

Ability and disability: School inclusion of special educational needs and disabilities students. A geographical perspective on the school network of Neamț County (Romania)

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Abstract: The European Union has launched its main agenda in 2015 under the slogan: A sustainable Europe by 2030. Thus, one of the most important Sustainable Development Goals is quality education, including special needs students. Romania had a slow start in the process of inclusion of these students in regular schools, but their number is constantly increasing. This study is one of the first attempts to describe the geographical disparities in the spatial distribution of SEND students in the mainstream school network in Neamț county, Romania. Schools from the above-mentioned county were examined in relation to the number of SEND students they have enrolled in the last 30 years, after the fall of the regime before 1989. The present study shows that the highest concentration of SEND students can be observed in the biggest cities of the county, with a noticeable exception of two rural schools. The first school is situated in the south-east part of the county, one of the poorest parts of Romania, whereas the second one has a great number of SEND students because of its type and due to its position in the centre of the country which makes it accessible from all directions.

1. Introduction

The last 30 years have marked radical changes in the collective mentality of Romanian society, especially following the opening of the borders. The departures to the western countries had repercussions on the entire culture of the Romanian people. The Romanian migrant saw himself caught between the traditional and extremely rigid education from the regime before 1989 (atheist and, theoretically, open to the conquest of the sciences), the education acquired within the family (paradoxically, very religious) and the cultural impact of the western society, more tolerant, more individualistic, more oriented towards inclusion. The Romanian migrant influenced not only the economy of the families back home, but also the social behaviour of those who remained in the country, who understood that they have rights and that they can take advantage of them. This was also the situation of SEND students and of their parents who saw an opportunity in the new adopted legislation to be included in regular classes instead of special ones. The publication of European Agenda for 2030, contributed to the awareness of the importance of school inclusion for SEND students. A quality education cannot let outside the educational system the SEND students. Today's literature speaks about social sustainability in the context of sustainable development (Wolbring and Rybchinski, 2013). Sustainability is nowadays a fashionable idea, connected more to the

environmental situations, but in reality, it goes much deeper, involving also social and economic notions (Rasouli and Kumarasuriyar, 2016). In this context, it is very important to identify and to explain what special education needs students means.

The 'umbrella' of special educational needs and disabilities is very broad and covers a wide range of impairments, from physical to mental. According to the Romanian legislation, SEND students are those students who require assistance in the educational process and benefit from a school guidance certificate, which provides those measures that must be implemented at the level of educational units to ensure the equalization of opportunities for these students (Bunescu et al., 2004). Also, it is very important to notice that sustainable inclusion of SEND means school inclusion (SNED are presents in regular classes) and educational inclusion – educational for sustainable development. (Ngcobo and Muthukrishna, 2011). Today's society cannot speak about sustainable development leaving outside the people with disabilities or with special needs.

This article studies the evolution of the number of students with special needs during the last 30 years in Neamț County. Our main goal was mapping in time and space the changes produced in the number of special needs students enrolled in regular classes after 1989. According to data provided by the National Institute for Statistics – Romania, during the last 30 years Neamț county saw a drop of school population, similar to what happened to national level. The Romanian school population dropped from 4 664 860 students in 1992 to 3 472 784 students in 2022. It was a contraction of 1,34 in 30 years. Each year, Romania lost 39 736 students, the equivalent of the population of a medium size city in the same country. Neamț county school population diminished even harder, from 116 943 in 1992 to 68 144 students in 2022. The contraction was in this case of 1,72 times, meaning that each year, the system has lost 1627 students, the equivalent of 65 classes (National Institute for Statistics – Romania, 2023). When the total number of students in Neamț County (school population) is correlated with the number of students with SEND enrolled in mainstream schools, an inverse relationship is observed: the lower the total number of students, the more the number of students with SEND increases. This is one of the reasons we have chosen this county because the spatial repartition of SEND children has changed dramatically during this period. Also, the insertion of special needs students in regular classes is examined mainly from the perspective of educational sciences. The geographical approach of the subject is very limited because most of the dedicated studies are focused on the pedagogical approach of the inclusion of special needs students. Of course, many of these studies can be analysed from a geographical perspective, but they still remain focused on an educational viewpoint over the integration of SEND in regular classes. We have tried to have a strict geographical approach although this might seem to analyse this phenomenon from a narrower point of view. We also try to identify some patterns in the geographical differences between rural and urban areas in the diversity of educational services for the special need students. The schooling figure is rarely the object of the researcher's analysis from a geographical point of view, and students with special needs are even less often included in statistics.

