and legislation were thoroughly examined to understand the current interpretation and implementation of the SEN concept in Romania. Key documents include national education laws, ministerial orders, and strategic plans.

Secondly, a comprehensive overview of the statistical and data-driven approach to SEN was achieved by accessing current data from the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The study examines partial findings from a field study focusing on teachers and their families working with children with special educational needs (SEN) in Bihor County. It highlights the challenges faced by respondents in their daily teaching and educational interactions with children with SEN.

Thirdly, a quantitative research has been conducted in Bihor County, Romania (Berce, Bernáth, & Pásztor, 2017) focused on teachers and families working with children with SEN. This included a needs analysis from the perspective of infrastructure, material resources, human resources, and financial resources in eight special education schools. Data were gathered from 314 teachers and teaching assistants, and 218 parents using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The questionnaire gathered detailed information from teachers and parents about their experiences and perceptions regarding SEN, covering aspects such as the effectiveness of SEN education, resource adequacy, and specific challenges within educational institutions. Responses were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), calculating descriptive statistics like means and standard deviations. Statistical tools were used to analyze the questionnaire data, to understand the challenges faced in special education.



The study addresses the following key research questions:

- To what extent does the Romanian legal framework align with international standards and recommendations for SEN?
- What are the primary issues within the educational environment concerning SEN?
- What disparities exist in the current state of the educational system regarding SEN?

In summary, the mixed methodology employed in this study provides a robust framework for understanding the integration and challenges of Special Educational Needs within the Romanian educational system, paving the way for informed recommendations and future research.

KEY FINDINGS

Aspects of the National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities “A fair Romania” 2022–2027

Special education attracts significant attention from societal stakeholders in the pursuit of achieving social inclusion. Social inclusion is characterized by the ability of every individual, irrespective of their socio-demographic background, abilities, or disabilities, to actively participate in society with equal rights and opportunities. In this context, special education plays a crucial role by facilitating learning and development for diverse groups of learners, each with unique abilities and backgrounds, tailored to their individual needs and pace. However, the responsibility for ensuring the social inclusion of students enrolled in special education extends beyond educational institutions to encompass the broader social community as well. The National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, titled “A Fair Romania” for the period 2022–2027, contributes to the advancement of policies and measures geared towards fostering the complete integration and inclusion of children enrolled in special education into society. This entails commitments to enhance the education system by allocating resources, ensuring the provision of adequate infrastructure for special education institutions, and instigating transformative changes in societal attitudes toward education and disability. This document encompasses a comprehensive analysis of various dimensions concerning the demographic of individuals with disabilities. The Strategic Plan for the period 2022–2027 delineates eight key priority areas as follows:

1. Accessibility and mobility enhancement.
2. Effective safeguarding of the rights of individuals with disabilities.
3. Promotion of employment opportunities.
4. Provision of robust social protection mechanisms, including habilitation and rehabilitation services.
5. Facilitation of independent living and community integration, with a focus on access to public services.
6. Advancement of educational initiatives.
7. Improvement of healthcare accessibility and quality.
8. Promotion of political and public engagement for individuals with disabilities ([Parliament of Romania, 2022b](#)).



The delineation of eight priority areas presents a comprehensive strategy for addressing social inclusion challenges pertaining to individuals with disabilities. Within the context of this article's thematic focus, particular attention is directed towards accessibility and mobility, as well as education ([Parliament of Romania, 2022b](#)).

Accessibility and mobility constitute the foremost priority area. This concern assumes notable relevance in the evaluation of the circumstances in Bihor. According to this perspective, individuals with disabilities should be afforded physical, informational, and communicational access to the array of products, services, and programs provided by society. Accessibility serves as the fundamental prerequisite for enabling the complete engagement of individuals with disabilities within the social life ([Parliament of Romania, 2022b](#)).

The Education priority area encompasses data pertaining to the circumstances of children and adolescents identified with disabilities and/or special educational needs (SEN). Ensuring their access to high-quality inclusive education within the community, equitably alongside their peers, is imperative for facilitating their holistic developmental progression. Central to this strategic approach is the imperative to tailor the educational milieu to accommodate the diverse needs of students with disabilities, thereby facilitating their engagement within the mainstream educational framework. It is underscored that while the adaptation of the school environment is a necessary component, it alone does not suffice to guarantee the quality of educational provisions for students with disabilities. Equally crucial is the provision of adequate human and material resources, alongside the integration of pertinent therapeutic interventions within the educational framework to optimize outcomes.

