

# INTEGRATION OF THE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, MINORITY AND DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS CORRELATED WITH THE RATE OF TOLERANCE (US – ROMANIAN COMPARATIVE APPROACH)

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**Abstract:** *In this paper, we are going to present the correlation between the rate of tolerance in Romanian society and the integration of the students with disabilities, students with an economically disadvantaged background and those belonging to different minorities within Romanian system of public schools. It is a comparative study taking into account the same phenomenon in US public schools.*

**Key words:** *minorities, disadvantaged students, tolerance, students with disabilities.*

## 1. Introduction

Integration of the students with disabilities, students with an economically disadvantaged background and those belonging to different minorities is a phenomenon that the public schools have confronted with in a lot of countries. The USA is a country which has successfully integrated these students in the public system of education, proving that the rate of tolerance in American society is a facilitating factor. For these reasons we have initiated a research study to observe the perception upon the integration of this type of students in Romanian public schools and to see how the process of integration is correlated with the rate of tolerance in the respondents' view.

The research took place from February to July 2016, and 700 subjects from Braşov County were involved. The subject population is differentiated according to certain criteria:

**Age:** 24.6% (172) belong to the 15-20 age category, 25% (176) to that of 20 -30, and 41.7% (292) to 30 – 50 category, and finally the remaining 8.6% (60) to that of those over 50 years old. It may be noticed that most subjects belong to the 30-50 age category; their relation to the educational system is either a direct one (as students or teachers), or indirect as parents.

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### **Socio-occupational Structure**

High school students: 7.3% (51) from national colleges and high schools of Braşov (Unirea National College, Grigore Antipa High School, Dr. Ioan Meşotă National College); 37.4% (262) University students from the faculties of Psychology and Education, Medicine, Nursing, Sociology and Economic Studies, all of them belonging to Transylvania University of Braşov. Students were chosen from these domains, because their future careers will be concerned with the economic, social protection and health care systems, and of course, those from the Faculty of Education will become the future educators or specialists in educational issues. We selected subjects according to three essential factors with major influence on the educative system: the economic, social and educational environments.

Teachers: 22% (154) of the subjects belong to the teaching staff of the above mentioned high schools and Transylvania University.

Parents: in proportion of 33.3% (233) are in their majority the investigated students' parents.

## **2. Methodology of Research**

In order to investigate and interpret the data and the results, a number of methods were used, from methods of collecting data, documentation, case analysis, predictions, to statistical - mathematical methods. Questionnaires were designed to identify the extent to which the essential elements of the integration in U.S. education are included in current integration methods used in Romanian education, and how they are perceived by the involved actors. There was a variety of questionnaires for each socio-occupational category of investigated subjects.

Students, teachers and parents filled in the questionnaires individually. The decision to participate in this study was their choice. There were no constraints related to filling in the questionnaires.

## **3. Integration of Students with Disabilities**

In the monitoring report, *The Rights of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities: Access to Education and Employment in Romania*, conducted by the Open Society Institute, in partnership with the organization For You, the fact that people with intellectual disabilities have limited educational opportunities is explicitly expressed.

The report demands that the Romanian Government improve the current legislation in order to increase educational opportunities for Romanians with intellectual disabilities.

Romanian regulations and policies support, at declarative level, integration of students with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, in regular schools. Nonetheless, actually only a small number of children with mild intellectual disabilities attend such schools. 'Romanian teachers are not adequately prepared and they lack resources to integrate children with intellectual disabilities in regular schools', says Raluca Nica, the author of the report (*Rights of People with Intellectual Disabilities: Access to Education and Employment*). '*Beside these impediments, the inflexible educational curricula do not support the children with disabilities to develop the skills they need in order to become independent and to manage on their own*' (*Rights of People with Intellectual Disabilities: Access to Education and Employment*).

Most Romanian students, regardless of the type of disability (more than 21,000 children) still attend special segregated schools, which offer an education below common standards. However, most of these schools refuse the registration of children who have serious intellectual disabilities. The information received from the Special Services for Child Protection, included in the report, shows that only 28% of the approximately 52,000 children with disabilities receive education (Report on the Status of the National Educational System, 2006).