These special needs students were often seen as a general failure of the regime before 1989 and they were marginalized as members of the perfect society the authorities promoted. Although the legislation regarding the integration of special need students was available during the regime before 1989, they were oriented over special schools where children with the same disabilities were enrolled. Nowadays, we observe a general change in the general mentalities due to the massive migration of adult population and the contact with the western approach of students with special needs. In order to help them become self-integrated in society and to be self-sufficient, these children need to be enrolled in mainstream education so they can be "exposed" to the everyday living conditions. So, a number of laws and international agreements were signed by various institutions and countries, in order to ensure the integration of special needs students in mainstream education. Some of the most important documents

regarding the integration of special needs students are the Salamanca Statement from 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) and the Guideline of Inclusion (UNESCO, 2005).

The people with special needs (whatever these special needs were) had a marginalized, peripheral status in the society during the regime before 1989. However, the same state created specialized institutions for these children, institutions whose declared purpose was to facilitate their integration in society. Why is it interesting to study the spatial distribution of SEND students? Is there any practical result that would help the educational system and student's integration in the general educational system? The integration of special needs students in schools remains a great desiderate for the Romanian society more than 30 years after the fall of the regime before 1989. During this period, the legislation has been improved, but the Romanian mentality and the resistance of the educational corpus are very discouraging for the parents trying to integrate their children in regular classes. Nevertheless, we can see an increasing number of students with special needs outside the institutions designed for their care. The authors focused on analysing the spatial repartition of special needs students in Neamț county who have acquired a certificate of educational orientation, proving that they have a disability and that they can be included in the mainstream education.

Positioning the subject in the literature was very difficult due to the fact that most scientific studies on the integration of SEND students are not related to geography. Apart from the research in SEND education, the authors have studied the legislative background to place these children in the mainstream education system from a legal stance. The Romanian literature is rarely focused on the problem of SEND students because of the variety of disabilities (which can be related to the person – physical or mental disabilities) and because it is a very sensitive subject. Also, the scarce of bibliographical resources in Romania is due to the reduced number of special needs students enrolled in mainstream education.

When analysing the national and international literature in the field, the authors were confronted with a lack of geographical information. The spatial repartition of special needs students has not been the subject of many scientific researches in the field of geography. The integration of special needs students is approached especially by the educational sciences such as pedagogy or child psychology. An example of study regarding teachers' competence and the schools and higher educational institutes was conducted in September 2022 by a Russian team over schoolteachers and higher institutions working with special needs students (Shutaleva et al., 2023). This was a sociological approach of the phenomenon; the geographical dimension being limited to the area where the study was applied. Another study realized by a Romanian team analysed the factors (Stăiculescu et al., 2022) influencing the participation of special needs students in higher education institution. Again, the authors focused on the reasons why students with special needs choose one university or another with no relation with the spatial repartition of the students.

Regarding the subject of educational inclusion of special needs students, Louise Holt analysed the situation of two primary schools in the United Kingdom and the pedagogical practices in approaching these students (Holt, 2004). Her conclusion was that children with similar characteristics are differently diagnosed in these schools accordingly to the "school culture". An interesting approach of the subject of people with disabilities is made by two Chinese researchers in a study about spatial disparity and structural inequality in disability patterns across Tianjin municipality: A multiple deprivation perspective, published in *Habitat International* review (Ngcobo and Muthukrishna, 2011). Their research analysed the disparities and spatial distribution of people with disabilities in a Chinese city focusing on their age, gender and types of deprivation. But this is a general approach, from the point of spatial planning, and they do not analyse separately the spatial disparities regarding students with special needs.

