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**DISCRIMINATION OF CHILDREN IN THE ROMANIAN  
EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

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***Abstract***

This paper exploits case-studies provided by 67 students in their final year, preparing for the teaching career, attending the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-primary Education study programme, “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău; the students presented, with details, cases of child discrimination in Romanian urban and rural schools. Based on their case-studies, our aim is to find in what way the students in the final year, who prepare for a teaching career in primary and pre-primary education, perceive the issue of discrimination in school. We intend to identify the students’ perception of discrimination in school by analysing their case-studies and highlighting: the types of discrimination and the percentages for each type; the level of discrimination at the local level compared to the national level; realistic solutions for diminishing child discrimination proposed by the students in their final year, preparing for the teaching career, attending the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-primary Education study programme. In the context of worrying statistics on discrimination of children based on poverty, ethnic group, disability and religion, there is a stringent need to identify ways to diminish it and the appropriate agents to implement them.

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## 1. Introduction

Teacher training for primary and preschool education must be correlated, in terms of the social and prospective nature of education, with the issue of sustainable development. This is defined as "...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Blessinger, Sengupta, & Makhanya 2018, p.1). Prospective teachers need to know the issues of child discrimination because when they work in the system, they will encounter situations that they will have to properly manage in a "world that continues to become increasingly globalized and interdependent" (idem). Higher education, in general, and teacher training, in particular, must additionally ensure that it will ensure inclusion and equity for its beneficiaries, so that they can, in turn, be able to transfer values, attitudes and strategies further within the education system.

Issues related to child discrimination in school are extremely closely related to the issue of equity. It is "defined as the fairness principle that every individual is entitled to *just* opportunity to access and participate in education. Equity therefore entails understanding student learning needs to mitigate obstacles to achieving student academic success" (idem). In this respect, it may be related to the labelling or non-labelling of students, the attendance or non-attendance of their school, participation in school activities, promotion or non-promotion, success or abandonment, school and social integration or exclusion.

High school dropout rates and/or non-enrolment in school has been associated with child discrimination across the globe. Reasons that put children at risk of social exclusion include: the poor financial situation of the families/poverty, parents' and siblings' low level of education, family break-up, migration, child labour, race and ethnic group to which they belong, children's special needs and disabilities, a poor economic situation of the country or region in which they live; the vulnerability of children that results from such situations manifests as non-enrolment, school dropout, social exclusion, non-employability and poverty; most often than not, poverty is revealed as the primary factor of discrimination, with disabilities and ethnic group as secondary (MDGIF & UNICEF, 2011; Costache & Zaharia, 2018).

Our previous study has highlighted the devastating impact and effects of poverty and discrimination on children: at the physical level (agitation, lack of motor finesse, aggression/violence towards others, aggression from others); at the psychic/mental level: anxiety, lack of interest/apathy, lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, depression, poor mental/intellectual/learning skills, behavioral disorders, need for special/customized recovery/rehabilitation program); at the social level (absenteeism, isolation/marginalization, self-isolation, bullying others, bullying from others) (Cojocariu & Boghian, 2018). The same study has also highlighted the teacher's crucial role in connecting and activating the agents involved in anti-discrimination measures and actions: children, teachers, families, the school and local authorities, the community, church. We believe that teachers should be better trained to face the challenges arising from discrimination situations in class and find support in their initiatives for eliminating discrimination in schools; the support should be provided by all the other agents involved in the educational act and should be made more easily available particularly by such agents as school and local authorities.