The absence of exact statistics about persons with disabilities contributes to a large extent to the lack of public interest for the problems of these people. The OSI report urges the Romanian Government to raise public awareness in order to support people with intellectual disabilities for active integration in their community and subsequently in common public schools.

Students with disabilities in the United States are subject to the same content and performance standards as their colleagues. It is above all a matter of integrating these students in the society, avoiding their isolation, and also represents an exercise of tolerance. This solution is preferred with the aim that these students ought not to be considered second class citizens, and their integration through increased opportunity to learn standards is being attempted in the United States.

The largest proportion of those who want the integration of students with disabilities in the regular education system at the same standards as other students, comes from parents (15.45%), followed by students (10.54%). Teachers are reluctant to accept this idea, and this is natural as long as it refers to a specific tendency of the education based on social efficiency, educational orientation to which they mostly opposed. They are the ones who are the most familiar with the higher level of educational demands, especially the amount of knowledge, which is often abstract, hard to understand, especially for the students with learning deficiencies. Similarly, they are also the ones who know that our education does not have the necessary logistics, teacher counseling or the system of social as well as cognitive assistance which exist in other countries.

In these circumstances teachers' reticence is understandable. Only 2.59% of them agree with integrating students with disabilities at the same standards as their peers. The parents' point of view is polarized. On the one hand they represent the higher percentage (15.45%) in favor of the integration based on the same standards, probably because of their children's need of socialization and, on the other hand, they declare in the highest proportion in the favor of segregating students with disabilities in special institutions.

The apparent contradiction could be explained by the double situation in which parents tried to put themselves when they answered the questionnaire: as parents of children with disabilities, in the first case, and as parents of children with normal development in whose classrooms children with special needs are introduced. So there might be parents whose experience is totally different.

Generally, the parents of children with disabilities have expressed in favor of their children's integration, and those with children without this kind of deficiencies, tend to consider their segregation as being the best solution. Teachers are consistent in their opinions, declaring themselves in the highest proportion for their segregation, while some of them remain on the progressive line in order to integrate the students with disabilities in regular schools but under specific standards (61.03%). The answer is one that is embedded in the same direction related to the common performance standards, where the

highest proportion tends to act according to the evaluation based on students' individual progress. In conclusion, it may be noticed that only 10.4% of participants consider appropriate the integration of students with disabilities in schools at the same standards with the rest of students.

A fairly consistent proportion advocates the idea of educating these students in separate institutions, which shows a rather increased degree of exclusivity. A noticeably higher percentage than that of 46.1% agree with integrating these students in regular schools, but with specific standards. If we consider that 56.5% of the ones who answered were favorably inclined to integrate students with disabilities in regular schools, the degree of tolerance is higher with 13.1% than that of intolerance, and increased opportunity to learn standards may be assimilated to specific standards because the latter do not necessarily have to decrease expectations, but they may tend towards increasing opportunities. Thus we can acknowledge that participants' tendencies do not contradict American model.

Not only students with disabilities may experience some difficulties when they have to prove their competence in relation to common standards, but also students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

#### **4. Integration of Disadvantaged Students**

As it could be seen, increasing opportunity to learn standards is the rationale that American education uses for integrating students with disabilities in public schools. Increasing opportunity to learn standards may be discussed regarding equalizing opportunities for economically disadvantaged students. The Law No Child Left Behind has explicit provisions related to the reduction of the gap achievements on national tests between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their colleagues. Schools which fail to eliminate these discrepancies receive assistance from federal funds. Coleman Report noted that score differences are mostly influenced by the economic background of the students.

On this matter, The Report of International Tendencies in Mathematics and Sciences presented by the Institute of Education shows that students which come from schools with only a few poor children get scores with 46 points higher, both in Sciences and Mathematics, than those who come from schools where more than 26% of children are economically disadvantaged. The results are far below the international average. ([www.arhiva.ise.ro](http://www.arhiva.ise.ro)).