The Romanian education system offers a diversified range of educational services adapted to students with special needs, available in both specialized and mainstream educational settings. This adaptation of the educational process is guided by the principles of differentiated and individualized learning, with due consideration given to the potential and progress of each pupil. However, despite the existence of an extensive legislative framework pertaining to inclusive education, a lack of coherent and unified approach persists. This challenge is predominantly driven by constraints related to financial and human resources allocated for special education. Consequently, to ensure the educational success of students with disabilities, a holistic approach is essential. Such an approach must encompass not only the adaptation of the school environment but also the provision of adequate resources, supported by a coherent and well-coordinated legislative and administrative strategy.

Public education aims to uphold the values of the modern age, such as educational equality, talent management, and provide a skilled workforce. However, these ideals can sometimes conflict with each other. For instance, effective vocational training requires certain competencies, which students gain partly from their families and significantly through various levels of formal education. Unfortunately, not everyone has the opportunity to acquire these foundational skills, thereby contradicting the principle of equality and excluding some individuals due to their lack of an adequate foundation ([Pásztor, 2017](#)).

In the pertinent literature, there is evident facilitation of access for individuals with disabilities to educational, occupational, and broader social spheres. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the significance of raising awareness and advocating for a paradigm shift in societal attitudes to foster a receptive and inclusive environment for those with differing abilities. This concerted effort holds promise in combating prejudice and discrimination while promoting cooperation and collaboration across all societal sectors. In essence, addressing and enhancing



the status of special education is indispensable for achieving social inclusion, requiring coordinated efforts among legislators, educational establishments, non-governmental entities, and the entirety of society.

An overview of national disability statistics and insights into special education in Romania

First of all, we briefly review the national statistics. According to data gathered from National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 30 September 2023, the total number of persons with disabilities communicated to the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, through the General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection of the counties and local districts of Bucharest was 909,754 persons. Of these, 98.23% (893,686 persons) are in family care and/or living independently (non-institutionalised) and 1.77% (16,068 persons) are in public residential social care institutions for adults with disabilities (institutionalised) coordinated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity through the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Fig. 1). On 30 September 2023 the rate of people with disabilities in the Romanian population was 4.16%. Compared to the rate of 4.16% persons with disabilities per 100 inhabitants, calculated at the Romanian level, the South-West Oltenia, South-Muntenia and North-West regions have the highest rates.

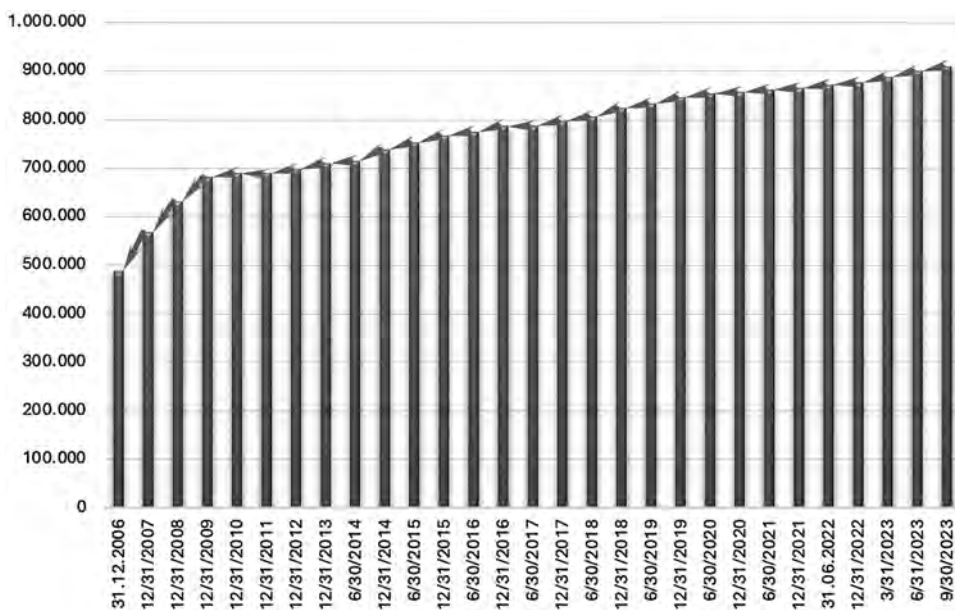


Fig. 1. Evolution of the number of people with disabilities in Romania, December 2006 – September 2023

Source: National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Statistic Data, 2023, p. 2



By counties/municipalities, the highest number of people with disabilities is recorded in Bucharest municipality (77,659 people) followed by Prahova county (38,039 people), and the lowest number is recorded in Covasna county (6,729 people). Bihor County is among the average counties (Fig. 2). The number of people aged over 50 represents 68.12% of all adults with disabilities. The data by age group shows that 46.05% are aged 18–64 (418,959 people) and 45.41% are over 65 (413,157 people), in total adults with disabilities (Fig. 3). The proportion of school-age children and those of an age to enter higher education is also not insignificant (ANPPDP, 2023).