Ngcobo and Muthukrishna have conducted a study in 2011 on a school in South Africa regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities according to imperatives of national legislation (Ngcobo, and Muthukrishna, 2011). The authors tried to connect the

environment of the school to the process of admission in regular classes. They include their research in the category of studies dedicated to 'children's geographies, but the aims of their work are to "highlights the experiential aspects of disabled children's inclusion in an ordinary public school, and is examines the processes that maintain or challenge the spatial conditions under which inclusion and the identity of disabled children are produced". Although, the geographical approach of the study it is obvious due to the connection with the space that children live in, we consider that the authors rather emphasize the role of the school culture in creating a better place for children with special needs than to explain the relations between individual space and the school space.

Because of the lack of information regarding the inclusion of SEND in regular classes before 1998, this article focuses on the evolution of SEND in mainstream education starting with 1990. The child with special needs, like the adult, had a specific place in the society during the regime before 1989, who encouraged the creation of special institution, specialized in helping these persons. The same government had created specialized institutions for these children, institutions whose declared purpose was to facilitate their integration into society. The law on education in the Socialist Republic of Romania of May 13, 1968, provided in article 30 that "For children with sensory, physical or intellectual deficiencies or with behavioural disorders, special general schools are organized, with the duration of studies and school programs specific to each category of deficiencies." (Bunescu, G. et al., 2004). The legal framework was thus created and clearly signalled for all categories of students. It is interesting that at the high school level, some categories of students with special needs "disappear". Article 34 of the same act had the following provisions: "For children with sensory or physical deficiencies, high schools of general culture can be organized, with the duration of studies and school programs specific to each category of deficiencies." However, these students are provided with professional training within vocational education, as specified in article 73: "For the qualification of people with sensory, physical or intellectual deficiencies, vocational schools can be organized with the duration of studies and school programs specific to each category of deficiencies" (Bunescu et al., 2004). Although the legislation during the communist regime was quite 'inclusive', the persistence of some old dated mentalities was reducing the number of SEND in regular classes.

2. Materials and Methods

The last 15 years have shown an increase in the number of students with special needs who integrated into conventional education: in Neamț county we see an increase of SEND students from 6 students reported in the 2007-2008 school year to 717 students reported in the 2020-2021 school year according to the statistics offered by Neamț county school authority. The share of students with special needs in the total number of students in Neamț County remains at very low values, despite a favourable legislative framework: in 1992, only 0.005% of students were with special needs (at that time all these students were enrolled in special schools), and 30 years later, their share in the total share of Neamț county students has risen to 0.023%, with the observation that half of them are now enrolled in regular schools. (Neamț County School Authority, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022).

In order to ensure the access to education of these students, during the regime before 1989, a series of specialized institutions were created, which have kept their status until the current period. The number of special education school units in Neamț county remained constant both during the regime before 1989 period and after the fall of this regime. We can see an increasing number of students with special needs, enrolled in regular schools from 6 students in the 2006-2007 school year to 430 students in 2019-2020 school year according to numbers communicated by the Neamț County school authority. On a general level, special schools were affected by the decrease in the

number of students, similar to any school in the county. Yet, the phenomenon is accentuated after 2011, when through educational policies at the general level, students with special needs are encouraged to integrate into conventional education system. In this way, the reduction in the number of students in specialized educational units can be explained by two causes: the decrease in the birth rate in general and the migration of students with special needs to non-specialized educational institutions. The phenomenon of migration to regular schools has been favoured by the change in the mentality of society in general, but also by the creation of a legislative framework that facilitates the integration of students in regular education units: there are procedures to equalize opportunities for students who take the national assessments and the national baccalaureate exam, which provides adapted subjects accordingly to the type of student's deficiency, starting from the way the subjects are printed to extending the working time or assigning a teacher-assistant to help scribe the answers. During the last 30 years the legislation has changed and the increasing students' number can be explained by the adoption of the European laws regarding the inclusion of youngsters with different deficiencies or disabilities or any other special educational requirement. The Romanian government has created the legal framework and the tools to include special needs students in the mainstream school network. Teachers were helped with specialized training courses and the curricula was adapted to the needs of these students. Students with special needs were encouraged to access the regular schools. A certain number of places, especially in the secondary schools were granted for students with special needs. Usually, it is the same number for all secondary schools. But each school year, these places are fully occupied showing an increasing interest of parents and students for regular classes.

