

Education Between Village and City: The Role of the Community in Supporting School Education in Rural and urban Contexts

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Abstract

This article analyzes the role of the community in supporting the school education process from the perspective of the differences and similarities between rural and urban environments. Based on the premise that schools do not operate in isolation, but in interdependence with the social, economic and cultural realities of a community, the research explores how actors such as the family, the administration, economic agents contribute to or, on the contrary, limit the effectiveness of the educational approach. Using a qualitative approach, based on semi-structured interviews with teachers and community leaders from both backgrounds, the study highlights key factors such as social cohesion, civic involvement and access to resources. The results emphasize the need for differentiated and locally tailored strategies to strengthen the school-community partnership. The paper also proposes directions for intervention to develop relevant, equitable and sustainable education in both types of educational settings.

Keywords:

rural contexts, urban contexts, community, interdependence, educational settings

1. Introduction

In today's society, which is characterized by accelerated transformations, cultural diversity, economic instability and a lightning technological advance, education can no longer be perceived as a linear approach, focused on the transmission of information, but must be interpreted as a complex social process, deeply contextualized and with multiple formative dimensions. In the face of the uncertainties of contemporary society, education can be said to act as an axiological compass which not only orients the individual in relation to the outside world, but also helps him or her to discover his or her position, purpose and responsibility.

In a broad sense, defining education as a process of socialization and humanization means facilitating the integration of the human being into the system of norms, values, traditions and forms of knowledge of the society of which he or she is a part. At the same time, education is also the bridge between generations, between past and future, between the individual and the community. It is not limited to instruction alone, but also involves shaping character, developing empathy, cultivating critical thinking and assuming an ethical and cultural identity. In this way, education makes a major contribution to the construction and development of the human personality in its totality - intellectual, emotional, moral and civic. At the heart of this process is relationship, the fundamental social

dimension of education. The learner is formed in dialog - with parents, educators, other members of the community - in a space of continuous learning that transcends the physical confines of the school. So education is not just institutionalized practice, but a whole ongoing social experience that takes place both in the family and in the community, in everyday interactions and in the relations of power and solidarity that structure society.

In a century in which identities are negotiated, boundaries are blurred and values are contested, education will remain the most powerful social process that involves shaping individuals not only for themselves but also for active, responsible and conscious participation in society. It becomes the essential tool for social cohesion, inclusion, social justice and strengthening democracy. School, in this context, is more than an environment for the accumulation of knowledge, it is also an environment for shaping citizenship, cultivating community spirit and developing the skills needed to live together in a plural and interconnected world.

As a definition of school, it is "a state, private, or religious educational institution/school unit, within which the instruction and education of students is carried out in an organized and systematic manner" (Bocoș, 2019e, p.422). In dictionaries, community is



defined as "a group of people with common interests, beliefs or norms of life" (Romanian Academy, 1998), "a group of people with common interests, beliefs, customs, norms of life" (Marcu, 2000) or as "the totality of the inhabitants of a locality, a country, etc." (Romanian Academy, 1998). From a sociological perspective, the community is that integral part of society, that subsystem of the social system (Bocoș, 2016a). School and community are educational factors that contribute to the achievement of educational goals. "Their action in the process of formation and development of human personality" must be "unitary, consensual, synergistic and systematic" and their influence must be "positive, complementary, convergent and teleologically oriented" (Bocoș, 2016b, p. 208).

The way in which the relationship between the school and the community is viewed is a strategic one, as it is considered an essential factor for the quality, relevance and equity of the educational process. The school does not operate as an isolated system, closed within its own institutional grids, but is actively integrated into the network of social, economic and cultural relations of the community of which it is part. Nowadays, the community is not just a geographic setting, but a social, identity and affective space that influences and is influenced by educational activity. Many researchers emphasize that the educational partnership between school, family and community is one of the most effective forms of supporting school performance, dropout prevention and student integration. In the words of Joyce Epstein (2001), 'community involvement in education is an essential dimension of school success because it extends the sphere of educational influence beyond the school walls'. Her proposed 'six types of engagement' model, which includes community collaboration as a distinct domain, demonstrates that a school's external relationships can contribute to improved learning opportunities and the development of a sustainable educational culture.