## 2. Problem Statement

Statistics (Muižniecks, 2014; Eurostat statistics (2018); INS-Tempo online (2018), SCL103A & SCL103B, (2018)) have been revealing worrying percentages of child discrimination based on poverty, ethnic group, disability and religion. The dramatic consequences of child discrimination in school include school drop-out and long-lasting, sometimes irreversible negative effects on the social, physical, moral and spiritual development of the discriminated child, ultimately leading to unemployment, poverty and marginalization: worldwide, 6 million students drop out of school every year (approximately 14% of the total number of students); Romanian schools have been having a difficult time in maintaining their students: as a consequence of the high risk of poverty and social exclusion for almost half of Romanian children, the school drop-out rate has grown by one third in the last 9 years (Eurostat, 2018). Worrying national statistics show that the school dropout rate is 20% higher in rural schools as compared to the school dropout rate in major cities: the national early school dropout rate is 26.6% in rural areas, 17.4% in small towns and suburbs, and 6.2% in municipalities (people aged 18-24 who have completed at least middle school and are enrolled in no form of education or training) (*Save the Children*, 2018). Although the school dropout rate slightly decreased, from 19.1% in 2015 to 18.3% in 2017, the national target under the Europe 2020 strategy (11.3%) remains unattainable. Access to quality education is a challenge, especially in rural areas where 45% of Romania's school population study (primary and middle-school level); for the 2017-2018 school year, the percentages for school enrolment and participation to the educational act for students between the ages 6-14 is: 94.2% in the urban environment, 71.6% in the rural environment; differences between rural and urban areas are also reflected in the rate of entry in pre-school education: the percentage of children aged 3-5 years old enrolled in preschool education is, for the 2017-2018 school year: 87.7% in the urban environment and 73.3% in the rural environment (Ministry of Labor and Social Justice, 2018).

The discriminatory social context and the lack of public policies that should make funding available directly to vulnerable students also generates differences in terms of all performance indicators between the rural and urban environment; a look at the results from national assessments reveals the complexity of a social phenomenon that has already become chronological: in 2016, 37.5% of the students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the rural areas had poor results (below the minimum score of 5), compared with 15% in urban schools (*Save the Children*, 2018).

## 3. Research Questions

Our research questions are connected to the purpose of our study:

RQ1: What are the types of discriminations identified by the students participating in our research?

RQ2: What is the relation between the level of discrimination at the local level and the level of discrimination reported by statistics at the national level?

RQ3: What solutions are there for diminishing child discrimination as proposed by the students in the final year who have provided the case-studies?

The objectives of the study, derived from the purpose and correlated with the research questions, are:

O1. Identifying the types of discrimination presented/analysed by the students participating in the study;

O2. Highlighting the percentage of each type of discrimination;

- O3. Highlighting some correlations between the level of discrimination at the local level and the national level of discrimination, according to statistics;
- O4. Identifying the solutions proposed by the students participating in the study on reducing child discrimination;
- O5. Systematizing the solutions proposed by the students participating in the study on reducing child discrimination.

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to find in what way the students in the final year, who prepare for a teaching career in primary and pre-primary education, perceive the issue of child discrimination in school.

We intend to identify the students' perception of discrimination in school and a series of realistic solutions for diminishing child discrimination proposed by the students; these solutions may be further elaborated upon and included in a module of anti-discrimination education that could be included in the initial teacher training of all students who undergo teacher training. It is important for us, the teachers involved in the teaching process, to know what the future teachers of primary and preschool education know about the discrimination of children in our education system and whether they can offer solutions (many-few, realistic-unrealistic) to this problem. Because they will certainly face the different facets of discrimination. To illustrate our conception of the outcomes of this study and their correlations, we present the study design in Table 01.

**Table 01.** Study design

Purpose of the study		
RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
O1, O2	O3	O4, O5

#### 5. Research Methods

Our research methods were the case study and case-study analysis. We analysed case studies provided by 69 students in the first semester of their final year, attending the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-primary Education study programme, Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău, Romania. The students presented, in details, cases of child discrimination existing in Romanian schools, from urban and rural environments. From the 69 case studies submitted by the students, 2 of them were found to present superficial, insufficient details for our study and were, therefore, eliminated from the analysis; therefore, the final number of case-studies we analysed was 67.