Neamț County is situated in the north-east of Romania close to the border with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Economically, it is situated in the lowest half of all counties in Romania. The major economical and demographical problems in Neamț County, with direct impact on the educational system are: the low level of birth rate, high migration, high unemployment values (above the national average) and predominance of the population in rural areas (64.69% in 2018) (National Institute for Statistics – Romania, 2023). In order to realise this study, the authors have used the investigation, the field survey, the interview, the direct observation and the processing of statistical data obtained from official sources (national databases, statistical yearbooks, school or county monographs, national reports). The documentation for the present study included three major stages. The first stage involved the assembly of data provided by the authorities and by the schools: The National Institute of Statistics, the Neamț County School Inspectorate, respectively the 4 special education units in the county, as well as from mainstream education units that educate students with special needs. One questionnaire was applied to all 143 schools from Neamț county, to which 326 responses were collected, from a number of 90 schools. After collecting the answers, we moved to a second stage, that of the field investigation and the interviews with three of the directors of compressive schools in the municipality of Roman that register the largest number of students with special needs in the city. The third stage involved the correlation of the databases with the information obtained in the field and the construction of the graphic and cartographic base. The four special schools we refer to during our research were created before 1989 and they provided specialized training courses for special needs children with minor, medium and severe disabilities. Three of them were dedicated to children under 14/15th years old, from primary school to lower secondary schools. These schools were created in the major urban areas from Neamț county, in Piatra Neamț (the main city and the capital of the county), in Roman municipality and in Targu Neamț town. Analysing the spatial distribution of these 3 schools, we will notice that they were spread relatively evenly in space at the county level, so that students with domiciles in other localities have access to a specialized education. The fourth one, was a specialized school, enrolling children between 14/15th years to 18th years old, corresponding to a professional school. We did not focus on the

evolution of the number with special needs registered in these special schools but rather on the evolution of SEND included in ordinary schools.

The data collected from the schools were processed using statistical and cartographic methods. The maps were made using the Philcarto software to be able to create a more faithful image of the geographical reality that the researchers wanted to present. The data was collected via a questionnaire asking very specific questions regarding the name of the school, the locality in which is localised the school, the environment of the school (rural/urban), the first year when students with specific needs were enrolled in their institutions, the gender, which we prefer not to include in this study, leaving the opportunity to further develop our research, and the type of disability. We also demand the schools to indicate if they students benefits of specific training courses or projects developed with NGO's or other local or national educational institutions focused on increasing the rate of inclusion of special needs students in regular classes. We have obtained a large data base from which we choose to work during this research only with the numbers referring to the evolution of SEND in ordinary schools. This opens the road to further researches that will include other information resulted from this questionnaire.

The analysed period starts after the fall of the regime before 1989 until 2020, covering 30 years of evolution of the school network in Neamț County. The present study focuses on the last five school years for which there are definite data, collected directly from the school units in the municipality. But for a correct spatial and temporal framework, it was necessary to corroborate the data with that existing in the official databases, existing at national and county level.

We took the data from schools and not from the students because of the sensitive nature of the issue research. Also, we didn't need to interact with the students because the data we needed for the research was not regarding any personal data. According to the educational contract that parents and students sign at the beginning of their training, schools are allowed to work with personal data of their students in order to help them choose their educational path better. During this research no student was directly approached, no personal data such as name, date of birth, address or type of disabilities were asked. Schools only answered to a questionnaire regarding the number of special needs students enrolled in their classes and the total number of students registered annually. In order to ensure that the date we have collected did not affected the subjects of our research, we have asked and obtained the approval of the ethic committee of A. I. Cuza University from Iasi (Romania).