The school is placed in a geographical and social context which profoundly influences not only access to education, but also the quality, relevance and effectiveness of the educational process. From this perspective, the differences between rural and urban areas cannot be ignored because they generate structurally distinct conditions in which learners are educated, teachers practise their profession and the community exercises its educational role. In rural areas, the challenges are primarily related to limited resources, both material (poor school infrastructure,

poor access to the internet or modern teaching materials) and human (lack of qualified teachers, high professional mobility, poor educational and vocational counseling). Also, labor migration and demographic ageing affect the social balance of rural communities, weakening educational support networks (Vlasceanu & Hâncean, 2012). However, rural areas are not without valuable educational resources. High social cohesion, close inter-human relations and the traditional role of the school as a central institution in the community can be important assets. For example, teachers can become informal community leaders, and parental involvement, even if sometimes modest in formal expression, can be emotionally and morally significant. Studies show that in many cases, rural schools are perceived as places of safety, continuity and hope, with a compensatory role for social and economic deprivation (UNICEF Romania, 2014). In contrast, urban environments generally offer superior access to infrastructure, educational technology, complementary services and extracurricular opportunities. Urban students benefit from an extensive network of cultural institutions, diverse educational partnerships, and remedial or excellence programs. Urban teachers also have more opportunities for continuous professional development and access to modern pedagogical resources (Voicu & Rughiniș, 2008). On the other hand, urban environments are often characterized by social fragmentation, increased population mobility and a lower degree of community cohesion, which affects the partnership between school, family and community. Highly marked socio-economic disparities in urban environments generate major educational inequalities, especially in marginalized or minority neighborhoods (Mânzat et al., 2017). Comparatively, we can state that rural areas are more homogeneous and affective, but more structurally vulnerable, while urban areas are more institutionally endowed, but more socially fragmented. This polarization highlights the need for a differentiated and more contextualized approach to education policies. There is no single solution applicable to both types of educational settings. Rather than standardization, it is essential to adapt educational strategies to local specificities so that learners, regardless of their background, have a real chance of success.

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the role of the community in supporting the school educational process, with a comparative reference to the specifics of rural and urban environments. The

focus is on identifying how different community actors - family, local authorities, economic agents, civic organizations and cultural institutions - contribute to or, on the contrary, limit the effectiveness of formal education, depending on the characteristics of the local context. The study aims to highlight the similarities and differences between the two types of educational spaces, to capture the facilitating or constraining factors of the school-community partnership, and to provide tailored intervention directions for enhancing relevant and equitable education in diverse communities.

The questions from which the research started are: what is the relationship between school and community in rural and urban settings; who are the community actors actively involved in supporting education and what roles do they play in the two contexts; what social, cultural or institutional factors facilitate or limit school-community cooperation; how do teachers and community leaders perceive the importance of educational partnership in the local context?

The choice of this theme is based on the need for a deep understanding of the local contexts in which education takes place. At a time when the emphasis is on equity, inclusion and social relevance, schools can no longer be considered in isolation, but in interdependence with the community that supports (or does not support) them. In addition, structural differences between rural and urban environments create real educational inequalities that require contextualized solutions, not normative generalizations. The literature (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Coleman, 1988; Epstein, 2001) constantly emphasizes the central role of the community in the educational formation of the child, but the research applied in the Romanian or Eastern European context is still relatively limited, especially in terms of comparative-contextual approaches. In this regard, the present study aims to make a practical and theoretical contribution by exploring in depth the community dimension of education, in the hope of providing relevant recommendations for inclusive educational policies and school practices tailored to the real needs of students.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Educational community