The case studies complied with a pre-established structure: description of the child discrimination context: urban/rural environment, family climate, socio-economic-cultural background, vulnerable family members and type of family (biparental, mono-parental, etc.); the child's age; disabilities of the discriminated child, social and school behaviour of the discriminated child; agents responsible for the discrimination and description of their conduct, actions, language; the response of others (teachers, school management, classmates, parents) regarding the discrimination and the vulnerable child; possible remedial solutions: the agents involved, actions for eliminating/controlling/diminishing the discrimination, types of

activities (curricular, counselling, extra-curricular etc.). Following the collecting of the case studies, a quantitative-qualitative analysis and systematization of the data obtained was carried out in accordance with each research question. Students were asked for their consent to participate in the research. They were assured that the data provided by them would be anonymous, confidential and used only for the stated purpose of the research.

## 6. Findings

Regarding *RQ1/O1, O2*: What are the types of discriminations identified by the students participating in the research?/O1: Identifying the types of discrimination presented/analysed by the students participating in the study;O2: Highlighting the percentage of each type of discrimination – there were analyzed the 67 case studies. The results are highlighted in Table 02, based on their frequency and percentage:

**Table 02.** Types of discrimination

Type of discrimination	Frequency/cases	Percentage
poverty and ethnic discrimination	17	25.37%
poverty discrimination	16	23.89%
disability discrimination	15	22.38%
ethnic discrimination	11	16.42%
poverty and disability discrimination	5	7.47%
poverty, ethnic and disability discrimination	1	1.49%
ethnic and religious discrimination	1	1.49%
ethnic and disability discrimination	1	1.49%
total	67	100%

The analysis of the data highlighted in Table 02 indicates that students identify a multitude of types of discrimination that are manifested in the teaching activity in preschool and primary education. In terms of form, we found that the students participating in the study identified, on the one hand, single types of discrimination (poverty discrimination, disability discrimination, ethnic discrimination: 42 cases, 62.69%) as well as combinations of types of discrimination, two types (poverty and ethnic discrimination, poverty and disability discrimination, ethnic and religious discrimination, ethnic and disability discrimination:24 cases, 35.82%) or even three types (poverty, ethnic and disability discrimination: 1 case, 1.49%). Whereas for the whole study there have been identified 4 types of discrimination (poverty, ethnic, disability, religious), the number of combinations generated by the students is 5 (poverty and ethnic discrimination; poverty and disability discrimination; poverty, ethnic and disability discrimination; ethnic and religious discrimination; ethnic and disability discrimination). The frequency of each type of discrimination identified is: ethnic discrimination occurs most often (n=5); poverty discrimination and disability discrimination have an equal number of occurrences (n=4); religious discrimination occurs most seldom of all (n=1).

Regarding *RQ2/O3*:What is the relation between the level of discrimination at the local level and the level of discrimination reported by statistics at the national level?/Highlighting some correlations between the level of discrimination at the local level and the national level of discrimination, according to

statistics, we should state, first and foremost, that although our paper is based on a relatively small number of case studies, we may draw several comparisons between our findings and national statistics on discrimination.

Our investigation yielded a percentage of 58.21 (39 cases) for discrimination of children based on poverty and poverty combined with other criteria, as shown above; the case-studies were collected in schools from Bacău county. At the national level, more than half (52,2%) of the children in Romania are vulnerable due to poverty and, consequently, social conclusion (Raport al Organizației Salvați Copiii România, 2016); this percentage is, for EU member states, only 28%.

National statistics on the degree of tolerance in the social space reveal that:

- 14% of children say they would agree to be deskmates with a colleague infected with HIV, 27% would be indifferent, 59% would be against (compared to about 19% who said they would agree to being classmates with a child in this situation); 34% of students said they would agree to be deskmates with a colleague with a physical disability (compared to almost 40% who would agree to have such a child as a classmate); 30% of the children say they would agree to be deskmates with a child with mild mental disabilities (compared with nearly 37% who would agree to having such a classmate); our investigation revealed a sum of 31,34% of cases of discrimination based on disability (not necessarily HIV, but physical and mental impairment);
- 32% of the children said they would agree to be deskmates with a Roma child, 16% said that they would be against and 52% said that this would not matter to them (compared with the percentage of nearly 49 of students who would agree to have a Roma child as a classmate); our investigation revealed 16,42% of cases of discrimination based only on the ethnic criterion (11 cases) and a sum of 46,26% (31 cases) of cases of discrimination based on the ethnic criterion and the ethnic criterion in combination with other discrimination criteria (poverty, disability and religion).