We proceed to conduct an overview of the data obtained from our prior research investigations. A quantitative research study, conducted in Bihor County, utilized a questionnaire-based survey to gather data from parents and school staff. The survey encompassed teachers and teaching assistants involved in special education within the county, with a total sample size of 314 (N). Additionally, a sample of 218 parents ($p = 95\%$) participated in the survey. It is pertinent to note that while the parental sample mirrors the population of children in special education, there exists an overrepresentation of respondents with a higher level of education compared to the actual distribution within the targeted parental cohort. In terms of frequency of participation in training courses per year, the majority of teachers attended two training courses per year, a quarter attended one, and more than three courses were attended by 5% of respondents (Berce et al., 2017).²

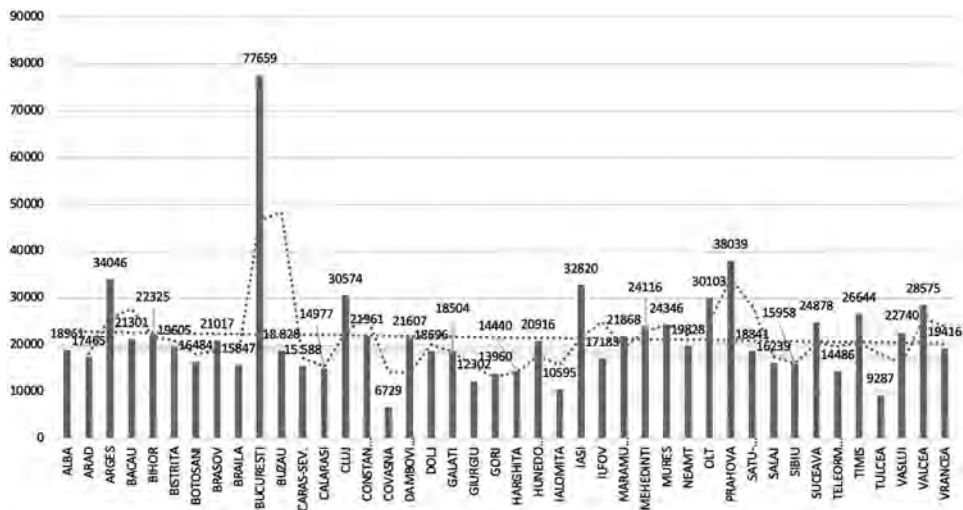


Fig. 2. Number of people with disabilities by county, 30 September 2023
Source: National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Statistic Data, 2023, p. 4

²In this study, we present research data that has not been published before.



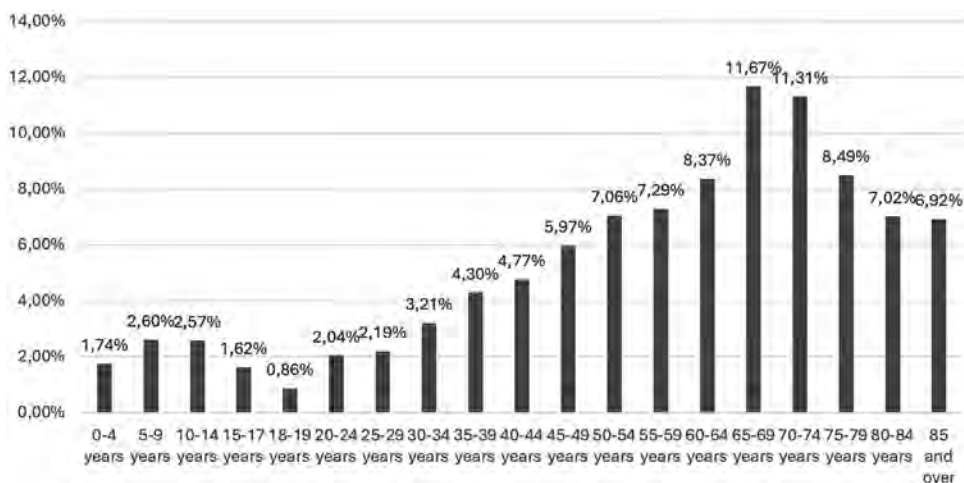


Fig. 3. Share of people with disabilities by age group on 30 September 2023
 Source: National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Statistic Data, 2023, p. 5

Primary challenges and requirements within the field of special education

In a comprehensive assessment, most teachers perceive that special education effectively addresses the needs of children with SEN (Fig. 4), and that the general conditions are suitable for meeting the children's requirements (mean 8.54/8.11, mode 10/9, standard deviation 1.88/1.82).

