EDUHEM 2018

VIII International conference on intercultural education and International conference on transcultural health: THE VALUE OF EDUCATION AND HEALTH FOR A GLOBAL, TRANSCULTURAL WORLD

POVERTY DISCRIMINATION OF CHILDREN IN SCHOOL. FROM REALITY TO SOLUTIONS

Venera-Mihaela Cojocariu (a)*, Ioana Boghian (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău, Mărăşeşti, 157, Bacău, Romania, venera_1962@yahoo.com
(b) Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău, Mărăşeşti, 157, Bacău, Romania, boghian.ioana@ub.ro

Abstract

Our paper aims to present a partial radiography on the extent to which the phenomenon of poverty affects the participation of children from Romanian preschool and primary educationin the didactic process and propose solutions for controlling and diminishing it. According to statistics, almost half (46.8%) of the children in Romania were at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2015 (Eurostat, 2018); 300.000 children aged 6-17 were not enrolled in primary or secondary education in 2015 (INS, 2018). Our paper exploits case-studies provided by 69 students in their final year at tthe Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-primary Education, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania, who identified and described cases of child discrimination in Romanian urban and rural schools. Based on their studies, we shall highlight the percentage of the cases of discrimination based on poverty, the poverty indicators identified most often, as well as the agents responsible for the discrimination. Regarding solutions, we shall propose several types of feasible interventions, the agents involved and the expected outcomes regarding the control and diminishing of the discrimination phenomenon in schools.

1. Introduction

Poverty discrimination of children is, unfortunately, a reality in today's Romanian schools (and not only!) (Eurostat, 2018; CRJ, 2018). Intercultural education is a pedagogical approach to cultural diversity which considers spiritual (cultural) and other specificities (gender, social or economic particularities) and tries to avoid the risks stemming from all sorts of inequalities. Intercultural interaction skills may be achieved by learning specific behaviours within educational formal, non-formal or informal influences. Several synonymous, equivalent terms have been associated with intercultural education (especially in the new educations, but not only): peace education, tolerance education, education for non-discrimination, civic education; they all share the focus on teaching human and individual rights and freedoms, and the need to respect and protect them. Intercultural education may provide the key to eliminating or at least diminishing the percentage of poverty and any other type of discrimination of children in Romanian schools by promoting such values as: tolerance, freedom, equality, solidarity, cooperation, respect for differences and human rights, empathy (Cucoș, 2000; Chiriac & Guțu, 2007; Haydon, 2007; Salgur, 2013; Savu, 2014; Albu & Cojocariu, 2015; Țurcan, 2015, Boghian, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

According to statistics, 6 million people drop out of school every year, that is approximately 14% of the total number of students, with consequences such as unemployment, poverty and marginalization; in Romania, the school drop-out rate has grown by one third in the last 9 years. Statistics also showed that almost half (46.8%) of the children in Romania were at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2015 (Eurostat, 2018); 300.000 children aged 6-17 were not enrolled in primary or secondary education in 2015 (they had not been enrolled or had dropped out of school) (INS, 2018).

3. Research Questions

Given the worrying statistics on child discrimination, we have formulated several research questions that support identifying issues and solutions on child discrimination in the Romanian society; the answers to our research questions are an incentive for officially designing and implementing educational policy measures focused on eliminating child discrimination in Romanian schools. Our research questions are

RQ1: What is the percentage of the cases of poverty discrimination based on the 67 case-studies included in the research?

RQ2: What are the poverty indicators identified most often in the case-studies?

RQ3: What are the effects of poverty discrimination on children?

RQ4: Who are the agents responsible for the discrimination?

RQ5: Who are the agents involved in the intervention programs?

RQ6: What solutions could there be implemented to control and diminish child discrimination in schools, the agents involved and the expected outcomes?

RQ7: What is the most appropriate solution to control and diminish poverty discrimination according to the case-studies?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of our study is to perform a partial radiography on the extent to which the phenomenon of poverty affects the participation in the didactic process of children from Romanian preschool and primary education. On this basis we aim to identify the agents responsible for child discrimination, types of interventions and the agents involved in implementing the interventions designed with the purpose of controlling and diminishing child discrimination. We believe that eliminating child discrimination in school may significantly reduce school drop-out rates.

5. Research Methods

The research method used was the case study and case-study analysis. Our paper exploits casestudies provided by 69 students in the first semester of their final year at the study programme of the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-primary Education, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania who identified and described cases of child discrimination in Romanian urban and rural schools. A number of 69 case studies were submitted by the students but 2 of the case studies did not meet the research requirements as they provided superficial, irrelevant, vague data with no type of discrimination identified.