For *RQ3/O4, O5*: What solutions are there for diminishing child discrimination as proposed by the students in the final year who have provided the case-studies?/O4. Identifying the solutions proposed by the students participating in the study on reducing child discrimination; O5. Systematizing the solutions proposed by the students participating in the study on reducing child discrimination.–the frequency and percentage of the solutions proposed most often by students are illustrated in Table 03:

**Table 03.** Types of solutions proposed by students for the issue of child discrimination in school

No.	Type of solutions	Frequency	Percentage
0.	the teacher is the most important factor in diminishing the discrimination	67	100
1.	the teacher treats all students in the class equally	67	100
2.	the teacher gets to know the discriminated child better	55	82.08%
3.	the teacher engages the child's family, classmates' parents, school and local authorities in finding a solution	34	50.74%
4.	the teacher assigns special tasks or roles to the discriminated child based on his/her needs and interests	16	23.88%
5.	the teacher praises and encourages the discriminated child for his/her efforts and results	15	22.38%
6.	the teacher organizes extracurricular activities	8	11.94%
7.	cases of child discrimination where the teacher is the main discriminating agent should be severely punished	7	10.44%

The collected and analysed data show that the agent playing the main role in initiating the intervention actions is the teacher (n=67/100%), which highlights his/her essential – and somewhat overwhelming – role as conflict manager in class in an undeniable way. The teacher has been described in the case studies as the primary agent who acts (and who is expected to take action!) for eliminating the children's discriminating behaviour and attitude. In this hypostasis, the teacher knows (is expected to know!) what to do and how to remedy the discrimination-based conflict in class/school and how to engage all the other agents involved in the anti-discrimination actions. At the same time, it should be emphasized that students, by taking full responsibility for reducing the discrimination of children in school, will also refer to other agents (students, parents, school counsellors, psychologists, support teachers, therapists, nurses, doctors, priests) and institutions (family, medical cabinets, town hall, church, NGOs) to work with. It is important that these are mentioned, but future teachers for primary and preschool education will have to rethink and develop these categories of partnerships by substantially increasing their involvement with them.

There were several types of actions described in the case studies, with the teacher as a leader in most of them:

1. The teacher treats all the students in the class equally (n=67/100%); although this has not been clearly stated in all the case-studies submitted by students and analysed by us, the way in which solutions have been formulated render the idea that the teacher applies, or should apply, equal treatment to all children in class, irrespective of their socio-economic-cultural-ethnic background;

2. The teacher observes the child's behaviour in various contexts, designs and conducts the educational process so as to integrate the vulnerable child, build empathy, group interaction and group cohesion, respect and mutual help (storytelling, role-play, projects and portfolios) (n=55/82.08%);

3. The teacher engages the child's family, classmates' parents, school and local authorities in finding ways to eliminate the discrimination situation and provide whatever possible support and help to the vulnerable child, also by educating children, parents and the local community in the spirit of an anti-discrimination attitude, behaviour and speech, finding financial support and other types of assistance for the vulnerable child and his/her family (n=34 /50,74%);

4. The teacher assigns differentiated tasks or roles to the discriminated child based on his/her needs and interests, focused on building self-confidence and filling in learning gaps; in the case of discrimination based on child disability, the case studies stressed the need for assistance and support from a school councillor/therapist or a certified professional with experience in working with children with disabilities because, in such cases, the teacher feels overwhelmed and helpless due to limited time resources and lack of professional training in this field (n=16/23.88%);

5. The teacher praises and encourages the discriminated child for his/her efforts and results (n=15/22.38%) and inspires all children to offer praise to one another more often;

6. The teacher organizes extracurricular activities, with the participation of all agents involved, to build group interaction, collaboration and cooperation, team-work at the level of the group of children, and empathy, mutual understanding and support at the level of the group of parents and the community (n=8/11.94%);

7. Cases of child discrimination where the teacher is the main discriminating agent should be severely punished; to this effect, there should be a legal authority in every school unit responsible with

monitoring and sanctioning child discrimination by means of educational programmes and legal action against the discriminating agent/agents (n=7 cases/10,44%).

