

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST YOUNG LEARNERS. WITH D FROM DAMAGE, DISTORTED HOPES, AND DISENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL. A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The paper highlights three real-life instances of discrimination against children in the pre-school and elementary school system in Romania that are more than twenty years apart. The paper then briefly surveys the official EU perspective on the fight against discrimination in education, alongside the current EU vision for an inclusive education. The final section focuses on the practice of fighting discrimination in the Romanian schooling system, thereby emphasizing the unbridged gap yet between the humanistic vision of inclusiveness, learner diversity and mutual enrichment on the one hand and the current inadequate materialization of inclusive educational policies in Romania on the other. Suggestions for addressing the problem conclude the paper.

Keywords: *discrimination, different learning needs, learner disengagement and demotivation, inclusive education, teacher professional development*

DOI: 10.24818/SIC/2021/01.06

1. Introduction

The paper highlights three instances of discrimination against young learners and their long-term consequences as concerns learner demotivation and disengagement with school. The author was personally involved with all three of them in her capacity as a silent, helpless observer who timidly confronted an ossified system, to no avail. Given the emotionally loaded experiences that the critical incidents describe, the text tends to read occasionally as an essay. This is a deliberate choice intended to capture some of the intensity of the injustice experienced and the perplexity aroused by the repetitive patterns of discrimination witnessed decades apart.

The discriminatory practices against young learners presented in the early sections of the paper are then projected against the EU vision and the UNICEF and UNESCO relevant approaches. The perspective of the Romanian Ministry of Education is also surveyed, to ultimately conclude that the vision of an inclusive education provided in a mutually enriching classroom is still a desideratum in this part of the world. This generous and yet pragmatic idea aiming at mutually enhancing education is still struggling to materialize.

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The paper ultimately relates the Romanian case studies to the current educational philosophy in the EU and world-wide so as to identify the ensuing compatibilities or the lack of them.

2. The critical incidents

For the purpose of the present paper three incidents have been selected from a range of discriminatory educational practices against young learners that the author has direct and extensive knowledge of. The situation presented below spanned two generations: the first one took place in the capital city of Romania during the communist regime, in a closed nation unaware of the international educational developments; the next two occurred in the same location 25 years later, at a time when Romania was a member state of the EU, its legislation had been harmonized with the EU standards, education-wise included, and the educational system resonated with the EU philosophy of an inclusive education. In principle, for sure. On paper, that is in official documents, by all means. In the classroom practice as well. Or maybe not yet.

2.1 The vicious circle

Almost 30 years ago: the oppressive communist system was gone at last. New and exciting opportunities everywhere. The time for a free and open education had come. Student-centered. The three liberating Hs: Holistic, Harmonious, Humanistic.

A little girl on her first school day. Over the moon: finally at school! High expectations. Perfect happiness. The school yard is overflowing with happy smiles and bright eyes: the youngest learners starting their first day of school. Paradise on earth.

The little girl six weeks later: she has learned the alphabet. Words are slowly emerging from the sea of dark signs on the page. With encouragement she makes good progress. A new world is opening up.

Only that she was never taught the alphabet at home, before school. For fear that she could get bored in class, lose interest and become potentially restless once she had mastered it all before school inception. Interestingly and definitely surprisingly, most of the pupils in her form had acquired the quintessential human skill of reading during the previous summer break.

As a result, progress at a normal pace may well look like slow progress. Fast is the norm in these times so what to do in order to accelerate the learning process for the minority of pupils who candidly started the first grade with no reading skills, as normal? If most of the kids had previous reading training and are able to read surprisingly well six weeks into their first semester in school, these few lame ducks who are only now acquiring the magic skill of converting black signs on paper into a colorful reality in their minds should be encouraged to make faster progress and catch up with the fast lane group. The slow lane group actually matches the time line in the syllabus, but still...

We just want the slow lane group to be super human, no big deal. Motivation is key, no doubt. How about the following scenario: the slow lane readers will be asked to stand up in class while the accomplished fast lane readers will be seated. The novice readers will be standing at the front of the classroom to read out. And the class will react. Peer assessment. Painful peer assessment. Tragic when the fast lane assessors laugh and the slow lane readers stand in front of the class and cry. Humiliation. Frustration. Helplessness.

The little girl was emulating Alice in Wonderland by almost drowning in her own pool of tears. Tears of shame. Tears of feeling inadequate. No information on how productive the “motivational strategy” was for the other sluggish readers - sluggish yet perfectly in line with the syllabus requirements and the respective timeframe - as the little girl was soon transferred to another school with different, more sensible and humane pedagogical approaches.