In the context of contemporary transformations of education systems, the concept of educational community is becoming increasingly relevant, being associated with the idea of participatory,

contextualized and sustainable education. Going beyond a simple reference to the geographical or administrative space in which the school operates, the educational community refers to all the social actors directly or indirectly involved in the process of educating children and young people, together with the relationships, values and resources mobilized around education. According to Joyce Epstein (2001), the educational community is a "functional entity" that includes the school, the family and the wider community (local institutions, economic agents, NGOs, the church, the neighborhood), united by a common purpose: to support the harmonious development and lifelong learning of the pupil. This perspective integrates the school into a wider relational system in which education becomes the collective responsibility of the whole community. Another relevant approach is that of Etienne Wenger (1998), who defines the educational community as a community of practice: a group of people who share a common interest (in this case, education), interact regularly, learn from each other and develop a common repertoire of resources, norms and practices. From this perspective, the educational community is not just an institutional network, but a living social space of collective learning and co-construction of knowledge.

Within sociological theories, the concept is also implicit in the social capital theory proposed by James Coleman (1988), who emphasizes that networks of relationships based on trust, norms of reciprocity and cooperation among community members contribute directly to school success. A strong educational community is thus one with high social capital, in which parents, teachers and other local actors actively collaborate to support education. At the institutional level, the concept of the learning community has also been promoted in European policies, in particular through the 'community schools' initiatives. These models propose a functional integration of the school into the life of the community by providing educational, social, cultural and health services in a unified framework adapted to local needs (EU Education and Training Monitor, 2020).

2.2. Ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner)

One of the most influential theoretical perspectives underpinning the relationship between school and community is the ecological theory of human development, formulated by American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner. This theory provides a complex

and systemic conceptual framework for understanding child development in relation to the social environment, emphasizing that human formation is conditioned by a network of interrelated influences organized on multiple levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The model proposed by Bronfenbrenner is based on the idea that development cannot be analyzed outside the social and cultural context in which the child lives. He defines five ecological levels, each having a specific contribution in shaping the individual's behavior and identity: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem.

This theory emphasizes that education does not take place exclusively in schools, but in an extensive network of relationships, influences and social structures. For example, a community that supports education, where parents collaborate with the school, where there are functioning partnerships with local authorities and accessible cultural resources, will create a balanced mesosystem that is able to support children's development in a coherent and harmonious way. Bronfenbrenner consistently emphasized that human development is optimal when there is congruence and continuity between the different levels of the environment. In the absence of this coherence - for example, when the school operates in isolation from the family or when educational policies do not take into account the realities of the local community - the educational process can become fragmented and meaningless for the learner.

2.3. Community pedagogy - school as community center

The concept of community pedagogy reflects a paradigm shift in contemporary educational thinking, whereby the school is reconfigured as an integral part of the local community, rather than as a separate or isolated entity. This approach promotes a holistic and participatory view of education, in which the formation of the child is understood as the result of the dynamic interactions between school, family, community and the wider social space. In its modern understanding, community pedagogy implies the recognition that education is a shared responsibility, which must involve not only teachers and pupils, but also parents, civic organizations, local authorities, economic and cultural agents, and the whole community as an active social space. As emphasized by Aubret and Étienne (2010), the school must function 'in and for the community', becoming a space for social encounter, dialogue and collaboration, a veritable 'educational node' in the community

network. The "community-centered school" model is one concrete expression of this pedagogy. This model has been promoted and implemented in various countries through programs aimed at reducing educational inequalities, supporting social inclusion and bringing the school closer to the real needs of the community (Blank et al., 2003; Dryfoos, 1994). In essence, a community school is not only a place of formal learning, but also a social, cultural, educational and family support centre, adapted to the local specificities.

2.4. Social Capital Theory (Coleman, Putnam)

Social capital theory provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the role of social networks, trust and norms of cooperation in supporting the educational process. This theory, originally developed by Coleman (1988) and subsequently extended by Putnam (2000), has been successfully applied in educational research to explain how the social and community environment influences children's school performance, social integration and educational participation. In Coleman's conception, social capital is defined as "a set of inter-human relationships that facilitate collective action within a group" (Coleman, 1988). Unlike economic capital (financial resources) or human capital (knowledge, skills), social capital is intangible but essential: it is expressed through mutual trust, shared norms and networks of cooperation between individuals and institutions. In educational terms, Coleman has shown that pupils who live in communities where parents are involved in school life, know each other and cooperate with teachers, perform better, even when they come from low socio-economic backgrounds.