While initial evaluations indicate that special education effectively addresses the needs of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), various challenges within the system compromise both the educational-learning process and the societal integration of children with SEN

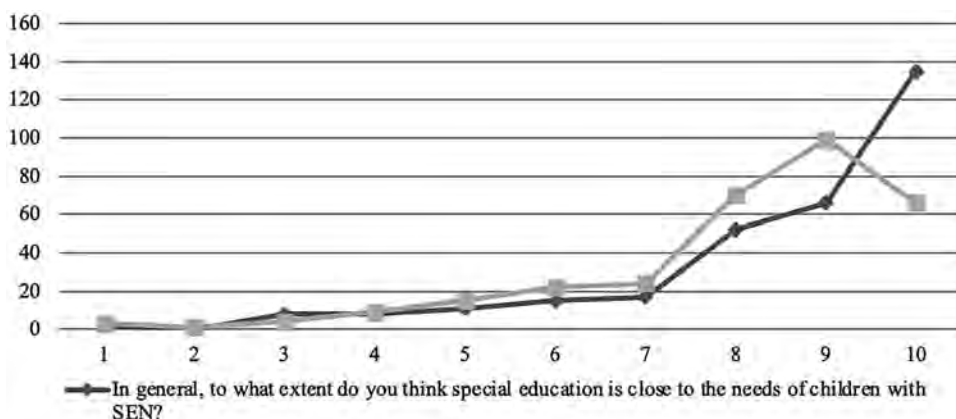


Fig. 4. General perceptions of special education effectiveness and school conditions for children with SEN (teachers' perspective)



(Fig. 5). Regarding issues within the educational establishment specific to special education, categorized by severity, the majority of teachers identified the most significant problems as those related to inadequately adapted school curricula (33.2%), insufficient human resources (30.1%), the dynamics between children and teachers (29%), and the quality of support provided to the child (27.6%). Conversely, the least severe issues pertained to physical accessibility, including access to buildings, classrooms, sanitary facilities, the availability of premises, and the qualifications of personnel engaged in the educational process.

The most significant problems at school level

Within educational institutions, teachers have identified several significant challenges related to accommodating the needs of children, particularly those with Exceptional Special Needs (ESN). These challenges include a severe shortage of teaching and technological materials adapted to the needs of ESN children, inadequate facilities and curricula, insufficient staff and therapy rooms, limited transportation options, and a lack of (sheltered) workshops within schools. Moreover, specific concerns and requirements have been highlighted, such as ensuring the physical and mental well-being of school staff, improving communication with parents to involve them more in the learning process, addressing the shortage of support staff and medical assistance, enhancing accessibility through the provision of lifts and ramps, adapting sanitary facilities to meet the needs of ESN children, managing the high costs associated with staff training, securing additional funding for extracurricular activities, managing the diverse range of diagnoses and class sizes (especially in rural areas), establishing day centers and recreational areas for children, reducing bureaucratic hurdles faced by both teachers and parents, and addressing challenges related to students' integration into society (Berce et al., 2017).

Additionally, there is a recognized need to supplement kinesiotherapy classes and therapeutic and occupational activities for students, improve communication between teachers and

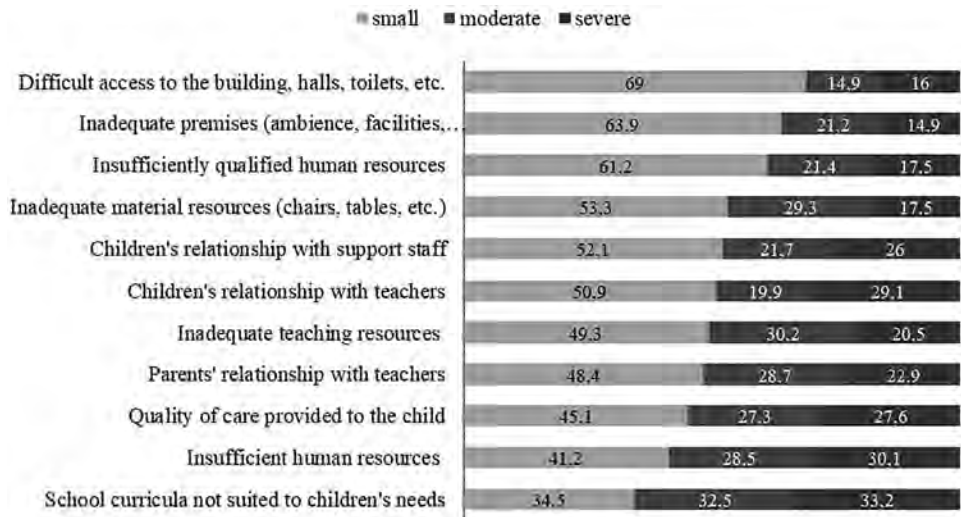


Fig. 5. The severity of problems in special education schools in Bihor County (teachers' perspective)



students with ESN, make teacher and staff training programs more accessible, enhance access to refresher programs and assessment tools, strengthen collaboration with the local community, and implement parent counseling programs (Fig. 6).

