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

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

• INTRODUCTION

- Education is one of the fundamental pillars of human and social development, and the right to education must be guaranteed to all children, regardless of their background or individual characteristics. In this context, children with special educational needs (SEN) constitute a vulnerable group that requires educational, psychological and social support adapted to their needs.
- In Romania, the implementation of the principles of inclusive education has intensified in the last decade, in accordance with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the National Education Law no. 1/2011, which enshrines the principle of equal opportunities in education. However, disparities between urban and rural areas remain significant, especially in terms of infrastructure, human resources and access to support services.
- The rural environment faces multiple challenges: shortage of support teachers, absence of school counselors, lack of psychopedagogical specialists and difficulties in social integration. For these reasons, the analysis of access of children with SEN to education in rural areas becomes essential for identifying directions of intervention that can lead to an equitable and inclusive education.
- The purpose of this research is to assess the degree of inclusion of children with special educational needs in the Romanian rural area, to identify the main barriers to access to education and to formulate concrete recommendations for improving the situation.

• MATERIAL AND METHOD

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

Research objectives

1. Analyzing the distribution of children with SEN between rural and urban areas.
2. Identifying the main difficulties in accessing education in rural areas.
3. Assessing the educational resources available to support students with SEN.
4. Formulating proposals for increasing school inclusion in rural areas.

Methods and tools used:

- Documentary analysis – statistical sources (INS, Ministry of Education, UNICEF, Eurostat) and previous studies on educational inclusion were used.
- Questionnaire and semi-structured interview – applied to a sample of 50 teachers from rural areas (from Timiș, Caraș-Severin and Hunedoara counties), to identify perceptions on the integration of children with SEN.
- Comparative analysis – between rural and urban areas in terms of educational resources and support infrastructure.

• Results and discussions

- The paper aims to analyze the degree of school integration of children with special educational needs in rural areas and identify the factors that favor or limit their access to quality education. Statistical data available in Romania show that the absolute number of children with special educational needs (SEN) is higher in urban areas, but their share relative to the total number of children in the school population is higher in rural areas.
- The general situation of children with SEN. Data provided by the Ministry of Education (2023) show that in Romania there were approximately 75,000 students with special educational needs, of which approximately 30,000 (40%) live in rural areas, but over 52,500 (70%) of them attend urban schools. This fact highlights the shortage of adapted school units in rural areas and the tendency of families to enroll their children in urban schools.
- Educational infrastructure and resources. In order to find out the answers of the teachers surveyed in order to identify the perception of the integration of children with SEN, a questionnaire and semi-structured interview were applied - on a sample of 50 teachers from rural areas (from Timiș, Caraș-Severin and Hunedoara counties). Thus, the following results were obtained:
 - only 28% of rural schools have a support teacher;
 - 17% benefit from a school counselor or speech therapist;
 - over 60% of respondents believe that the facilities and teaching materials for working with SEN students are insufficient or non-existent.
- Qualitative results show that most teachers in rural areas are willing to integrate children with SEN, but they face a lack of professional training and institutional support. Also, in some communities, reticent attitudes persist on the part of parents of other students, which limits the inclusion process.
- Urban-rural disparities. Compared to the urban environment, where there is a network of special schools, resource centers and support services, the rural environment remains deficient at all levels (figure 1).

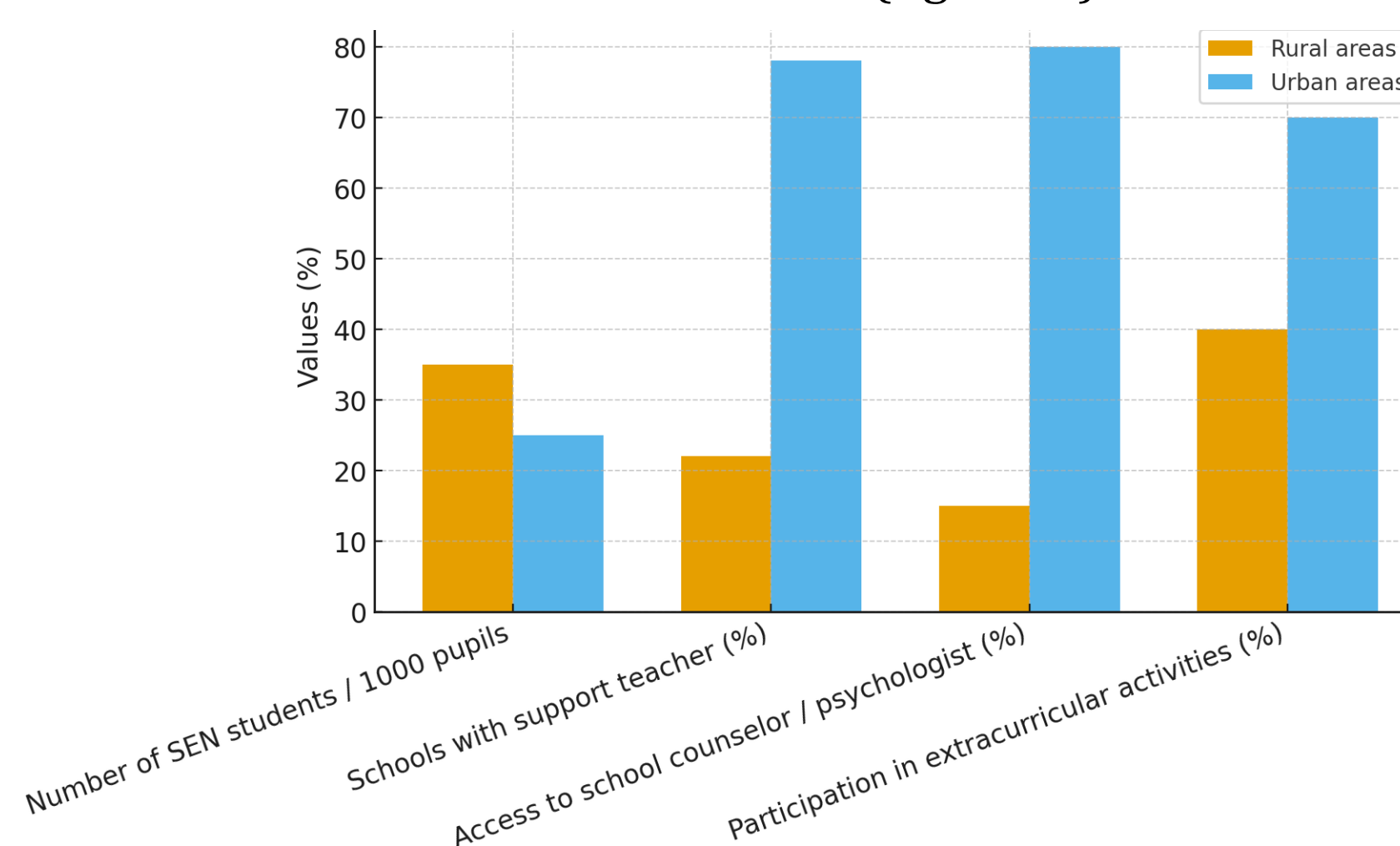


Figure 1 Comparing indicators regarding access of children with SEN to education in rural and urban areas

Conclusions

The research confirms the initial hypothesis that access to education for children with special educational needs is lower in rural areas. The disparities between rural and urban areas are not only due to the lack of material resources, but also to the shortage of specialized personnel, the lack of continuous training of teachers and poor community involvement. To reduce these inequalities, a series of measures are required that can contribute to reducing educational gaps and strengthening the principle of equal opportunities, transforming the rural environment into a more equitable and inclusive educational space for these children.