All the solutions provided by the students who conducted the case studies indicate the fact that teachers display, with few exceptions, an active anti-discrimination attitude; however, the few cases when the teacher has been indicated as a discriminating agent (7 cases/10,44%) shows the need to educate teachers for increased tolerance, acceptance and equal treatment and chances.

## 7. Conclusion

The data obtained in our micro-research, although limited due to the small number of case studies analysed, allow us to release two categories of conclusions: specific conclusions - generated in terms of purpose, research questions and previously established objectives, formulated on the basis of the case studies collected from students in particular life situations; general conclusions, determined by analysing the specific conclusions formulated by extrapolating them to the issue of discrimination of children in school at the level of education system.

The specific conclusions highlight that students who are preparing for a teaching career in primary and preschool education have a fair, though not complete, representation on the issue of child discrimination in school. They know many of the types of discrimination that are manifested in the system (poverty discrimination, ethnic discrimination, disability discrimination, religious discrimination) and their various combinations. However, there are and are actually practiced other types of discrimination that have not been referred to: gender discrimination, background (urban, rural), which may mean that students do not have a complete picture of the phenomenon, therefore they will not have the appropriate tools to handle such discrimination (given that they have not even identified them). The students can develop realistic solutions to highlight cases of discrimination, but their perspective is predominantly centred on the teacher. Even though this is the main pillar of formal education, future teachers need to learn to share their issues (of any kind!) and the responsibility to solve them with all the actors and institutions empowered in this respect. In fact, their mission is to coagulate them in a block of anti-discrimination action, based on the principle of equity, to ensure inclusion and equal opportunities for education, for sustainable development.

The general conclusions extend to the process of initial and continuing training for the teaching career. Our study highlights the need to empower teachers to act since they have been nominated as the main agents initiating anti-discrimination actions. There is a stringent need to build the correspondence between teachers' good intentions to eliminate discrimination and the result of their actions which depends on the support and involvement of the child, the child's family, school and local authorities, and the entire community in which the discriminated child lives. This correspondence may be achieved by implementing a series of measures at the level of class, school and community aimed at raising awareness and promoting mutual support and understanding. The solutions aimed at eliminating and/or controlling child discrimination in school concern several levels of action:

1. at class level, the teacher applies equal treatment to all students;
2. at school level, the school authorities make the school a welcoming environment for all children and work more closely with teachers to ensure that:
  - the right to education of all children is respected;



- teaching methods are adjusted to suit the needs of all students and focused on exploiting the individuality and talents of each child and on the acquisition of competences;
  - teaching-learning-evaluation methods are adapted in such a way that they encourage and empower all children to learn, considering their different learning styles and levels of skills;
3. at community level, the local council, school inspectorates and school authorities work together to connect families, school and the community; they design, adopt and implement measures to increase school enrolment rates and reduce school dropout rates by means of counselling, financial and medical support.

Based on our research, we believe that initial teacher training should include a compulsory course or module on anti-discrimination measures in class and school aimed at providing teachers with the knowledge and tools needed to deal with the challenges of child discrimination in educational institutions. The anti-discrimination content units may discuss aspects such as: causes and effects of discrimination; anti-discrimination measures; agents that may support teachers in eliminating discrimination; anti-discrimination policies; examples of anti-discrimination measures/actions in class/school/community. At the same time, there are enough possibilities (courses, modules, seminars, conferences) to continue this process in the continuous training of teachers.

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