3. Results

Neamț County school network has some particularities among the other counties in Romania: it is the school network with the largest number of theological secondary schools in the country. This does not mean that the special needs students are enrolled in a larger number. Also, in Neamț County we can count two vocational schools enrolling students in the various sport fields. In case of these schools it is very difficult to integrate students with special needs. According to the methodology regarding the admission in the upper secondary schools specialized in training future sportsmen, every student needs to pass a practical exam verifying their sportive skills (ISJ Neamt, 2023). No child with a physical disability will be able to be enrolled in this vocational high schools. This not mean that in order to eliminate this segregation, specialized classes for disabled children cannot be created within these schools to help children with educational special needs practice a sport according to their physical possibilities. This remain a great desire for SNED and their parents, to be included in a school that will help them develop their sport skills and that will encourage them to practice a sport that will increase their inclusion in the contemporary society. The benefits of sport for SNED and not only, were analyzed in various specialized studies or projects designed especially for disadvantaged children (Kelly, 2011). Other vocational school is the Art High School located in the main city of the county, Piatra Neamț, but there is no place for a SNED in this school. Most

places for SNED in upper secondary schools are in the technical high-school, which, theoretically prepare students for real life work and production (ISJ Neamt, 2023). This is one of the reasons why we can see an increasing number of SNED in ordinary schools.

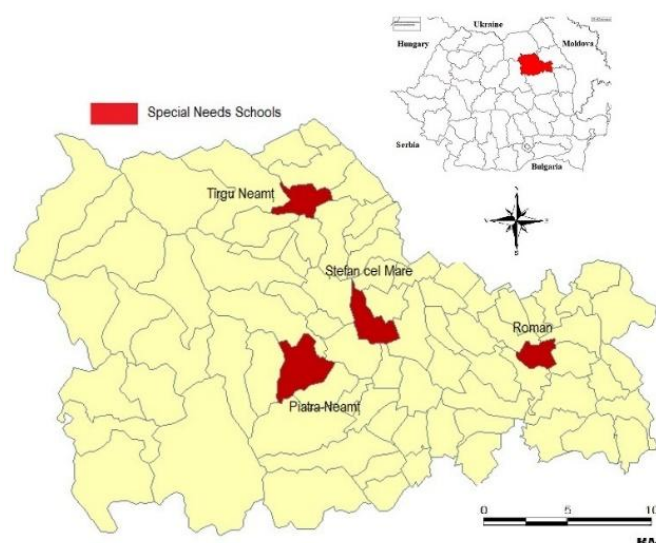


Figure 1. Spatial repartition of special schools in Neamț County. Source: own preparation based on Neamț County School Authority (2022)

The special education units still exist in the current Neamț county school network and they are located in the main urban centres of Neamț County in the Piatra-Neamț, Roman and in Târgu Neamț. The exception is the special lower secondary school from Ștefan cel Mare commune. This spatial repartition of special schools in Neamț County has been stable in time and space. These schools were organized during the regime before 1989 and they kept their status 30 years later, after the fall of communism. This spatial distribution was based on the accessibility of schools. As can be observed, the Special School from Ștefan cel Mare which enrolls students from 9th to the 10th grade, upper secondary level in the Romanian education system, is situated right in the centre of the county. The Romanian educational system is structured as follows: compulsory education starts at age 3 with kindergarten until age 6. It follows the Primary school which ends at age 10 when pupils are in year 4. This is followed by Lower secondary schools from Year 5 to Year 8 (age 11 to 14/15). Upper secondary school starts with Year 9 at age 14/15 and compulsory education ends at 18 years old when students are in Year 12. These 3 educational units educate primary and secondary level students, and a fourth unit, the Special Vocational School, Ștefan cel Mare Commune, offers training for the lower cycle, the 9th and 10th grades, in the fields of textile and leather industry, Agriculture, Food and tourism and Manufacture of wood products. Geographically, this school unit is centrally located in the county to facilitate access for students, who benefit from accommodation within the special school, but also transport from the neighbouring administrative units.