The case studies implied a structure based on which students had to record data on:

- the context of the child discrimination case: urban/rural environment, the family climate, the socio-economic-cultural background of the child, vulnerable family members (disabilities, illnesses) and type of family (biparental, mono-parental, absence of both parents, absence of one parent, etc.);
- the age of the child, absence/presence of disabilities at the discriminated child, social and school behaviour of the discriminated child;
- the agents involved in the discrimination and description of their type of behaviour, actions and speech;
- the reaction/attitude/actions of others (other teachers, school authorities, classmates, parents) towards the discriminating agent and behaviour and the discriminated child;
- solutions for improving the respective child discrimination situation: the agents involved, possible types of actions for eliminating/controlling/diminishing child discrimination, the type of these activities (curricular, counselling, extra-curricular etc.).

Based on an analysis of the 67case studies, we shall highlight the percentage of the cases of discrimination based on poverty, the poverty indicators identified most often, as well as the agents responsible for the discrimination. Regarding solutions, we shall propose several types of feasible interventions, the agents involved and the expected outcomes regarding the control and diminishing of discrimination in schools. The downsize of this research approach is the fact that some students failed to record data on all the items enumerated above, therefore we can only sum the results for the recorded data, knowing that there may have been unrecorded pieces of information. Therefore, we have mentioned the number of cases to show the times that each discrimination indicator was mentioned in the case studies.

For the case studies that presented types of discrimination other than poverty-related, we did not go further with the analysis of the data recorded as this does not respond to our current purpose.

6. Findings

RQ1: What is the percentage of the cases of poverty discrimination based on the 67 studies on cases of discrimination included in the research?

The types of the discrimination identified in the 67case-studies are:

- poverty and ethnic discrimination:17cases/25.37%
- poverty discrimination:16 cases/23.89%
- disability discrimination:15cases/22.38%
- ethnic discrimination: 11 cases/16.42%
- poverty and disability discrimination:5 cases/7.47%
- poverty, ethnic and disability discrimination:1 cases/1.49%
- ethnic and religiousdiscrimination:1 cases/1.49%
- ethnic and disability discrimination:1 cases/1.49%

As shown above, the total number of poverty discrimination casesis 39 out of 67, namely a percentage of 58.21.This number sums all the cases of discrimination based on the criterion of poverty and the cases of discrimination based on two or three mixed criteria (poverty, ethnicity, disabilities), namely: poverty discrimination (16); poverty and ethnic discrimination (17); poverty and disability discrimination (5); poverty, ethnic and disability discrimination (1).There is a high, worrying percentage (58.21%) of discrimination based on poverty mixed with all the other factors. The descriptions of the context of child discrimination provided by the case studies reveal the following complementary data:

- child age: 5- 10years of age (pre-primary and primary-school level);
- urban / rural environment: urban schools (5 cases), rural schools (18cases);
- discriminated child school results: poor (7cases), satisfactory (3 cases), good (2cases), very good (1case);
- level of poverty: very high (13cases); high (3cases); medium (3 cases); low (0 cases); very low (2cases);
- type of family: mono-parental(11cases), one parent working abroad (5cases), the child is raised by his/her grandparents (2cases);
- domestic violence(4cases);
- parents' level of education: illiterate (5cases), middle education (5cases), high-school education (1case), higher/university education (2cases);
- parents' employment status: 1 parent unemployed (3 cases), both parents unemployed (8 cases), short-term/seasonal employment (3 cases);
- family members with disabilities/illnesses(1case); deceased parents: both (0 cases); 1 deceased parent (2 cases);

- family climate: disharmonious family climate (10cases); harmonious family climate (1 case), alcohol addiction of oneparent (6cases) or both parents (2cases), parental indifference/abandonment (8cases);

- disability of the discriminated childundergoing special assistance and care (1 case), or not undergoing special assistance and care (4 cases).

The analysis of these data in relation to RQ1 shows that, most often than not, poverty discrimination is most closely related to: rural children (18 cases); poor and very poor school results (10 cases); single-parent families (11 cases); a very low level of parents' education (5 cases); the parents' unemployment (11 cases); disharmonious family climate (10 cases). These become risk factors that increase poverty-based discrimination, which must be considered by decision-makers in the field of education policy (central and local level) as well as by education agents and teachers.

RQ2: What are the poverty indicators identified most often in the case-studies?

The poverty indicators identified most frequently in the case studies are:

- lack of decent clothing:19cases

- lack of food: 18cases

- lack of basic school supplies:17cases

- lack of proper living conditions at home: 16cases;

- lack of proper body and clothes hygiene: 8cases

- lack of mobile phone: 1 case

The data explicitly shows how poverty affects the basic, material life of children, through lack of clothing, food, decent living conditions, but also their spiritual level through lack of basic school supplies.