The most significant issues at the level of educational institutions

Within educational institutions, teachers have identified several significant challenges related to accommodating the needs of children, particularly those with Special Education Needs (SEN). These challenges include a severe shortage of teaching and technological materials adapted to the needs of SEN children, inadequate facilities and curricula, insufficient staff and therapy rooms, limited transportation options, and a lack of (sheltered) workshops within schools. Moreover, specific concerns and requirements have been highlighted, such as ensuring the physical and mental well-being of school staff, improving communication with parents to involve them more in the learning process, addressing the shortage of support staff and medical assistance, enhancing accessibility through the provision of lifts and ramps, adapting sanitary facilities to meet the needs of ESN children, managing the high costs associated with staff training, securing additional funding for extracurricular activities, managing the diverse range

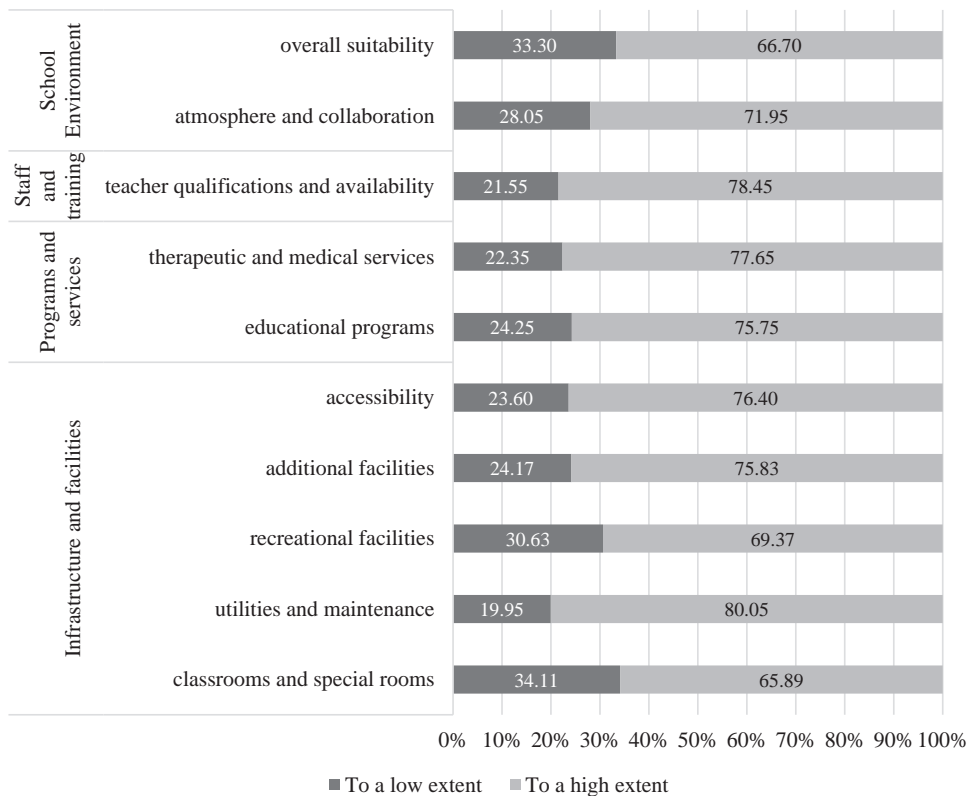


Fig. 6. The diversity of issues faced in special education (teachers' perspective)



of diagnoses and class sizes (especially in rural areas), establishing day centers and recreational areas for children, reducing bureaucratic hurdles faced by both teachers and parents, and addressing challenges related to students’ integration into society. Additionally, there is a recognized need to supplement kinesiotherapy classes and therapeutic and occupational activities for students, improve communication between teachers and students with ESN, make teacher and staff training programs more accessible, enhance access to refresher programs and assessment tools, strengthen collaboration with the local community, and implement parent counseling programs. Within educational institutions, teachers have identified several significant challenges related to accommodating the needs of children, particularly those with SEN. These challenges include a severe shortage of teaching and technological materials adapted to the needs of SEN children, inadequate facilities and curricula, insufficient staff and therapy rooms, limited transportation options, and a lack of (sheltered) workshops within schools (Berce et al., 2017).

Main problems and needs regarding special education

At a general assessment level, the majority of teachers consider that special education overall meets the needs of children with SEN, and the general conditions are suitable for the children’s needs. Similar to the perspectives of teachers, parents’ initial assessments indicate that special education adequately addresses the needs of children with SEN (Fig. 7).