Neamț county school population decreased constantly during the last 30 years (INS, 2016) and the perspectives for the future years are not very encouraging. The share of Neamț county school population at national level in 2022 was 1,96% dropping from a share of 2,51% in 1992. Meanwhile, the number of SNED included in regular schools increased. An interesting fact is that the share of SNED in the Neamț school population is almost the same as the share on Neamț school population reported to total number of students enrolled in pre-university Romanian educational system. The first students with special needs in conventional education are registered in the 2006-2007 school year, according to the data provided by the educational units in Neamț county. Starting with the 2011-2012 school year, when the National Education Law no. 1 / 2011 was producing

effects, the number of students enrolled in regular schools is constantly increasing. The percentage of special needs students in the overall school population follows an increasing trend after the fall of communism, from 0.51% in 1992 to 2.28% in 2020. That means a four-point four increase in 30 years, while the numbers of students with special needs enrolled in comprehensive schools, increased from 0 to 1.04 %. Before the National Educational Law was adopted in 2011, the number of special needs students enrolled in regular schools was very low. The first school year when this law was effective, did not produced a significant change in the behaviour of students and parents. Either they did not know the law, or they did not understand the benefits of integrating these students into mainstream schools. After five years of implementing this law, we can observe that this number almost tripled in 2015-2016, compared to 2012-2013. The following two school years, the number of special needs students constantly doubled, to reach the peak in 2019-2020, when 545 students with special needs were enrolled in regular classes. By comparison, the number of students with special needs in special education schools is decreasing, having relatively constant values, especially in the last 7 school years.

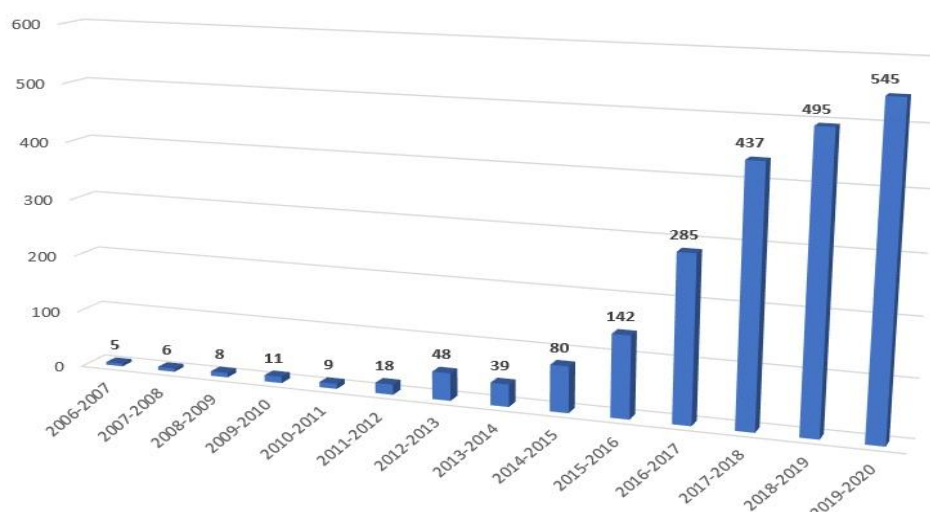


Figure 2. Special needs students enrolled in mainstream schools. Source: own preparation based on Neamț County School Authority (2022).

Table 1. The evolution of the number of SEND during the last 30 years in Neamț County. Source: own preparation based on Neamț County School Authority (2022)

Year	Total no. of students	SEND	SEND enrolled in regular schools	Weight of SEND in regular schools (%)
1992	116 943	598	0	0,005
1997	112 609	1367	0	0,012
2002	105 230	1131	0	0,011
2007	90 138	928	6	0,010
2012	82 521	2447	18	0,030
2017	75 580	1157	453	0,021
2020	69 186	1578	717	0,023

The number of students enrolled in special schools in Neamț County followed the general trend, decreasing constantly their number after the fall of the communism. In the first decade the number of students remains high, probably a reminiscence of the

high birth level rate during the regime before 1989. During the second decade, the number of students enrolled in special schools drops and remains constant during the third decade. Among the special need schools in Neamț county, Târgu Neamț is maintaining a first position throughout the analysed period, while Roman municipality is keeping the same number of students during all the three decades analysed. The publication of National Educational Law in 2011 encouraged families to integrate their children in compressive schools, but it has also encouraged them to pursuit their education in upper secondary schools, which is why we can observe an increasing number of students enrolled in the special high-school in Stefan cel Mare in the first three years after the application of National Education Law in 2011. The number of students registered here dropped after 2011 because a number of places were designated for special needs students in regular schools and parents preferred to enrol their children in conventional schools in order to facilitate their transition from school to work life.