The Presidential Commission's Report labels the current educational system as inequitable. *'An educational system is equitable if it offers students the same learning and grading opportunities, regardless the social, economic or cultural background they come from. Unfortunately, in Romania, despite the previous efforts, inequity is still present. Living in rural areas is associated with major disadvantages: currently only 24.54% of students from rural areas get to attend high school. The proportion of students from rural areas who obtain poor scores in Romanian, Mathematics and Science is 2-6 times higher than that of those from urban areas; the proportion of those who get very good achievements in the same subjects is 2-3 times smaller!'* (Presidential Commission's Report for Analysis and Policy Development in Education and Research, Romania of Education, Romania of Research, 2007).

Regarding this issue, 58.44% of teachers believe that students from disadvantaged areas do not have the same chances in succeeding educationally as their colleagues from other areas, which seems more realistic than that of students who express themselves in this direction in an extent of only 43.77%, or parents represented by a lower percentage of 40.75%.

The general subjects' perception is that students who come from disadvantaged areas do not have equal opportunities in relation to their peers (54.4%) and 45.6% believe in the existence of equal opportunities. The difference is not significant, but it is necessary to note that equal opportunity is an issue that is far more acute than it seems at perceptive level. An artificial attempt of solving such a complex issue is to decrease expectations instead of increasing learning opportunities, which creates the illusion of equal opportunities, but in reality, this is a problem that requires the attention of every responsible faction in order to deeply approach its intimate mechanisms.

In addition to the integration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities, there is another problem related to integration, namely the integration of minorities in the system of education. If we consider the fact that the minorities which are not integrated in schools are both in the United States of America (Hispanics, African Americans, Native Americans) and in Romania (Roma population), economically disadvantaged groups, it may be observed that the measures of equalizing opportunities must be associated with promoting tolerance.

## **5. The Integration of Minority Groups**

America is acknowledged for its great diversity of races, ethnicities and cultures, which live together in an environment that should prove high tolerance. Education must cope with real challenges trying to assimilate this racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, in the dominant Anglo-American stream, but to keep at the same time, each of their identities. Romania does not confront with such diversity, but there are a number of ethnic groups to be integrated into the education system with their culture and traditions.

The draft of the law regarding the status of national minorities in Romania defines, for the first time in Romanian legislation, the term of *'national minority as any group of Romanian citizens who have been living on Romanian territory since the formation of the modern state, in a smaller number than the majority population, having their own ethnic identity expressed freely through culture, language or religion, which they want to preserve, express and develop'* (Ministry of European Integration, 2006).

We should remember that the 2002 census recorded 19,409,400 Romanians (89.5% of the total population), 1,434,377 Hungarians (6.6%), 535,250 Romas (2.5%) 61,091 Ruthenians (0.3%), 60,088 Germans (0.3%), 36,397 Russians (0.2%) 32,596 Turkish people (0.2%), 22,518 Serbians (0.1%), 17,199 Slovaks (0.1%), 8092 Bulgarians, 6786 Croats, 6513 Greeks, 5870 Jews, 3938 Czechs, 3671 Poles, 3331 Italians, 2249 Chinese, 1780 Armenians, 1370 Macedonians, 520 Albanians, 207 Croats and 175 Slovenes (Presidential Commission's Report for Analysis and Policy Development in Education and Research, Romania of Education, Romania of Research, 2007).

The Romanian Constitution, adopted in 2003 and the Education Law acknowledge, protect and guarantee the rights of preserving cultural identity and the right to study in mother tongue on all levels: thus, according to the data provided by the Ministry of

European Integration, only for the Hungarian minority 2.000 educational institutions and departments have been created, from kindergartens, primary and secondary schools to universities with special departments to study Hungarian language in Cluj Napoca, Târgu Mureş and Bucharest. According to the same source, in the 2004-2005 school year, public universities offered 62 specializations taught in Hungarian. At the Babeş Bolyai multicultural University there are 19 faculties taught in Romanian, 16 in Hungarian, 10 in German and 2 faculties of Jewish studies (Ministry of European Integration, 2006).

