

The Role of the Romanian School in Preventing and Combating Social Exclusion Among Children

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Abstract

Keywords:

social exclusion, social vulnerabilities, parental support

This paper explores the complexity of social exclusion among children in Romania, adopting an interdisciplinary and systemic perspective grounded in recent statistical data, theoretical frameworks from sociology and educational sciences, as well as an analysis of institutional and community-based best practices. The study highlights that childhood in Romania remains deeply exposed to a range of interdependent vulnerabilities - from monetary poverty and parental absence to health problems, domestic violence, and unequal access to education. The research findings confirm the strategic role of the school within the child's social ecology, emphasizing its transition from a purely educational actor to a key pillar of social protection. Teachers, through their direct and continuous interaction with students, can identify forms of vulnerability that often remain invisible in official statistics, such as the effects of parental migration and the absence of family support. Thus, the school becomes both a reflection of social inequalities and a mediator between the child, the family, and public or community-based support systems. Positioned in this way, the school acquires significant transformative potential, emerging as a key space for preventing and addressing social exclusion, and for promoting inclusion and equity among children at risk.

1. Introduction

Social exclusion among children is a central theme in current debates on social and educational policy, both at the European and national levels. This concern is reflected in key policy documents such as the *European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child* (2021), the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), as well as the *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's Concluding Observations on the Implementation of the Convention in Romania* (2023). The issue is also embedded within the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015) and the *National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction for 2022–2027* (2022).

The analysis of the situation of children in Romania draws on both statistical data and empirical evidence, focusing on the identification and prioritization of issues that: (a) affect a significant number of children, with an incidence higher than the average recorded at EU level; and (b) generate long-term negative consequences on children's development. Within this framework, the *National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights 2023 - 2027*, entitled "*Protected Children, Safe Romania*" (2023), incorporates key components of the *European Child Guarantee* (2021), particularly about access to early

childhood education and care, educational and health services, and measures to support social inclusion.

In Romania, children aged 0 to 17 constitute the population group most exposed to the risk of poverty and social exclusion. An assessment of the most recent national and European statistical data reveals both the scale of the phenomenon and its determining factors, including household structure, parents' demographic characteristics, education level and employment status, place of residence, as well as the indirect effects of economic migration and domestic violence. Simultaneously, research conducted by non-governmental organizations highlights the presence of forms of vulnerability not captured in official statistics, particularly with respect to children affected by extreme poverty, parental migration, or family violence.

In this context, expanding the analysis to the level of school units has the following research objectives: (a) to identify the predominant forms of vulnerability observed among students, from the perspective of primary school teachers; (b) to compare teachers' perceptions with available official data; and (c) to assess the role of schools as sites for early detection and intervention in cases of child vulnerability.



The research results present a more nuanced reality: compared to official statistics, teachers report a significantly higher incidence of vulnerabilities among their students, especially in four critical areas: family context and parental economic migration, health status, risk behaviors, and poor socio-economic conditions of families. This perspective highlights the need to redefine the role of the school in preventing and combating social exclusion among children.

Thus, the school must be conceptualized not only as a privileged space for the direct observation of children's problems but also as a strategic actor in the early identification of vulnerabilities, an active support mechanism for parents, a key partner in collaboration with the non-governmental sector for implementing integrated interventions, and, not least, as a vector for raising awareness and mobilizing public institutions and society at large to reduce the social inequalities affecting children.

2. Multidimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion Among Children in Romania. European and National Statistics

2.1. General Context: Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Romania

In Romania, poverty represents one of the most severe forms of social exclusion, directly affecting children's well-being and their opportunities for development. According to Eurostat data from 2024, Romania recorded the second highest percentage of population at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) among European Union member states - 27.9%, compared to the EU average of 21% (Eurostat, 2024a). The at-risk-of-poverty rate (AROP) stands at 19.0%, while the rate of severe material and social deprivation is 17.2% (INS, 2025).