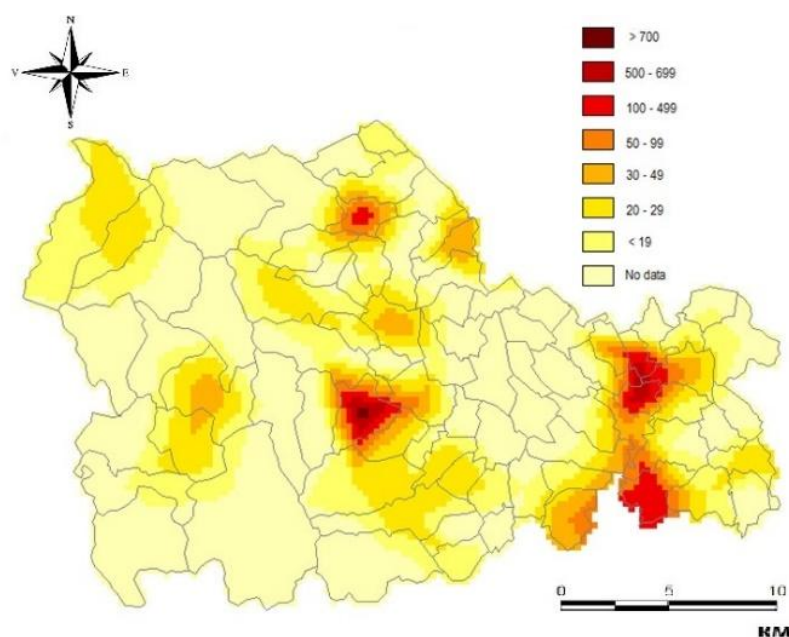


Figure 3. Geographical disparities of SEND enrolled in mass schools in Neamț County.

Source: own preparation based on Neamț County School Authority (2022)

Regarding the spatial repartition of the schools involved in the study 53% of them are located in rural areas. However, 68,93% of the SNED registered in ordinary schools, are enrolled in urban areas. Analysing educational level, most students, 64,46% of SNED are enrolled in primary and lower secondary schools, followed by 33,53% enrolled in high-schools. Only 1,34% of the SNED follow the courses of professional schools. The number of students with special educational needs registered in ordinary classes it is limited by the number of places that the Neamț county school authority.

Analysing the spatial distribution of special needs students outside the schools created especially for their care, we can observe a concentration of their number in the communes neighbouring the major urban areas. We can also observe a split between the western and the eastern side of the county. The western side is a mountainous area, with sparse population and small villages. This area is also better developed economically and families do not rely on the financial aid these children receive from the state. Also, this part of Neamț County is renowned for their monasteries, their faith and the traditional moral values of small, rural communities impede families to accept they have a child with special needs.

The eastern part of the county is situated in a hilly area with a very low-income population. This is also one of Romania's most important migrations and it includes the

cities and towns of Iași, Bacău, Vaslui, Suceava and Botoșani areas. It is important to specify that the high number of students with special needs in Roman has two possible explanations. The communes, north of Roman are inhabited by a Roman Catholic majority and many families immigrated to Italy, Spain and other countries in Western Europe, countries with the same religious profile. The contact with the western mentality helped them accept that it is normal for their children to benefit from the help the government offers them. On the other hand, in the south part of Roman municipality we come across one of the poorest communities in the county. For many families in this area the financial aid for special needs students is the only source of income.

The geographical disparities of special needs students enrolled in mass schools prove a concentration in the main urban areas. The biggest exception are two communes situated in the south-east part of the county, inhabited by a strong Roma community which opens the road to new research to see how the ethnicity and the number of special needs students correlate.

4. Discussion

The integration of special need students in conventional education was the object of many scientific studies during the recent years in Romania and worldwide. These studies analysed this process especially from the perspective of the educational sciences, emphasizing the role of the school in facilitating the transition from education to life after school. Psychological or sociological studies focused on methods, patterns and ways of helping students integrate in regular classes. A geographical approach on the phenomenon is scarce due to the difficulties in reaching reliable data and because the weight of special need student in the total balance of pupils is insignificant. But the increasing number of special need students registered in regular schools forces a geographical analysis in order to better allocate financial, pedagogical and psychological support for these students, their families and their teachers. The number of students with special needs enrolled in special schools remains constant over the years; instead the number of students with special needs enrolled in normal classes increased. This is a direct consequence of the application of the National Educational Law from 2011 who encouraged parents to enrol their special needs children in compressive schools, to help them better integrate in the society. Nevertheless, there is a gap between the educational offer and the needs of the society (Istrate et al., 2019) and this is even more visible in the case of special needs students.