The methods and fundamental concepts used by the American system of education in certain contexts: bilingual, bicultural, pluralist cultural education, all known under the generic name of multicultural education can be assimilated in Romanian education in order to integrate minorities. The attitude of minorities towards educational integration takes a number of forms. From an extremely active one, that of Hungarians, who leads a sustained struggle for bilingual education and, even more than that, for schools exclusively taught in Hungarian, to one of indifference towards school, manifested by Roma students. In this case, the lack of interest in school may be interpreted in the light in which African Americans regarded school in the United States a few decades ago.

During a long period in history black people, subjected to slavery, while the state institutions ignored and oppressed them, distrust in these institutions, including school. This reluctance has historical roots which have been preserved in a collective memory, often very persistent in the case of dominant minorities. Similarly, in the history of the Roma population there has been a period of slavery and one of forced deportation in Transnistria, and besides that this population lived in isolated communities, where traditions were very well preserved and collective memory strongly manifested. Starting from these considerations, their resistance toward school may be a recollection of the period when this population was dominated, marginalized and treated as being inferior.

In 2000 Agenda, published by the European Commission in July 1997, it is remarked that the integration of minorities in each of the candidate countries is satisfactory, excepting the Roma minority (Ministry of European Integration, 2006).

In Romania the situation of the Roma minority is still a sensitive matter. Although a number of measures have been taken at the central level, they are hardly reflected on the local level, where there is a low awareness regarding the specific problems of the Roma population.

On the 8th of March 2005, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor of the United States of America released a report regarding the situation of human rights in Romania, which pointed out the persistent segregation of the Roma students in some schools, although many non-governmental organizations had noticed the situation and the Ministry of Education and Research had banned such practices.

*'Approximately 80% of the young uneducated population is Roma, of which 38% are functionally illiterate. The proportion of Roma children enrolled in primary education is 64%, compared to 98.9% which is the national average'* (Presidential Commission's Report for Analysis and Policy Development in Education and Research, Romania of Education, Romania of Research, 2007).

Integration of Roma in the educational system is an essential measure for their social integration. It involves the elimination of some barriers of the existing system and access to education, an essential element for the future of this ethnicity.

Those who believe in the highest proportion that minorities are partially integrated in the educational system are students, 74.76%. The highest percentage of population which considers the integration of minorities complete is represented by parents, 42.91%, followed by teachers, 41.55%. Only 22.04% of the students agree that minorities are totally integrated in the educational system.

As a general feature it may be said that only 33.3% of the respondents consider minorities totally integrated in the system and 64.3% perceived that the integration is partial.

Considering that other minorities have a relatively good integration, some having high schools in their mother tongue (Hungarian and German) and universities, our opinion is that the reservation towards total integration is caused by a lack of integration of the Roma minority.

The methods used by the American educational system as well as the long experience for integrating such a large diversity of races, ethnicities and cultures in the educational system would be very useful in order to bring the Roma population closer to school.

'Minorities' integration is impossible to achieve without promoting a spirit of accepting diversity and tolerance.

## **6. Promoting Tolerance**

All socio-occupational categories agree on a rate of over 93%, that tolerance should be promoted in schools. Teachers seem to be the most tolerant 99.35%, followed by students 93.92% and ultimately by parents 93.56%.

Regarding age groups, a favorable opinion is observed at the age category between 15-20 years old 93.02% and one of 96.66% at that of over 50 years old, tolerance increasing with age.

It may be concluded that promoting tolerance is approved in a very high proportion by 94.9% of the respondents. In spite of isolated manifestations of intolerance, which sometimes persists, we can summarize that there is a unified agreement on the concept and education has an important role in promoting it in school and social life. It is significant to remark that answers have come from subjects who live in an area of Romania and have a long experience of living along with other minorities, which takes place in a spirit of tolerance manifested by majority towards minorities.

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