In Romania, children (aged 0 - 17) constitute the population segment most exposed to the risk of poverty and social exclusion. By contrast, at the EU level, the most exposed group is represented by young adults (aged 18–24). In 2024, 33.8% of children in Romania were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared to the EU average of 24.2% (Eurostat, 2024b). Although this figure marks a reduction from 2023 (a decrease of 5.2 percentage points), medium-term analysis shows the continued structural nature of the risk: 39% in 2023, 36.3% in 2020, and 21.4% of children were experiencing severe material deprivation in 2023 (Eurostat, 2023a; INS, ZAF0123, 2020; INS, SAR112B, 2020).

These findings underline that children aged 0 - 17 remain the most vulnerable group in Romania regarding poverty and social exclusion. While the indicator has shown a slight downward trend in recent years (2023: 39%; 2020: 36.3%), the long-term evolution demonstrates the persistence of significant structural inequalities. This confirms the relevance of child poverty and social exclusion as central indicators in understanding and addressing social inequity in Romania.

2.2. Structural Determinants of Social Exclusion Among Children

a) Household Typology and Family Structure

Household structure is a key determinant of child poverty risk. According to Eurostat data (2024c), in households with dependent children, the risk of social exclusion reaches 30.4%. The most affected are large families: in 2023, 63.3% of households consisting of two adults with three or more children were affected by poverty, followed by households composed of three or more adults with children (28.0%), and single-parent families (21.6%) (INS, 2024).

Birth order statistics reveal a heightened concentration of vulnerability among children from large families: 10.1% of children in Romania are third-born, 3.7% are fourth-born, and 2.5% come from families with six or more children (INS, 2023).

b) Parental Age and Socio-Educational Profile

Young parental age, combined with low levels of education and limited integration into the labour market, significantly increases the risk of poverty among children. In Romania, 1 in 10 children is born to an adolescent mother. In 2022, 33.3% of all live births occurred outside of marriage, with 60.2% of these children having mothers under the age of 25 (INS, 2023). In 2023, one in four children was born to a mother under the age of 25 (INS, 2023, POP201B), while 12% had fathers in the same age group (INS, 2023, POP201F).

Regarding labour market participation, in 2022 only 55.2% of mothers of live-born children were formally employed, while 34.7% were not engaged in any form of employment. Young parents aged 18–24 recorded an employment rate of just 19% (INS, 2023).

c) Parental Educational Attainment and Its Impact on Children

Parental educational attainment is a critical predictor of the risk of social exclusion. At the European level, children whose parents have a low

level of education (ISCED 0–2) face a poverty risk of 61.2%, compared to only 11.0% among those whose parents hold higher education degrees (ISCED 5–8), resulting in a disparity of 50.2 percentage points. Romania exhibits the third highest educational gap within the European Union, with a difference of 69.9 percentage points between these two groups (Eurostat, 2024d). Nationally, relative poverty affects 42.8% of individuals with low educational attainment, compared to only 2.4% among those with tertiary education (INS, 2023, AR102F).

d) Place of Residence and Regional Disparities

The risk of social exclusion is unevenly distributed across territorial regions. In 2024, the South-East and South-West Oltenia regions recorded the highest AROPE (At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion) rates—39.7% and 35.1%, respectively—while the Bucharest-Ilfov region reported a significantly lower rate of just 12.0% (INS, 2025). Furthermore, in rural areas, 35.5% of the population lives in monetary poverty (Eurostat, 2023b), highlighting systemic disparities between urban and rural environments.

2.3. Parental Economic Migration and Its Effects on Children

Poverty remains one of the primary drivers of economic migration among parents in Romania—a phenomenon with profound implications for the well-being of the children left behind. According to data provided by the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption (ANPDCA, 2021; 2024), the number of children affected by parental migration has decreased by approximately 15% over the past three years. In 2021, a total of 73,387 children had at least one parent working abroad, of whom 12,339 were in the situation where both parents had migrated. By 2024, these figures had declined to 61,007 and 9,039, respectively.