There are a number of parents who declare their children with special needs in order to benefit from the financial support they receive - visible in rural areas, where sometimes this is the only source of income for the family, but to ensure the validation of this affirmation further studies are required in order to see if there is any correlation between income – ethnicity – educational backgrounds of the families with special needs children.

The spatial distribution of special needs students show that the main urban areas concentrate the highest number of special needs students enrolled in normal classes due to proximity influence and usually because parents in the areas surrounding bigger cities access information easier and they tend to have access to better educational and psychological services.

The current approach of the inclusion of SNED in regular classes, was developed from a communication realised by the authors in 2022 in Paris to the Congress of French Geographical Society. This was the departure point for this research which developed in time. During the research new paths to explore opened. The perspective over the phenomenon of SNED inclusion in regular schools is very narrow and it represents the situation regarding Neamț county. A study over other counties would confirm or deny the increase of SNED in mainstream education. At regional level, this is one of the first attempts to highlight the place of special needs students in Neamț school county network. The situation registered at regional level it is not necessary to be the same at

national level. But mapping the inclusion of SNED in regular classes, would help various local, regional and national institution to better adapt their social policies (because integrating special needs students it is a social problem). These institutions would know where they need to improve their efforts in order to ensure financial, pedagogical, curricular and health resources. Knowing where SNED are, helps them benefits of better projects and programs.

5. Conclusions

After the 1990s, many things have changed in the Romanian society, culture and of course, in the educational system. Inclusion of special needs students is seen now as a normality. National and local authorities are working together to increase the number of these students enrolled in mainstream schools. The effort of these authorities is visible in the increasing number of students enrolled in the regular classes. The schools and the teachers are making constant efforts to adapt the curricula, the teaching methods, even school's furniture in order to create a friendly environment for these students. At first, the inclusion was something very difficult to complete since neither the schools nor the teachers and even the students themselves were prepared to integrate people with different educational requirements. We can observe two different perspectives on the subject: before 1990, students with special needs were educated in over specialised schools' units, especially created for their needs. Nowadays, the society is more oriented towards inclusion and the Romanian schools try to create competencies and to develop social skills and abilities to help the future citizens better adapt to the future society. Before 1990, Romanian society tried to adapt citizens to its needs; today, Romanian society tries to adapt to its citizen's needs.

Nevertheless, the topic remains a delicate one. Especially in the rural environment, where customs and traditions still persist and people are poorly educated on the subject. The authorities have shaped a positive discrimination of students with special needs which benefit from financial and educational aid. In some poor rural areas, as proven by the geographical disparities already discussed, these children become an income source for their families. Here, we can observe a paradox: parents don't want the community to find out they have a special need child, and on the other hand they benefit from them.

This research proves its limits due to the complexity of theme and the difficulty to approach the subjects directly concerned. To our knowledge, this is a first attempt to observe the spatial disparities in the distribution of special needs students enrolled in mainstream education in Neamț county. But it opens the road to more specific investigations and to a follow-up of their trajectory after they finish their studies. Do they follow another form of education? Do they integrate in the work field? These are questions for further researches. Also, a change of scale would be interesting to make in order to observe if there are any patterns related to the environment or the economical or educational status of the families with special needs students. This research shows the reality currently existing in Neamț county. Almost 63% of the mainstream schools responded to the questionnaire and half of them are located in rural area. Nevertheless, the schools from urban areas register a higher number of SNED.

The new educational law, adopted in July 2023, opens a new perspective on the Neamț County school Network. The goal of this law is to endorse the enrolment of special needs students in mainstream schools and to eliminate the special schools, that existed before 1990. This will produce a great transformation of the county's school network and opens the perspective of different research to observe the changesets this law will determine.

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