Nonetheless, the damage was done. Gone was the excitement, gone was the sense of joy and discovery as the years that followed soon proved. By sheer coincidence, no doubt, the schooling experience that started on such a positive note gradually turned into an dreary, inescapable routine. A routine to be endured, never to be enjoyed. With disengagement and avoidance strategies. With aversion occasionally.

To stay with the analogy to Alice in Wonderland, the little girl soon evolved into some kind of Humpty-Dumpty: frail and round. Round because she came to rely on sweets to treat the wounds and the anxiety that school had inflicted on her. Some form of compensation for the all too many negative emotions she had experienced in school.

She had started school with a lot of enthusiasm and high expectations of her own abilities in meeting the required standards. And high expectations of the teacher and the school to appreciate her efforts and recognise her for her commitment. She was unaware that, just like Humpty Dumpty, she was sitting on a wall and walls are dangerous. When she had her big fall she actually fell outside school, outside the school community. "And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again." With the little girl it was doctors and psychologists who worked hard to put the little girl together again, but did not quite manage that.

The former little girl has grown into a failing adult. A lot of resentment and fury. Wasted opportunities. Unfulfilled potential. Low self esteem. Depression. A bleak life of fleeting joy and constant struggle. A broken life. In short, the educational, psychological, and social impact of discrimination on children.

2.2 History repeats itself

Almost two decades later the little girl's son is in kindergarten. Abandoned by his parents he lives with his maternal grandparents. He receives constant encouragement and stimulation. Encouragement to draw and practise drawing as drawing appears to be indispensable in kindergarten. Surprisingly, he bursts into tears. He is three and carries the big burden of being abandoned by his parents. And now more burdens: "I'm stupid... I can't draw... It's a shame." Clearly the perception of the kindergarten teacher. So the best strategy he intuitively comes up with is to refuse to draw altogether so as to avoid ridicule, humiliation, and rejection. Which annoys the teacher even more and she consequently insists that he must draw at all costs. She is determined to find ways to break this unacceptable stubbornness in one so young. Standards are standards and the syllabus is explicit in its heavy emphasis on drawing. The war is raging.

So the grandparents acting as parents start to look into the problem. Radical measures are in place: he is three and three days per week he spends three hours after kindergarten with psychologists who work hard to unblock his system and help his tiny hands do their magic with crayons. Panic attacks at the prospect of drawing. The little boy goes white, cold, and shivering. Because he is stubborn, no doubt... Two months later, despite everybody's best efforts, no progress: the little boy is overworked and exhausted; he has lost weight; he has nightmares. So much time, hard work and money has not produced the desired results: drawing is still eluding him.

In kindergarten the problem persists, the little boy comes across as a rebel and is treated accordingly. From bad to worse.

The substitute parents start medical investigations. Nothing appears to justify his adamant decision not to draw. As all the investigations reveal a healthy, normal little boy - normal but who can't draw, what kind of normality is this, one may wonder - the medical experts request a brain MRI: a tumour maybe? Children need to be put to sleep for such scans so there is additional drama. The pressure is already unbearably high after months of investigations that reveal nothing wrong, nothing to justify the inability to draw; they only add to everybody's exhaustion. All this against the daily complaints that he doesn't draw in class and is becoming unengaged with the study and play alike.

The state-of-the-art medical technology proves helpless. And so are all involved in supporting the little boy. Until doctors discover that his hands are not able to perform fine operations as effectively as his peers can and that the coordination of his hands is very perfectible. So the little boy and his substitute parents put all their energy in taming the "wild" hands: they start to button and unbutton shirts, to thread beads, to pick up seeds and lots of small items, to ultimately train the tiny fingers to hold a crayon and leave a mark on paper.

2.3 Inclusive education?

The little boy goes to school. After the unfortunate experiences with two generations of children being discriminated in pre-school at age three and in school at age six, the little boy's substitute family has turned wiser: in summer, before the school starts, his grandmother-turned-mother visits the school and talks to his would-be teacher to learn about her expectations: does she expect her grade zero students to be able to read when they start school or not? Sigh of relief: the teacher confirms that she is going to take care of this, no point in the family teaching him the alphabet beforehand. Back to normality. Or so it seems.

School finally begins. The little boy sings with joy on the way to school. Short-lived joy. The young students are soon asked to draw. Panic. The little boy knows by now that when he draws, adults are not happy with his work. To him, no action at all looks better than poor action. No drawing means no ridicule, no negative comments. His past experiences in the early educational system have taught him this lesson.