However, specific inquiries within the questionnaire reveal several systemic challenges that impede the educational process and the societal integration of children with SEN (Figs 8 and 9). Regarding the severity of issues at the educational establishment level in special education, the majority of parents identified the most serious concerns pertaining to their interactions with teachers and support staff (37.8/35.3%), the quality of assistance provided to the child (34.8%), and a quarter of parents expressed that the school curriculum is inadequately tailored to the needs of children with SEN.

Among the most significant problems at the level of educational establishments in relation to adaptation to the needs of children in the opinion of parents, the following were mentioned similarly, with the opinion of teachers: the acute lack of teaching and technological materials adapted to the needs of children with SEN, inadequate school premises (lack of facilities, brightness) and

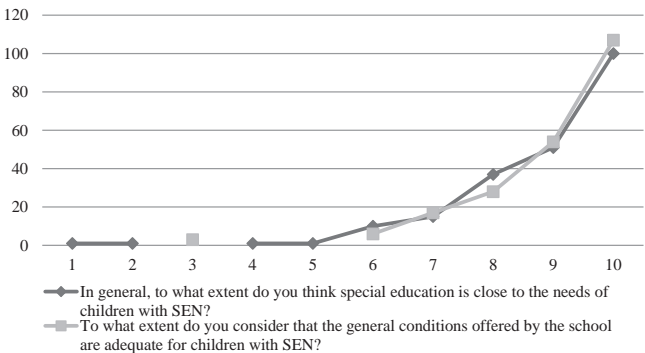


Fig. 7. General perceptions of special education effectiveness and school conditions for children with SEN (parents’ perspective)



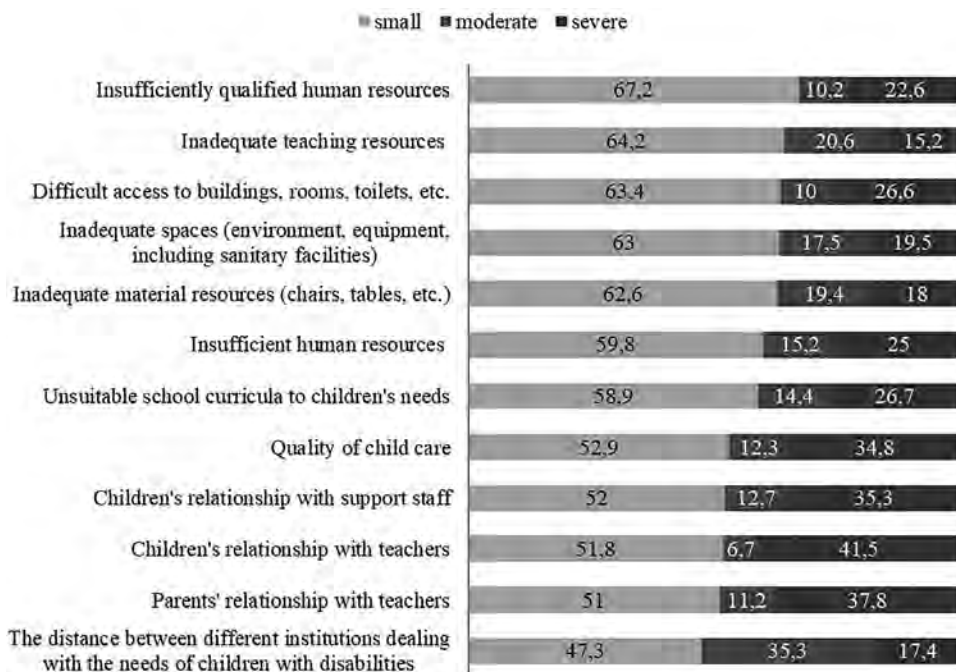


Fig. 8. Severity of the problems in special education schools (parents' perspective)

school programs not adapted to the needs of children, lack of staff and lack of therapeutic cabins (including the sports base), respectively lack of transport for children and lack of (sheltered) workshops in school. Excessive bureaucracy and the process of assessing and diagnosing children with SEN discourages parents from enrolling or retaining their children in special education, which drastically reduces children's chances of integrating into society (Manea, 2006).

In conclusion, both teachers and parents identify a number of significant problems at school level in terms of adaptation to the needs of children with special educational needs (SEN). Lack of appropriate teaching and technological materials, inadequate premises, inappropriate curricula and lack of staff and therapeutic resources are recurrent issues highlighted in both perspectives. The importance of ensuring the physical and psychological safety of staff and pupils, improving communication with parents and the need to streamline administrative and evaluation processes are also highlighted. Furthermore, concerns regarding excessive bureaucracy and issues related to the assessment and diagnostic procedures have been highlighted by both teachers and parents.