However, official statistics do not fully capture the scale of the phenomenon. According to a study conducted by Save the Children (2023), the actual number of children left behind without the direct care of their parents is significantly higher. Estimates suggest that over one-quarter of children under the age of 17 have had, or currently have, at least one parent working abroad. This discrepancy between official data and on-the-ground realities is partly due to the lack of formal notifications submitted by parents to the authorities, as well as the limited capacity of social assistance services to effectively monitor and address the consequences of parental migration (Ombudsman, 2021). As a result, the impact of economic migration

on children often remains invisible in administrative statistics, further increasing their risk of social and emotional vulnerability.

2.4. Violence Against Children – A Persistent and Largely Invisible Phenomenon

In Romania, violence against children constitutes a major social issue, marked by both a significant prevalence and an underrepresentation in official reporting. According to data provided by the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption (ANPDCA, 2021; 2023), the most frequently identified form of abuse is neglect, occurring predominantly within the family environment. In 2021, a total of 7,557 cases of neglect were recorded, rising to 11,053 cases in 2023, an alarming upward trend.

Nevertheless, official statistics capture only a partial image of the true extent of the phenomenon. A study conducted by Save the Children (2021) reveals a far more complex reality surrounding child abuse. The research indicates that at least one in five parents exhibits a tolerant attitude toward the use of corporal punishment. Notable discrepancies in perception exist between parents and children: while 28% of parents acknowledge using physical punishment, 46% of children report having experienced such practices. Moreover, over half of the parents state that they discipline their children when they make mistakes—23% frequently and 34% in exceptional cases.

From the parents' perspective, the primary factors contributing to the use of violence against children include poverty (68%), alcohol consumption (63%), lack of government support (41%), a high number of unwanted children (40%), limited access to parenting and child-rearing information (25%), and inadequate social services (20%). These factors point to a confluence of structural and individual vulnerabilities, underscoring the need for the development of multidimensional public policies focused on prevention, family support, and early intervention.

2.5. Children's Health Status and the Impact of Poverty

Children from families experiencing poverty are at increased risk of both undernutrition and, paradoxically, obesity, due to unbalanced or nutritionally inadequate diets (Mihalache et al., 2020). Health assessments conducted in school settings reveal significant disparities in children's physical development. According to the health evaluation conducted during the 2019–2020 school year, 26.6%

of children exhibited disharmonic development, with a higher prevalence of overweight conditions observed among students in urban areas (INSP, 2021).

International data confirm this trend. In 2022, one in three 15-year-old boys in Romania reported being overweight, compared to one in five girls (OECD, 2023). At the same time, the incidence and prevalence of chronic medical conditions among children have been steadily increasing, with notable variations based on the place of residence. In urban areas, the most frequently diagnosed health issues are refractive errors (5.3%), non-endocrine obesity (4.4%), and metabolic diseases such as diabetes (2%). In contrast, in rural areas, non-endocrine obesity ranks highest (3.4%), followed by refractive errors (2.4%) and underweight conditions (1.3%) (INSP, 2021).

3. Vulnerabilities of Children in Romania: Perceptions of Primary School Teachers

An analysis of the most recent national and European statistical data highlights the scope and complexity of social exclusion among children in Romania. In addition to these official sources, research conducted by non-governmental organizations points to the existence of often unreported vulnerabilities related to poverty, economic migration, and family violence. In this context, it is necessary to broaden the analytical approach to social exclusion by anchoring the investigation in the school environment, which is perceived as a privileged space for direct observation and, in many cases, the only setting where early identification of children's vulnerabilities can occur.

3.1. Research Question

Building on this premise, the present study poses the following research question: What are the main vulnerabilities identified by primary school teachers among their students?

3.2. Research Objectives

1. To identify the main forms of vulnerability observed among students, from the perspective of primary school teachers.
2. To compare teachers' perceptions with available official data.