The teacher is vexed with what she perceives as the unruly behaviour of this difficult little boy. Same feedback day in, day out: "He doesn't work in class. He won't touch the pencil: no drawing, no writing." The family provides her some information on the little boy's background and his hard start in life, with the trauma of being abandoned by his parents in infancy, his early under-nourishment, under-development and the like. The grandparents-turned-parents actually feel heroic and very happy at this point in his life that they have managed to bring to school a little boy who has been able to overcome the many obstacles and challenges in his tiny life.

No drawing. The teacher constantly complains that he does not work – read draw – in class. And then she becomes suspicious "He must have a medical condition." Now this is tricky: he has a medical condition indeed, but the family has clear instructions from the medical experts who take care of him, who supervise his progress and are thrilled about it; they all insist that any diagnosis is strictly confidential and is available only to the doctor and the patient. What is more, based on their medical practice, they consider that once the medical diagnosis is shared with the school system, the little patient ends up being discriminated and marginalized. Not again, please, school, please!

Under the doctors' strict orders the family tactfully avoids disclosing the diagnosis and continues to highlight the many activities that the little boy can do, the many things he knows, his many interests and skills. The teacher insists on what he can not do and on what he does not know. She is the educational expert so the family constantly asks her for advice and suggestions. "Based on your experience, what do you think we should do to help with his drawing? What could be helpful? Any advice to share? How do you recommend that we should approach it?" For three months on end she answers nothing but "I don't know." Her guidance and support to us is best summed up as "I don't know."

And then we learn from our general practitioner that the caring "I don't know" teacher called to inquire about the little boy and his medical condition. In the face of the doctor's refusal to discuss it with her, the teacher called the kindergarten - with the same request - and met with the same refusal. All the while unwilling and unable to reach out to the little boy and his family and to consider sharing her expertise and providing some much-needed support.

The cold war is soon to become a thing of the past. Two month into the first semester of the preparatory grade - intended to help kids adjust to the school requirements and prepare them for the smooth transition from the joys of kindergarten learning to the equivalent joys of schools – the little boy who does not draw and does not work in class but sits quietly, observes and watches, the little boy stands up in class, walks around and looks in admiration at a colleague’s work. Disaster strikes: he is upsetting the class! The learnign process is endangered! The little boy has started an open, full-blown war.

The teacher has a quick solution: she calls in the security guard and requests to have the little boy removed from the classroom. The little boy knows this is not fair and is disproportionate, so he tries to stand his ground. He is dragged out, in tears, on the teacher’s orders. His request to be in class with the other children falls on deaf ears and cold hearts. No other child in the class has ever been subjected to such treatment. They can all draw.

Panic attacks. Frustration. Anger. Sence of injustice. Back to the psychologists and psychotherapists. They are shocked: to touch a child in tears and dispair and drag him out of the classroom under the eyes of his colleagues is just unheard of! As one psychologist put it: “I’m amazed that after such massive school-induced trauma the little boy is still willing to go to school.” They voice their critical opinions of the teacher’s inadequate crisis management skills and object to the solution she adopted in terms of its impact on the little boy’s self esteem and his appetite for learning, when learning comes with such negative experiences. But psychologists will always take the children’s side and feel for them. They score high in terms of emotional intelligence. It comes with their job. Unlike educators. Sadly.

This is when our dreams of an inclusive education for little boys and girls in the capital city of Romania ended. The gap between theory and practice proved just unbridgeable.

3. Fighting discrimination in education: The EU perspective

Romania is a member of the EU and adheres to the EU policies and decisions.

When it comes to fighting discrimination in education, there are good intentions and enlightened approaches everywhere: locally through the Romanian Ministry of Education, regionally – that is in the European Union - through the European Council, European Parliament and the European Commission, world wide through UNESCO and UNICEF. To mention just a few actors involved in promoting and protecting children’s equal rights to education.

The stakes are very high as the manifold consequences of children’s discrimination in education as well as the educational, psychological, and social impact of discrimination on children are extensively documented. Governments, the Romanian government included, constantly promote inclusive education and its proven strategies for fulfilling each student’s potential, as well as the students’productive integration on the labour market and in the community, so as to ensure their full development and their successful engagement with the community, for an autonomous, dignified and rewarding life.