The most pressing challenges include:

- Insufficient provision of adapted teaching materials and technology resources.
- Inadequate learning environments and facilities.
- Inadequate curricula.
- Shortage of personnel and therapy facilities.
- Limited transportation options.



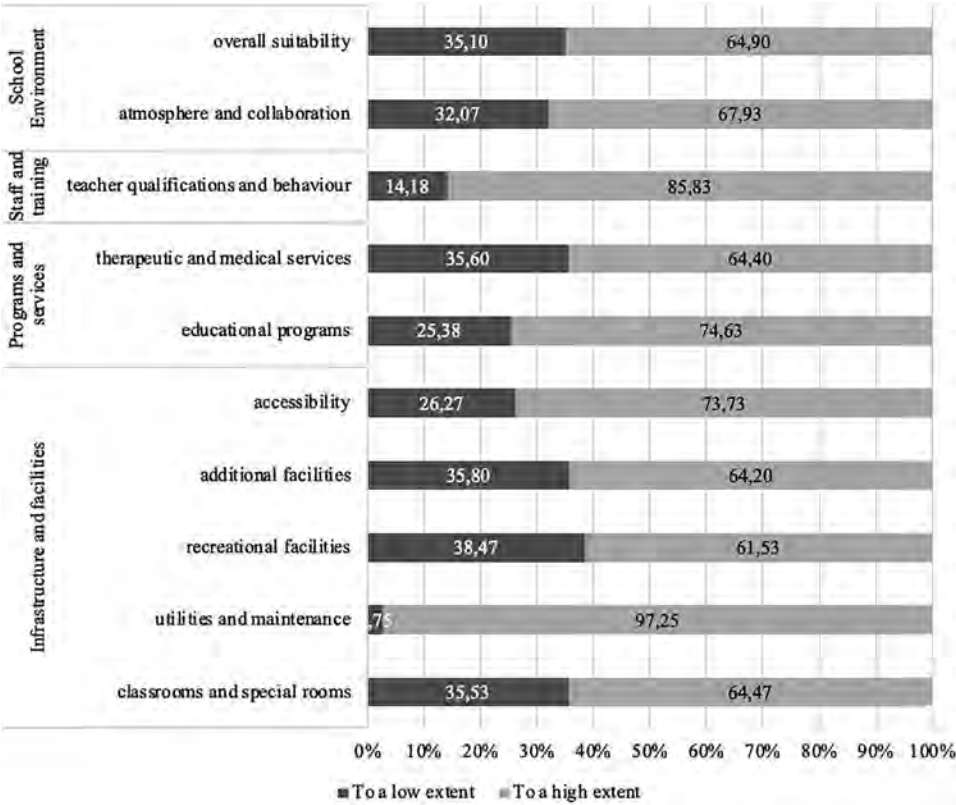


Fig. 9. The diversity of issues faced in special education (parents' perspective)

– Inadequate availability of sheltered workplaces.

The identified needs encompass:

- Safeguarding the well-being of both staff and students
- Support for care and nursing personnel
- Effective communication channels with parents
- Enhancing accessibility within the facility
- Provision of adapted sanitary facilities
- Managing the costs associated with continuous training
- Addressing the diversity of diagnoses and managing large class sizes
- Establishing adapted play and relaxation zones
- Streamlining administrative processes to reduce bureaucracy
- Fostering social integration among students.

The predominant challenges encountered are associated with physical space and its accessibility, while a secondary set of difficulties pertains to the learning process. These challenges and needs underscore the multifaceted nature of the obstacles faced by educational institutions



in adapting to the requirements of pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Close collaboration among teachers, parents, education authorities, and the wider community is imperative to identify and implement strategies that effectively address the needs of SEN pupils and enhance their social and academic integration. This emphasizes the necessity for a holistic and collaborative approach to ensure an inclusive and effective educational environment for all children (Maruşca & Lezeu, 2022).

Based on the outlined challenges and needs for children with SEN within public schools, it is evident that while the concept of inclusive education is supported in principle, its effectiveness in practice remains significantly compromised. The identified issues—ranging from inadequate resources, unsuitable learning environments, to insufficient staff and therapeutic support—highlight systemic inadequacies that hinder the realization of a truly inclusive educational environment.

The convergence of views from both teachers and parents on these matters underscores the critical gaps between policy intentions and educational realities on the ground. Despite the acknowledgment of the importance of physical and psychological safety, effective communication, and the reduction of bureaucratic obstacles, these essential elements are often lacking in current implementations of inclusive education. The breadth of challenges, including the need for more tailored teaching materials, improved facilities, and a curriculum that meets diverse learning needs, points to a comprehensive deficiency in meeting the demands of SEN students.