In addition, Putnam has extended social capital theory to the macro-social level, emphasizing the importance of civic participation, volunteering and membership in community networks for the effective functioning of democratic institutions, including schools. In his work *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam points out that in societies where social capital is in decline - through loss of cohesion, diminishing trusting relationships and declining civic engagement - education also suffers, becoming a more bureaucratic, formalized and less community-supported process. Applied to education, social capital theory offers an explanation for the success of schools in disadvantaged but socially cohesive communities and the failure of urbanized and well-resourced schools that are disconnected from the social and cultural environment of their students. It suggests that

quality social relations - both formal and informal - can compensate for the lack of other forms of capital (economic, institutional), especially in vulnerable contexts.

3. Research methodology

The present research is part of a national framework marked by significant disparities between rural and urban environments in terms of access to education, the quality of the teaching process and community involvement in supporting schools. In order to understand the complexity of the relationship between school and community in these divergent contexts, the research was carried out in two geographically and socio-economically representative counties: one predominantly rural (Hunedoara County), and one with medium urbanization and active peri-urban areas (Arad County).

In rural areas, the schools analysed are secondary schools in small localities (less than 5,000 inhabitants), characterized by: decreasing population, high external migration of parents, low level of adult education, modest material resources, a school perceived as the main pillar of community stability. In urban areas, the research focused on general and high schools in neighborhoods with varied socio-economic profiles: both central areas and suburbs with vulnerable populations (including Roma communities and internal migrants). These units are characterized by: higher access to technology and educational resources, ethnic and cultural diversity, lower parental involvement in school life, a fragmentation of social cohesion. The schools involved in the study were selected in order to provide a balanced picture of the variety of educational contexts in Romania, with a focus on the comparison between rural and urban dynamics in terms of the relationship between school and community.

3.1. Research design

The research adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach, with the aim of identifying in-depth perceptions, experiences and school-community relationships in two distinct social environments. A qualitative methodology was chosen in order to allow a contextualized and nuanced understanding of educational realities that are difficult to capture through standardized quantitative methods.

3.2. Tools used

The main tool used was the semi-structured interview, applied on the basis of a guide of open-

ended questions, centered on the following dimensions:

- perceptions of the role of the community in education;
- concrete forms of school-community collaboration;
- challenges in involving community stakeholders;
- examples of good practice or local initiatives;
- needs and expectations in relation to the educational partnership.

The interviews lasted on average 45-60 minutes, were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed in full for further thematic analysis.

3.3. Sample

Research participants were selected by purposive sampling, based on the criterion of relevant experience in relation to the topic of educational partnership. The sample included:

- 12 teachers (6 rural, 6 urban) with at least 5 years of teaching experience and involvement in community activities;
- 6 community leaders (e.g. representatives of town halls, parents' associations, local organizations, priests or educational volunteers), chosen for their influential position in the community and direct relationship with the school.

3.4. Dimensions covered in the analysis

Data analysis focused on three key dimensions of the school-community partnership:

- Social cohesion - the degree of solidarity, mutual trust and informal support around education;
- Civic involvement - participation of community actors in school life, local educational initiatives, volunteering;

Local resources - the existence and mobilization of human, cultural, financial and institutional resources to support the educational process.

4. Results

The analysis of the data that was collected through the semi-structured interviews revealed a number of recurring themes, organized around the three dimensions of social cohesion, civic involvement and mobilization of local resources. Even if there are common features between the two environments analyzed (rural and urban), the results highlight significant differences in perceptions, resources and cooperation mechanisms.