To assess the role of the school in the early observation and intervention in cases of vulnerability.

4. Methodology

The research was conducted between October 2024 and January 2025, involving 164 primary school teachers who completed a structured questionnaire.

The instrument was developed around four key dimensions, derived from the review of relevant literature and statistical data:

- Family and social conditions,
- Health,
- Risk behaviours,
- Family and parental economic migration.

Each dimension was explored using binary-coded closed-ended items (Yes/No), addressing the question: "Have you had at least one student in your class who...?" The questionnaire was distributed online via professional teaching networks and social media platforms. In parallel, informal discussions and interviews were conducted with a smaller sample of teachers to further explore and contextualize certain findings.

Two types of analysis were applied:

- Descriptive statistical analysis – to identify the frequency of reported vulnerability forms within each dimension.
- Comparative analysis – to correlate teachers' perceptions with the available official data.

It is important to note the exploratory nature of this study. Although it is not nationally representative, the research offers relevant insights into the predominant forms of vulnerability observed among students in the classes investigated.

5. Results and Interpretations

5.1. Dimension: Family and Parental Economic Migration

The most frequently reported form of vulnerability is parental absence due to economic migration. A total of 92.6% of respondents indicated that they had at least one student in their class with a parent working abroad, while 54.3% reported cases in which both parents were abroad, with the child left in the care of another adult.

Although official statistics (ANPDCA, 2021 - 2024) show a decrease of approximately 15% in the prevalence of this phenomenon, data collected from schools and studies conducted by non-governmental organizations (Save the Children, 2023) suggest a broader and largely underreported reality. This discrepancy indicates that schools are often on the front lines in dealing with the consequences of parental migration, while official statistical systems capture only a partial image of the phenomenon (see Table 1).

Table 1

Parental Economic Migration – School-Based Data vs. Official Statistics

Aspect	School-Based Data	ANPDCA Data (2021–2024)
Prevalence of the phenomenon	Very widespread (over 90% of sampled classes affected)	Decrease of ~15%, with fewer than 75,000 cases reported
Children without both parents but with a caregiver in the household	54.3% of teachers reported such cases	9,039 children in 2024
Risk of underreporting	High, noted by NGOs and institutions	Acknowledged by the Ombudsman

5.2. Dimension: Health

The second most significant category of vulnerability identified by teachers pertains to children’s health. A total of 63.5% of respondents reported having at least one student in their class with disharmonic physical development, while 23.4% identified children at risk of chronic illnesses such as obesity, myopia, or diabetes. Additionally, 24% mentioned students living with adults suffering from chronic diseases.

Teachers' perceptions align with findings from public health studies but offer an important functional perspective: educators do not merely observe medical diagnoses but also recognize symptoms that directly impact classroom activity, including fatigue, lack of concentration, difficulties in adaptation, and social isolation (see Table 2). In this regard, the school functions as a privileged space for the early detection of health-related dysfunctions.

Table 2

Health Dimension – School-Based Data vs. Statistical Sources

Indicator	School-Based Data (Teachers' Reports)	Official Data (INS, OECD, etc.)
Children with disharmonic development	In 63.5% of classes, there are children with signs of impaired physical development.	26.6% of children assessed (2019–2020) were found to have disharmonic development.
Children at risk of chronic illness (e.g., obesity, myopia, diabetes)	In 23.4% of classes, there are children considered at risk for chronic illness, based on family history, environmental exposure, or preexisting conditions (e.g., asthma, obesity).	Urban areas: myopia – 5.3%, obesity – 4.4%, diabetes – 2%; Rural areas: obesity – 3.4%, myopia – 2.4% (INSP, 2021).
Children indirectly affected (living with chronically ill household members)	In 24% of classes, children with live in households where at least one adult has a chronic illness.	No specific official data available for this indicator.