RQ3: What are the effects of poverty discrimination on children?

The data on the effects of poverty and discrimination of children revealed the following types of behaviour at the discriminated children:

- at the physical level: agitation (6 cases), lack of motor finesse (4 cases), aggression/violence towards others (9 cases), aggression from others (4 cases) (total 23 cases, 34.32%);

- at the psychic/mental level: anxiety (6 cases); lack of interest/apathy (5 cases), lack of self-confidence and self-esteem (12 cases), depression (3 cases), poor mental/intellectual/learning skills (6 cases), behavioral disorders (2 cases), requires special/customized recovery/ rehabilitation program (3 cases) (total 35 cases, 52.23%);

- at the social level: absenteeism (5 cases), isolation/marginalization (21 cases), self-isolation (10 cases), bullying others (4 cases), bullying from others (14 cases) (total 54, 80%);

Systematization of these data points out that poverty produces a devastating impact on children, affecting their whole being and in all respects. The presented data indicate the serious impact of poverty on children, in descending order, at the social (80%), psychical (52.23%) and physical (34.32%) level.

RQ4: Who are the agents responsible for the discrimination?

The case studies highlighted several agents responsible for child discrimination:

- the teacher (5cases)
- children/classmates (31cases)
- parents (10 cases)
- the school authority/school principal (3 cases);
- the teacher, the classmates and parents (3cases);
- the school and/or local authorities (2cases).

The behaviour of the discriminating agents includes isolation, intolerance and violence. As the data reveal, the agents that manifest discrimination most often are children/classmates (31cases) and parents (10 cases) (three times less). The data show that teachers are such agents sometimes (5 cases), which indicates a dimension on which the initial and continuing training for the teaching career should focus.

RQ5: Who are the agents involved in the interventions?

The case studies highlighted several agents that could be involved in the interventions for eliminating/controlling/diminishing child discrimination:

- the teacher (25cases);
- the teacherand the classmates (10cases);
- the teacher, the classmates, parents/grandparents (8cases);
- the teacher, the classmates, parents/grandparents, school and local authorities (7cases);
- the teacher and the school psychological counselor (4 cases);
- other agents: NGOs (1 case); the school inspectorate (1 case).

The agent playing the main role in initiating and conducting the intervention actions is the teacher (25 cases), which reaffirms his/her essential role in the formative process. The teacher connects all the other agents involved in the non-discrimination interventions: children, parents, school and local authorities.RQ6: What solutions could there be implemented to control and diminish discrimination in schools, the agents involved and the expected outcomes?

The case studies mentioned several types of interventions initiated, in all cases, by the teacher:

- the teacher applies equal treatment to all the students in the class (19 cases);
- the teacher gets to know the discriminated child better by observing his/her behavior in different contexts, studying his/her medical records and designing and conducting educational activities with the whole class aimed at integrating the discriminated child in the class group, building empathy at his/her classmates, group interaction and group cohesion, respect and mutual help(for example, activities in which each child presents him/herself and his/her family through a video recording or storytelling and role-play; a student plays the role of a discriminated child) (22cases);

- the teacher applies a differentiated educational program to meet the needs of the discriminated child; for example, the teacher assigns special tasks or roles that the discriminated child enjoys, for a certain amount of time, to build self-confidence and fill in learning gaps (11 cases);

- the teacher discusses the case of the discriminated child with the child's family, classmates' parents, school authorities to find ways to eliminate the discrimination situation, to educate children, parents and the local community in the spirit of non-discrimination attitude, behavior and speech(11cases);

- the teacherpraises the discriminated child for his/her renewed school efforts and results(8cases);the teacher also encourages the other classmates to offer praise to the discriminated child as well as to other classmates;

- the teacher discusses the poverty discrimination case with the parents, school and local authorities to find ways to provide financial support and other types of assistance (e.g. medical assistance) to the discriminated child and his/her family (6 cases);

- the teacher organizes extracurricular activities (short trips, visits to museums, watching a movie together, extracurricular activities with children and parents, meetings with parents) to build group interaction, collaboration and cooperation within the group, team-work spirit(5cases);

- there should be a legal authority that monitors and sanctions cases of child discrimination in school (2 cases).

The more difficult and more complicated the problem of discrimination in schools, the greater and more complex the effort of teachers to reduce it, which enhances their work and responsibility. For the process of initial and continuous training, it raises the need for training in accordance with this school reality, for equipping teachers with strategies dedicated to diminishing this phenomenon.

RQ7: What is the most appropriate solution to control and diminish poverty discrimination according to the case studies?

The solutions that were circulated in the case studies most often are:

the teacher conducts educational activities aimed at integrating the discriminated child in the class group, building empathy, group interaction and group cohesion, respect and mutual help (22cases);

equal treatment in class: the teacher provides is the one to set an example by treating all children in class equally; the teacher provides an example for non-discriminating use of language, behavior, attitudes and actions (19 cases).