4.1. Social cohesion - a latent resource, differently tapped

Rural social cohesion was perceived as a defining feature of the community. The teachers who were interviewed reported close personal relationships with pupils' families, an atmosphere of informal support and increased community solidarity, even in the absence of institutionalized structures. In contrast, social cohesion in urban areas is fragmented. Teachers point to difficulties in establishing trusting relationships with parents, low parental participation in school life and a strong individualization of educational interests. This difference can be explained by distinct demographic dynamics, i.e. rural communities are more stable and urban communities are more mobile and estrous, which influences the consistency of social relations.

4.2. Civic engagement - sporadic but potential

In both rural and urban areas, civic involvement was found to be modest and often dependent on individual initiatives. Community leaders acknowledge that the relationship with the school is often formal, ritualized or focused on administrative matters. However, in specific cases - particularly in rural communities - examples of real collaboration have been identified, such as the organization of extra-curricular activities with the support of the church or the town hall, support interventions for children in need, intergenerational activities. In urban areas, civic involvement tends more to take the form of externally funded projects or NGO initiatives, which are not always sustainable. Teachers expressed the need, on the basis of the interviews, for stable partnership mechanisms that go beyond a reliance on volunteering and individual enthusiasm.

4.3. Local resources - between scarcity and under-utilization

Participants from both environments reported a lack of material resources, but noted notable differences in the way they mobilized existing ones. In rural areas, resources are scarce but well anchored in the local informal network. There is a greater willingness to contribute collectively (e.g. through voluntary work, donations, community involvement). In urban areas, although resources are more abundant, they are fragmented and biocratically managed, leading to inefficiency and disconnection from the real needs of the school.

5. Conclusions

The research findings suggest that the school-community relationship in Romania is deeply

influenced by the socio-cultural context, and the differences between rural and urban environments require a differentiated and sensitive approach. While the rural environment provides a solid basis of cohesion and human closeness but is institutionally disadvantaged, the urban environment benefits from infrastructure but suffers from relational fragmentation and low affective involvement.

In both cases, the school-community partnership is opportunistic rather than systematic, dependent on local initiatives, committed personalities and favorable circumstances. There is a lack of formal frameworks, coherent local public policies and an inclusive vision of the school as a 'hub of community life'.

Based on the findings of this research, the teachers and the other actors involved in the research were presented with the results and conclusions. Based on these, the actors involved in the research proposed some strategic directions for strengthening the school-community relationship. The recommendations were the following:

1. Institutionalizing the local educational partnership by creating in each school a community advisory council (consisting of teachers, parents, local authorities, NGOs, religious representatives), with the role of mediation and co-creation of educational initiatives and establishing inter-institutional cooperation mechanisms between school, municipality, social institutions to manage the problems of vulnerable students;
2. Development of educational social capital by training teachers in community involvement and developing partnership relations and by introducing in the school curriculum components of participatory civic education, with projects of direct involvement in community life;
3. Supporting the school as a community space by redefining the social function of the school by opening it to extra-curricular activities, social and cultural community services and by allocating special funds for local school-community projects with a focus on inclusion, cohesion and social innovation;
4. Adapting educational policies to local specificities by introducing a framework of community autonomy in school management, especially in rural areas, with methodological support provided by county inspectorates and institutions and by creating local databases on the educational context

(community profile, vulnerabilities, local networks) to inform school decisions.

In conclusion, this article suggests that quality education cannot exist without a supportive, involved community that is aware of its formative role. The school needs the community, but the community also needs the school in order to regenerate itself, to coagulate and to form the citizens of the future.

Authors note:

Cristiana Creț is a doctoral student at the Doctoral School of Education, Reflection, Development at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Her doctoral research focuses on the role of professional learning communities in the development of schools as learning organizations, with an emphasis on teacher training and development, educational leadership, and organizational culture building. In addition to her academic work, Cristiana Creț works as a special education teacher at the Arad School Center for Inclusive Education, where she is involved in educational and intervention projects dedicated to children with special educational needs and school inclusion. Her professional and research interests include inclusive education, educational psychology, organizational development, and educational policy.

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