5.3. Dimension: Risk Behaviors

The third category of vulnerability concerns students' risk behaviors. A total of 58% of teachers reported having at least one student exhibiting violent behavior in their classroom; 48.8% indicated the presence of children coming from households with a potential for family violence; and 44.4% identified cases of parental neglect.

These behaviours are rarely captured in official statistics, underscoring the crucial role of schools in detecting and reporting such cases. Although the National Authority for the Protection of Children’s Rights and Adoption (ANPDCA, 2023; see Table 3) reports over 11,000 cases of neglect, the reality observed by teachers suggests a significantly higher frequency (see Table 4).

Table 3

Cases of Child Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation (ANPDCA, 2023)

Type of Case	Family	AMP (Maternal Assistants)	Residential Services	Educational Institutions	Other Institutions	Other Locations
Physical abuse	1321	29	78	186	11	369
Emotional abuse	1933	12	27	100	9	159
Sexual abuse	598	11	11	25	4	855
Neglect	11053	30	37	118	28	339
Exploitation through labor	143	0	0	0	1	66
E Sexual exploitation	8	0	0	0	0	35
Exploitation for criminal activities	60	0	0	8	0	45
Total	15116	82	153	437	53	1868

Table 4

Risk Behaviours – School Perceptions vs. Official Data

Aspect	School Perception	Official Data (ANPDCA, Save the Children)
Children with violent behaviors	58% of classes affected	No direct official data available
Risk of neglect	44.4% of classes affected	11,053 official cases reported in 2023
Origin of behavior	Dysfunctional households/families reported	Confirmed: abuse mainly occurs within the family
Parental attitudes	Indirectly observed (child aggressiveness)	1 in 5 parents approve corporal punishment
Under-reporting	Extremely high	Officially acknowledged

The significant discrepancies between what teachers observe in the field and what is reflected in official statistics can be explained by several key factors:

- Parents' reluctance to report violence, a phenomenon confirmed by the *Save the Children* study (2021).
- Insufficient or inadequately equipped social services, which lack the real capacity to identify and monitor such cases—an issue also highlighted in other contexts, such as parental migration.
- The tendency to normalize violent behaviours as part of child-rearing practices, a perception still widespread according to *Save the Children* (2021).

5.4. Dimension: Family and Social Conditions

The final dimension, though no less significant, concerns the socio-economic conditions of families. A total of 56% of primary school teachers reported having at least one student in their class living in overcrowded housing conditions; 54.3% identified students from households experiencing monetary poverty; and 25.9% mentioned cases of extreme poverty.

In comparison with official statistics (Eurostat, INS), teachers' perceptions reflect a higher incidence of the phenomenon. While national statistics quantify poverty in structural terms—such as income levels, educational attainment, or employment status—teachers observe its direct consequences: absenteeism, lack of school supplies, poor nutrition, and inadequate clothing.

5.5. Study Conclusions

Teachers report observing vulnerabilities in students across all four dimensions: Family and Parental Economic Migration, Health, Risk Behaviours, and Family and Social Conditions.

Children's vulnerabilities are multiple, recurring, and interconnected. Phenomena such as parental absence, family poverty, health problems, and domestic violence coexist and mutually reinforce one another.

Teachers indicate a significantly higher incidence of vulnerabilities compared to available statistical data, underscoring the crucial role of schools as spaces for early detection and intervention.

The family remains the primary source of risk for the child, whether through parental absence, precarious living conditions, or abusive behaviours.

The results support a reconsideration of the school institution's role in preventing and combating social exclusion, in line with Research Objective 3.

6. The Role of the School in Addressing Child Vulnerabilities

Continuing the investigative approach focused on the perceptions of primary school teachers, this section aims to analyse the role of the school in responding to identified vulnerabilities, emphasizing the intervention, prevention, and support strategies implemented by educational actors. While the previous section highlighted the complexity and prevalence of vulnerabilities among children, this chapter focuses on the concrete actions undertaken by teachers and the institutional and intersectoral resources mobilized to support children at risk.