For example, “in December 2017, the European Council, European Parliament and the Commission endorsed the adoption of the **European pillar of social rights**. The agreement highlights the importance of the social, educational and cultural dimensions of EU policies for bulding a common European future. The first principle of the European Pillar of social rights underlines that: 'Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market’”.²

² https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/inclusive-education_en

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education echoes this approach in its key message: “Changing the role of specialist provision towards supporting inclusive education is closely related to ensuring the rights of all learners to high-quality inclusive education.”³

The complexity involved in bridging the gap between these inclusive policies and the educational practice accounts for the comprehensive attention granted to it by EU policy makers in their “all abilities, one education approach”. The ultimate goal of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education aligns with its key principles: “that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers. The development of these principles reflects the Agency’s increasing emphasis on being an active agent for policy change in the field of inclusive education.”⁴

The overall vision of the Agency aims at establishing an educational system across the European Union that becomes “more equitable, effective and efficient in valuing learner diversity and raising the achievement of all learners”⁵.

3.1 Fighting discrimination in education: the Romanian primary education practice

Investigation reveals that what the little boy has consistently experienced in the educational system appears to have a two-fold origin: on the one hand what is referred to as the indirect disability discrimination (Mifsud, 2019) that manifested repeatedly in the primary education system and, on the other, the teachers’ limited empathy and their lacking training in dealing with learners with different learning styles and educational needs.

In retrospect, the little boy’s walking around the classroom to inspect his colleagues’ drawings in their second month in grade zero/ preparatory grade could be interpreted as a kinesthetic learning style, not as unruly behavior that justified, according to the teacher’s approach, the intervention of the security guard who used force to drag the little boy out of the classroom. Such behaviour violates a learner’s dignity and “creates an environment that is intimidating, degrading, offensive or humiliating” (Mind, 2021:1). A harmful environment that is counter-productive both for learning and for inclusive education.

It has been long documented that each “learner has distinct and consistent preferred ways of perceptions, organization and retention.... Gardner’s research has shown that human cognitive ability is pluralistic rather than unitary and that learners of any subject will make greater progress if they have the opportunity to use their areas of strength to master the necessary material.” (Vaishnav, 2013: 1-2). Experienced educators and reflective practitioners are familiar with learners occasionally breaking “rules without realising, or due to distress as a result of having their needs unmet. Applying such policies without flexibility may well lead to indirect disability discrimination. The only exception is when the policy or practice can be justified as a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim, such as the health, safety and welfare of pupils” (Mifsud, 2019). Which was certainly not the case when the little boy walked about the classroom in his second month in the preparatory class.

The Romanian Ministry of Education is very explicit in its official website about the goals the preparatory class is required to meet: “***For the child***, the preparatory class is a period of adjustment to school life, which allows him to adapt well to the program, community and specific requirements of this diverse environment in terms of socio-emotional, intellectual and physical development. From a socio-emotional point of view, the preparatory class supports the child to gain confidence in their own strengths, to increase their self-esteem, initiative and desire for success.” (Romanian Ministry of Education, 2021)

³ <https://www.european-agency.org/resources/multimedia/key-message/changing-role-specialist-provision-towards-supporting-inclusive>

⁴ <https://www.european-agency.org/news/key-principles-2021>

⁵ <https://www.european-agency.org/news/key-principles-2021>

There is clearly a gap between the ministerial vision and expectations and the everyday classroom practice. A gap hard to bridge yet. According to UNICEF, “despite efforts to achieve European standards and a higher level of development and social cohesion, almost 42% of Romanian children continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty, reduced access to services, exclusion, and discrimination.” (UNICEF, 2021)

To further compound the problem, the doctors’ recommendation not to disclose the little boy’s medical condition resulting in limited manual skills which was intended to protect him from discrimination and marginalization, clearly enraged his school teacher who perceived it as deception. As a result, she continued to state the obvious (“He doesn’t draw in class.”) but denied us any practical support. With no practical support there was no progress, and with no progress there was no integration. Furthermore she engaged in extensive detective work to learn about his diagnosis and called the little boy’s general practitioner’s office and his kindergarten. So much for empathy and professional expertise in promoting an inclusive education.

The practice of inclusive education tends to lag behind the theory, at least locally, in Romania, as the first part of this paper demonstrates. Change is difficult to manage in any field, all the more so in education. The successful experience of other countries suggests that the transition to inclusive education could be achieved through a long-term national project. However, long-term projects are hard to implement in politically volatile environments where the nation-wide priorities set by the Ministry of Education change frequently, with every new Minister and his or her own agenda.

In the Romanian educational environment inclusive education requires a paradigm shift relying on teacher professional development and, specifically, teacher professional learning for inclusion. This needs to start as top-down decisions that are embraced by the school management and the teachers’ body. Teachers need to become aware of the European Union’s vision for inclusive education and be trained accordingly, acquiring “proven strategies that bring out the benefits for everyone” (Dale McManis, no year: 1). They need to develop the skills required for supporting **all** learners as the teachers’ role in achieving an inclusive education is of strategic, crucial importance. Otherwise inclusive education will continue to be a fantasy which educational authorities appear to uphold but still fail to make it a reality.