Moreover, the call for close collaboration among all educational stakeholders signifies the necessity for a community-based, participatory approach to reform. The emphasis on a holistic and collaborative strategy to address these challenges suggests that the effectiveness of inclusive education can only be enhanced through concerted efforts that span policy reform, increased funding, professional development, and the cultivation of an inclusive culture within schools (Zlătescu et al., 2014).

In short, the current state of inclusive education for children with SEN within public schools reveals a pressing need for systemic improvements. To realize the potential of inclusive education, a shift towards a more integrated, resourceful, and empathetic educational system is imperative. This entails not only addressing the tangible needs of SEN students but also fostering an educational ethos that embraces diversity, promotes equity, and ensures the full participation and development of every child.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In our study, we examined the development and implementation of special educational needs as a public policy concept in Romania by scrutinizing the incorporation of inclusive education within the regulatory and policy framework. Our research focuses on three primary objectives and research questions. Our first objective aimed to highlight the process of integrating the conceptual framework of inclusive education and special educational needs into public education regulatory and policy documents in our country. Additionally, our investigation also shed light on some challenges in implementing the concept. Secondly, we have also attempted to provide some understanding of the apparent paradoxes in Romanian education, where the legislative and policy groundwork for inclusive education seems well laid, yet practical application may not yet be fully realized. Finally, we have also aimed to address the related future research questions and problems that may require further attention.



Overall, Romania has made commendable progress in adapting inclusive education and special educational needs as an approach to public education over the last few decades. The rights guaranteed by Romanian Constitution are enforced by the Law on Public Education, particularly its recent amendment, and in other documents as well. This aspect is also crucial in terms of strategies, as the current National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities “A fair Romania” 2022–2027 encompasses a wide range of dimensions, illustrating a comprehensive approach to inclusivity. Current statistics show a growing trend in our country of individuals who wish to integrate into all aspects of social life, relying on the compassion of society.

Teachers and parents, the primary stakeholders, consistently report discrepancies that hinder the effective realization of inclusive education. These discrepancies underscore the urgent need for interventions to reconcile declared objectives with actual practice. This dissonance between policy and practice signifies a critical challenge Romania faces in fulfilling its inclusive educational ambitions. From a structuralist point of view, there is a serious discrepancy between the declared *de jure* and actual (*de facto*) conditions in Romania. In conclusion, although Romania has made significant strides in legislative and policy frameworks to support inclusive education, the journey from policy to practice remains fraught with challenges. Addressing these challenges requires not only a reevaluation of current strategies and resources, but also a concerted effort from all stakeholders to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real. The forward path should be informed by continuous research, dialogue, and adaptation to ensure that inclusive education in Romania moves from a well-intentioned promise to a lived reality for all students.

Inclusive education is an educational approach that aims to create a learning environment that fosters the individual development of all students while eliminating discrimination and exclusion within educational institutions. This approach employs a range of support systems, including educational assistants, differentiated teaching materials, and assessment methods tailored to individual needs (Varga, 2015). Although there are instances of inclusive education in the Romanian education system, significant obstacles hinder the widespread success of this approach. One of the main challenges is the education system itself, which often impedes progress because of the slow pace of training professionals with the necessary pedagogical skills. However, there are challenges associated with changing traditional educational practices, particularly the established learning styles.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The overview provided herein paints a foundational yet limited picture of the current state of inclusive education and special needs support within Romania. To deepen our understanding and tackle the nuanced challenges faced by individuals with special needs, an expansive exploration involving diverse projects, research outcomes, innovative practices, and policy initiatives spearheaded by civil society and industry experts is essential. A comprehensive and detailed systemic analysis of Romania’s education and social care systems is critically needed. This analysis should specifically target the pervasive issues of excessive bureaucracy, overregulation, and a prevailing lack of trust that collectively obstruct the pathway for individuals with special needs seeking to access and benefit from these systems.

Addressing these challenges requires sustained research efforts aimed at capturing and understanding the perspectives of those directly involved in the educational process, including



educators and caregivers. Their insights are invaluable for identifying gaps, generating solutions, and enhancing the overall efficacy of educational strategies for individuals with special needs. Importantly, the transition from research to policy improvement necessitates that these empirical insights and recommendations be effectively communicated to policymakers. The goal is to ensure that evidence-based changes are implemented efficiently, reducing bureaucratic barriers and fostering a more accessible, inclusive, and trustful educational environment.

In summary, while the initial assessment provided offers important insights, the path forward demands a concerted effort from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Together, through ongoing, targeted research and open dialogue, we can move towards a more inclusive and effective educational system that not only acknowledges the challenges faced by individuals with special needs but actively works to overcome them.

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