In a social context marked by poverty, exclusion, and persistent structural inequality, the school becomes not only a place of instruction but also a key factor in the child's social protection network, playing a fundamental role in identifying, reporting, and intervening in situations of vulnerability. Thus, the main directions of school action can be summarized as follows:

6.1. Early Identification of Vulnerabilities and Family Dysfunctions

The school environment serves as a privileged space for direct observation, where teachers detect forms of vulnerability that are difficult to capture through statistics—such as the impact of parental migration, domestic violence, neglect, malnutrition, emotional difficulties, and lack of medical care. The discrepancy between official data and the reality perceived by schools highlights the risk of underreporting vulnerabilities and, implicitly, underestimating their effects on the child. Therefore, continuous professional development for teachers to correctly and promptly identify risk signs is essential, especially in communities affected by social exclusion.

6.2. Promoting remedial education, facilitating access to education and school inclusion of students from socio-cultural environments with educational risk (Jucan & Ungurășan, 2024)

Remedial education programs are large-scale national initiatives that currently benefit from substantial funding and are implemented on a wide scale. One such example is the "*School after School*" program, which aims to reduce the risk of early school leaving, particularly among students from vulnerable backgrounds, and to improve their performance in assessments and examinations.

6.3. Parental Support and Educational Interventions for Families

The research results confirm the close connection between child vulnerabilities and family characteristics: low parental education, economic migration, poverty, lack of emotional support, or parenting skills. In this regard, the school extends its traditional functions, becoming a support space for the entire family. Identified forms of parental support include:

- Informing parents about their rights and available social services (scholarships, aid, subsidies); assistance with the necessary documentation to access social benefits.
- Informing parents about programs and support services for families and children, including those run by the non-governmental sector; implementing educational programs (locally or nationally funded), tailored to children's needs, with parental education components.
- Parental education workshops focused on identified needs (e.g., children left home alone parents with medical issues). The 2023-2024 Methodological Letter for Early Education specifies that parental counselling activities are part of the 3 hours of methodological activity assigned to early education teachers or primary teachers. It is recommended that specialists from institutions focused on family and child welfare (school counsellors, social workers, legal advisors, etc.) participate in these activities.
- Extracurricular educational activities are designed to strengthen the partnership between school and parents and to create parental support networks.

6.4. Interinstitutional Collaboration and the Development of Community Support Networks

In the face of chronic vulnerabilities such as economic migration, poverty, or domestic violence, the school cannot act in isolation. Effective intervention requires collaboration with public social assistance services, the healthcare system, local authorities, and non-governmental organizations. Parental migration has structural and chronic effects, necessitating social policies, psychological counseling, educational support, and community integration.

Children's health must be understood holistically - encompassing medical, psychological, and social dimensions - and approached through integrated actions within both schools and communities (e.g.,

health screening programs, psychological and nutritional support, and access to medical services).

To combat violent behaviors, schools must be supported through partnerships with social services, school counseling, and anti-violence awareness campaigns. Institutional responses to poverty must combine structural interventions (e.g., income, housing, parental education) with active community support, especially in rural areas and among families with low levels of education.

Programs and services aimed at supporting vulnerable children must be built upon an integrated approach to family well-being. These should aim to reduce poverty and social exclusion, include labor market integration for parents, ensure access to public health services, develop parenting skills, and - most importantly - increase children's educational attainment and parents' professional qualifications (Prodan, 2022).

6.5. Support from the Non-Governmental Sector: Models of Good Practice

Over the past two decades, numerous NGOs have become strategic partners of schools in combating social exclusion. The programs implemented by organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, OvidiuRO, HoltIS, and World Vision have focused on several key areas:

6.5.1. Social programs and services for children and families at risk of poverty

Since 2011, UNICEF has implemented the project "Supporting Invisible Children," later renamed "First Priority: No Invisible Child!", providing education, healthcare, and social services to vulnerable families. Between 2014–2019, through projects such as "Social Inclusion through the Provision of Integrated Social Services at the Community Level" and the "Minimum Package of Services" (MPS) model, integrated community services were delivered. Since 2021, the project "Romania for Every Child: Breaking the Vicious Cycle of Exclusion for Vulnerable Children" has emphasized the need for Integrated Community Centers.