The Romanian culture has a strong fascination with exceptional people, learners included. Romanians take great pride in the amazing accomplishments of stellar students who earn medals in international olympiads. And this appreciation is fully deserved. However, we often tend to forget in Romania that the exceptional students are only the tip of the iceberg, a vibrant community of gifted and hard-working teenagers. They are visible and glorious, as they should be, and the Ministry of Education basks in their international glory. Still the vast majority of learners are unable to connect effectively to the school system - for being discriminated against, among others - and they are the grey, mediocre majority struggling through their joyless compulsory education. “We need schools that recognize and support that reality” (King, 2020:2). Although the statement was originally inspired by the discrimination in the US education system, it speaks to education’s need of social relevance and awareness everywhere, Romania included.

Once we accept that “education is the gateway to children’s full participation in society – transition into adulthood, opportunities for employment, and engagement with their communities.” (UNICEF), then we realize that what we need in order to fight discrimination in the schooling system is an education that is not only inclusive, but also engaging and meaningful.

3.2 Grass-roots suggestions for addressing the problem

The suggestions below have naturally emerged from the author’s first-hand experience with young learners’ discrimination in Romanian education when contrasted to the lofty vision of the European Union. Basically they are inspired by the painful gap between the integrative vision promoted by the EU – a vision that is also adhered to by the Romanian Government and the Ministry of Education, respectively, in its mission statement - and the everyday reality.

Based on empirical evidence, the young learners who need support in their educational endeavours are currently under-represented in the educational system. Real-life numbers appear to be significantly larger than officially acknowledged, also due to the parents' awareness that with the limited support officially available, it may be less socially damaging to their child to actually conceal the diagnosis and struggle on their own throughout the educational process.

As specialist services offered by the school system to the young learners who face educational challenges pride of place is attached to individual psycho therapy sessions that can be provided in the school one hour per week. The side benefit of this form of specialist support is the psychotherapist's easy networking with the teacher and thereby their ability to informally educate the teacher as to the best strategies to use in order to engage special learners.

Again based on empirical evidence, the teachers in kindergarten and elementary schools appear to fit one of the following three profiles: a. they have no knowledge of and no interest in dealing with such learners and they basically marginalize and reject them; b. they have no knowledge or very limited pedagogical expertise in dealing with these special learners but they are eager to learn, therefore they cooperate with the family; c. they are aware of the magnitude of the phenomenon and know how to deal effectively with the challenges of integrative education.

Based on the training programmes provided by the Romanian Ministry of Education on an on-going basis, clearly the numbers of teachers who become aware of the educational needs of such learners and who are willing to support them are constantly rising. There is definitely progress in this respect, and ample room for improvement as well.

To conclude, young learners with special education needs, frequently diagnosed with ADHD, are under-documented in the Romanian educational environment; they are under-supported given the gap between their growing numbers and the limited support system in place; they are under-appreciated in terms of their many talents and the contribution they can make to the community. For example, the Romanian education system commonly focuses on the negative aspects of ADHD, primarily the learners' inability to concentrate, tendency to procrastinate, being easily distracted, poorly organized and forgetful. Romania and its education system has yet to become inclusive and learn to see opportunities where it has traditionally seen only problems.

A good case in point is the USA, with the UK and the Scandinavian nations close behind. As evidence that other cultures have learned how to build on the creativity, determination, energy, and passion that ADHD people bring to their careers, the following random selection of articles⁶ helps to tell a very

⁶ Entrepreneurship and ADHD: Fast Brain, Fast Company? <https://www.additudemag.com/entrepreneurship-adhd-business-research-traits-stories/>,

ADHD: The Entrepreneur's Superpower, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dalearcher/2014/05/14/adhd-the-entrepreneurs-superpower/?sh=5e160a8b59e9>

Those with ADHD might make better entrepreneurs. Here's why <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/286808>

The 5 Superpowers People With ADHD Can Use to Be Better Entrepreneurs <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/322335>

ADHD traits can be an 'opportunity' for entrepreneurs. TED speaker Cameron Herold helped to grow three companies past the \$100m mark. He explains why ADHD gives him the edge on MBA-types

<https://www.theguardian.com/small-business-network/2015/jul/18/adhd-opportunity-entrepreneur-ted-edge>
Harnessing ADHD for business success

different story: a story of people who enhance their own lives and their communities instead of embarrassing them.

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