The case studies provided by the students also contain descriptions of the reaction/attitude/actions of others (other teachers, school authorities, classmates, parents) towards the discriminating agent and behaviour and the discriminated child; not only do they not contribute to diminishing the phenomenon, but on the contrary, amplify it: mockery, isolation, marginalization, teacher's indifference, passiveness.

Other findings indicated that religion at young ages does not constitute a reason for discrimination; but poverty and disability unfortunately do. The most relevant effects of poverty discrimination highlighted by the collected and analysed data are: a. mixture of effects at all the three levels: physical, psychic/mental

and social; b. isolation is usually accompanied by self-isolation; c. violent behaviour of the discriminated child is a consequence of the bullying received from others. Role-play has been highlighted as an efficient way to build empathy and eliminate discrimination. The fact that most cases of discrimination described are from rural schools does not imply that discrimination is absent in urban schools; this result is partially explained by the fact that students conducted their case-study research in rural areas since they, too, live or work in rural areas.

7. Conclusion

Our present paper provides an incentive that supports and motivates further research on child discrimination; this, in turn, can and should generate the design and implementation of educational policy measures focused on diminishing and, ideally eliminating child discrimination in school.

Conducting case studies and presenting them has been, for the students in their final year of training for a teaching career in preschool and primary education, a real attempt to connect to the educational reality that they are going to face starting with the next school year and a good exercise of critical and reflexive thinking, correlating theory with practice, searching/generating solutions to overcome the problem. We consider that the suggestions presented by them reveal, on the one hand, knowledge of our education system and a realistic capacity to relate to the issue of discrimination. On the other hand, the relatively limited number of solutions meant to ensure the control and diminution of poverty discrimination reveals their lack of experience in teaching and a certain degree of professional immaturity (which is, of course, natural for the students who are in the penultimate semester of their teacher training and to be considered for further training sessions).

The case-studies analysis has also revealed the gap between Romanian non-discrimination laws and reality (CNCD, 2018). The right to equal treatment is, for some children, not ensured.

The measures taken at the level of educational policy and socially experienced to provide a daily snack for all small school children (milk, bread loaves, apples, vegetables, cereals) are either not financially and properly supported, or diverted and therefore fail to meet the real needs of poor children. The intention to ensure a warm daily meal for all small school children does not yet have enough financial and managerial resources to be translated into practice. These issues, when accompanied by insufficient space facilities (insufficient/inadequate classroom space), insufficient or (physically/ morally) worn-out teaching materials, lack of textbooks and/or curricular auxiliaries, in contrast with the system's experimenting with digital textbooks, show how poverty at the individual level correlates with inadequate fund management or material, managerial, attitudinal deficiencies at the education system level.

We appreciate that introducing the Intercultural Education course into the initial teacher training curriculum for primary and preschool education can generate considerable positive effects over time.

References

Albu, G., & Cojocariu, V. M. (2015). Intercultural Education – Tensions and Prospects Case Study – The Approach of the 1st -year Students from the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-school Education. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 209, 53-60.

Boghian, I. (2018). Values Promoted by Intercultural Education. In Soitu, L. (Ed.) *Fifth International Conference on Adult Education. Education for values – continuity and context.* Chisinau, Moldova

Chiriac, A., & Guţu, V. (2007). Curriculumul intercultural: orientări, principii, resurse. *Pedagogie*, 9, 75-77.

Cucoş, C. (2000). *Educaţia. Dimensiuni culturale şiinterculturale.* Iaşi: Polirom.

Haydon, G. (2007). *Values in Education*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Salgur, S., A. (2013). The importance of the teacher in intercultural education. *International Journal of Global Education*, *2*(1), 1-5.

Savu, E. (2014). The 'intercultural' teacher – a new response to the teaching career. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 128, 111-116.

Ţurcan, L. (2015). *Formare acadrelor didactice prin valoril e toleranţei*. Chişinău: Tipogr. UPSC. Ion Creangă.

CRJ (2018). *Harta excluziunii în şcoala românească*. Retrieved May 19th, 2018, fromhttp://www.educatiefaradiscriminare.ro/articole/harta-excluziunii-scoala-romaneasca/ .

CNCD (2018). *Legislaţie naţională*. Retrieved May 19th, 2018, fromhttp://cncd.org.ro/legislatie-nationala.

Eurostat (2018). *Education and training statistics*. Retrieved May 19th, 2018, from http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/overview .

INS (2018). *SCL103A&SCL103B*. Retrieved May 19th, 2018, from http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/index.jsp?page=tempo2&lang=ro&context=25.