6.5.2. Programs and services for children left behind by parents working abroad

Since 2010, Save the Children Romania has implemented programs including: Direct intervention for children with parents abroad (e.g., recreational and social camps); information and counseling on parents' responsibilities when leaving the country, and

awareness-raising campaigns on the socio-emotional impact of migration on children; remedial education through After-School programs.

6.5.3. Programs addressing violence against children

Since 1999, Save the Children has operated five counseling centers offering evaluation, psychological counseling, and therapy for children and families. In 2003, it launched the first nationwide awareness campaign on child abuse: *“Beating is not from Heaven!”* followed by campaigns such as *“Violence Breeds Violence”* (2007), *“Listen to Their Soul!”* (2011), *“Label-Free Children”* (2013), *“Stop the Fight at Home!”* (2014), and *“Stop Violence Against Children!”* (2015).

6.5.4. Health programs for children and families

Save the Children, in collaboration with hospitals and private sector partners, has also implemented: *“Every Child Matters”* (2010) - supporting mothers and children in disadvantaged communities; equipping family medical practices and healthcare facilities with medical equipment; organizing informational sessions on nutrition, physical activity, emotional health, sexual education, and substance use under the *“Healthy Choices”* initiative (2017–2022), part of the national *Health Education Program*.

6.5.5. Educational access and awareness programs

The *“Every Child in Kindergarten”* project by OvidiuRO (since 2010) raises awareness about the importance of preschool education. Other projects such as *“I Also Want to Go to School,”* *“A Future Through School,”* and *“We Support Vulnerable Children to Attend School”* (2018–2021), implemented by Save the Children, offer school preparation, after-school support, and summer schools. Projects like *“School for All,”* *“Choose School,”* and *“I Want to Be in 9th Grade”* by World Vision Romania aim to prevent early school leaving.

6.5.6. Parental education programs

Parental education is promoted as a key means to provide children with positive behavioral models. For over a decade, Save the Children’s counseling centers have implemented the *Positive Parenting Program (Triple P)*. UNICEF’s *“Let’s Go to School!”* and *“Inclusive Quality Education”* initiatives include components for developing parenting competencies. *“Start in Education”*, a World Vision project, includes

both educational kits (*“Backpacks of the Future”*) for children and parental education sessions. HoltIS is a recognized provider of parental education in Romania, with a network of certified parenting educators active especially in schools (e.g., the *“Friendly Schools in Involved Communities”* project).

6.6. Active School Involvement in Public Policy Development and Implementation

The data generated by the educational system and the expertise of teachers form a valuable foundation for evidence-based public policies tailored to local realities. The principles *“Children First”* and *“No Child Left Behind”* are integrated into national strategies and programs, including:

- Law No. 272/2004 (republished), on the protection and promotion of children’s rights.
- National Strategy on the Protection and Promotion of Children’s Rights *“Protected Children, Safe Romania”* 2023 - 2027.
- The *“Every Child in Kindergarten”* project by OvidiuRO (2010), institutionalized by Law No. 248/2015, encouraging preschool attendance among disadvantaged children.
- The Integrated Community Centers, initiated by UNICEF, are being scaled nationally through the project *“Creating and Implementing Integrated Community Services to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion”*, led by the Ministry of Labor and Social Justice in partnership with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education (2018–2022).
- The *“Healthy Meals”* National Program, targeting preschool and school-aged children by providing a free daily hot meal or food package (Government Decision No. 24/2024).
- The National Program for Reducing School Dropout, which is directly or indirectly influenced by research reports, impact assessments, and best practices developed by schools and NGOs.

7. Conclusions and Discussions

7.1. Childhood – A Critical Stage Marked by Vulnerability and Social Exclusion in Romania

The present analysis underscores that, in Romania, childhood continues to be a stage deeply exposed to multiple risks of vulnerability and social exclusion. With a child poverty and social exclusion risk rate of 33.8% (Eurostat, 2024a) and a Human Capital Index of just 58% (World Bank, 2023), the country faces

systemic challenges that severely limit human development from the earliest stages of life.

Educational disparities associated with socioeconomic status are among the highest in Europe. Student performance - particularly in disadvantaged areas - can no longer be interpreted solely in terms of educational quality. Instead, it must be contextualized within a complex set of structural factors: poverty, migration, inadequate housing, insufficient parental education, and limited access to basic services. In this light, the outcomes of the education system reflect not only pedagogical efficiency but also the degree of social equity present in society.

7.2. Child Social Exclusion: A Complex, Multidimensional, and Intergenerational Phenomenon

The combined analysis of statistical data and teacher perceptions reveals the interconnected nature of vulnerabilities affecting children - ranging from household structure and parental education levels to the indirect effects of economic migration and domestic violence. The "compositional burden" model (Bradshaw & Mayhew, 2003) and the theory of the cycle of disadvantage (Rutter, 1985) confirm that poverty and social exclusion are transgenerational phenomena, often perpetuated by the absence of early and effective intervention.

Parental migration, early childbirth, domestic violence, and parental neglect represent invisible risk factors, rarely captured by official statistics but deeply felt within educational communities. This reality demands an ecological approach to vulnerable childhood (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which considers the complex interactions between the environments in which the child develops: family, school, community, and institutional systems.

7.3. Child Poverty as a Manifestation of Structural Inequality

Child poverty cannot be reduced to a matter of low income - it represents a broader set of deprivations and exclusions: limited access to quality education, poor health services, precarious housing, malnutrition, and the absence of protection from violence. These dimensions define multidimensional poverty, which directly affects a child's ability to realize their potential and achieve social mobility.

Moreover, child poverty is increasingly understood as a social construct, shaped by political and societal choices regarding resource allocation and the functioning of protection systems. In this sense, the lack of systemic interventions and integrated support

services is not merely a technical failure, but a form of social injustice.

7.4. The Role of the School: Between Educational Actor and Pillar of Social Protection

The research findings confirm the strategic position of the school in the child's social ecology. Far beyond its traditional educational role, the school is increasingly assuming responsibilities in early detection, parental support, and social intervention. Teachers - through their direct and daily interactions with students - are uniquely positioned to identify forms of vulnerability that are often absent from official records: parental migration, neglect, health issues, or domestic violence. Thus, school becomes a key factor in the early identification and prevention of social risks.

In this context, the school acts as a frontline defence against child vulnerabilities, providing not only educational support but also parental guidance through information dissemination, counselling, educational activities, and thematic workshops - helping to strengthen the relationship between families, communities, and public institutions.

Furthermore, the school plays a crucial role in facilitating integrated interventions, in partnership with the non-governmental sector, to support children and families in difficulty. The programs implemented cover a wide spectrum of needs: combating poverty, supporting children left behind by migrating parents, preventing and addressing violence, health education, early childhood education promotion, and parenting skills development.

At the same time, the school serves as a driver of public and societal accountability regarding child social exclusion. In this respect, child vulnerabilities cannot be addressed in isolation but require a systemic vision, where educational, social, health, housing, and community development policies are aligned and operational within a coherent intervention framework.

7.5. A Systemic Approach – A Prerequisite for Combating Social Exclusion

The effectiveness of such an approach does not lie solely in the implementation of isolated measures, but in the system's capacity to build sustainable mechanisms for prevention and support, capable of breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. In this sense, the school becomes both a mirror of social inequality and a bridge between the child, the family, and protection systems - a space with transformative

potential, capable of fostering inclusion and social equity.

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