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**Doctoral School of Administration and Public Policy**

**FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERACTION**  
**BETWEEN CITIZENS AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

**ABSTRACT of the PhD THESIS**

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Keywords: illiteracy, functional illiteracy, risk of poverty and social exclusion, reforms, right to education, school trajectory, administrative involvement.

## 1. Research purpose and objectives

This paper is centered on the analysis of the processes within the community that contributes to the persistence of illiteracy, but focuses on how this phenomenon influences and is influenced by the characteristics of the rural environment.

The main aim of the investigative approach was to formulate a detailed conceptual vision regarding the disadvantaged children from rural areas, in terms of acquiring the knowledge, skills and competences needed to ensure a decent living, and to draw conclusions and recommendations to address the rural-urban educational gap.

The present PhD thesis started from the general objective of the research, i.e. to identify the factors causing illiteracy according with the elaboration of a set of conclusions and recommendations to improve literacy in the rural dimension of the North-West Development Region. In line with the main objective, several specific objectives of theoretical, methodological and empirical character were derived as follows:

<b>SO1.</b>	Mapping of data and results related to the studied problem;
<b>SO2.</b>	Examination of the variations of illiteracy manifested by the population of Bistrita-Nasaud County, in interaction with a public service;
<b>SO3.</b>	Establishing the administrative profile of the actors involved in rural community literacy;
<b>SO4.</b>	Identifying the perception of illiteracy incidence in distinct rural environments located in the North-West Development Region;
<b>SO5.</b>	Evaluation and comparison of the opinions of the four local actors (City Hall, Police, Medical Center and School) on the studied phenomenon;
<b>SO6.</b>	Assessment of the degree of parental involvement in children's literacy;
<b>SO7.</b>	Formulate explanatory, improving and forward-looking solutions to improve literacy rates in rural communities.

The research objectives are based on the general assumption that the local community can also have a significant effect on illiteracy rates, regardless of the socio-economic background of the families from which the pupils come. In other words, the illiteracy rate is not only determined by resources (school or family), but also by the involvement of the community (administrative bodies and civil society) in educating the younger generation.

Given the gaps associated with illiteracy in rural areas, we have started a continuous information collection and updating effort using 3 qualitative research methods:

- analysis of official documents and literature;;
- direct and participatory observation;
- interviews with rural community representatives (local actors);
- interviews with parents.

The selection of empirical research tools was preceded by a synthetic bibliographical study phase with two nodal directions:

- analysis of the specialized literature on the studied phenomenon, of reports issued by national and global bodies, other similar studies and researches, which focused on the identification of current perceptions on illiteracy, forms of manifestation, models of intervention and sustainable community development by educational branch and essential research conclusions, which targeted both the Romanian educational system and other relevant international experiences.

- analysis of the main normative frameworks for prevention, intervention and control of learning difficulties in rural areas, with the aim of contextualising illiteracy in relation to the priorities and visions of educational policies.

The bibliographical documentation involved a detailed analysis of the topic, the field in which belongs, followed by its contextualisation in the domain of education and public policies.

## **2. Structure and content of the thesis**

The structure of the PhD thesis consists of 7 chapters dedicated to the scientific approach, 12 pages of references and 7 appendixes. The organisation of the chapters follows a logical, procedural and unified approach, starting with the bibliographical study and ending with the research methodology, the results of which I have translated into a set of conclusions, reflections and recommendations.

**CHAPTER 1 - THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH** houses the proposed research scenario and summarises the 3 qualitative research methods that have been adopted. The first chapter exposes the problem we are trying to solve through the investigative approach and describes the basic assumption that orchestrates the whole research. From this provisional representation of reality, were divided secondary working presumptions (P1-P3) related to differences between communities in literacy levels and their impact on social outcomes from an administrative and parental perspective. In formulating the presumptions, we did not seek to prove facts, but to explore them through scientific methods, which have the capacity to generate objective data and express innovative

and original truths. The last part of the chapter outlines the main objective of the research from which several specific objectives (SO) and derived objectives (DO) of a theoretical, methodological and empirical nature have been distinguished, each being a trigger for a set of research questions (Q). The first chapter is therefore methodological and establishes both the terminological elements of the research methods and the temporal coordinates of application.

The second chapter entitled "**CONCEPTUAL PARTICULARITIES AND THEORIES ASSOCIATED WITH ILLITERACY**" is not intended to be exhaustive, but only addresses a few theories related to illiteracy and its relentless consequences for vulnerable groups. At the same time, it captures concepts and paradigms related to illiteracy encountered in rural areas and its associated risks. The role of the first section is to introduce the reader to the topic and to familiarise him with the state of knowledge on the issue under analysis. Several sub-chapters are divided into sections covering the definition and background of the notions of absolute illiteracy and functional illiteracy, followed by a presentation of the phenomenon in Romania and the European Union as comparative realities. I then turned to the retrospective of social inequalities and the digital divide as reflections of illiteracy and assigned a theoretical overview of exogenous influences on cognitive development. Thus, Chapter 2 is focused on understanding the studied phenomenon both from a terminological point of view, but especially in terms of the school trajectories of village children that are drastically impacted by sociocultural inequalities and heredity. The consolidation of the theoretical-conceptual discourse was based on the interdisciplinarity of bibliographical references. Chapter 2 thus provides an initial overview of the urban-rural educational gap, calling on the theories of contemporary scholars (F. Baum, P. Gilster, D. Sălăvăstru, P. Bourdieu, P. Carneiro) as well as perspectives from behavioural psychology (A. Bandura), philosophy (Aristotle, Phaleas of Chalcedon, Comenius), economics (G. Becker, P. H. Coombs) and psycho-pedagogy (M. Palicica).

**CHAPTER 3 - THE LEGISLATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ROMANIA** examines national, European and global policies on education. In sub-chapters 3.2 - 3.4 we have highlighted relevant legislative norms concerning the education system and discussed the financing mechanisms of education. In the same chapter we described five of the most important reform processes, noting that in many political discourses, education has been constantly debated as a governmental priority, which is why every minister with decision-making power has proposed education reform. Chapter 3 closes by presenting four models of good practice from the

European Union, where we have focused on highlighting measures to increase literacy rates among the underage population.

**CHAPTER 4 - CASE STUDY ON LITERACY OF THE POPULATION IN BISTRIȚA-NĂSĂUD COUNTY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 HEALTH CRISIS** is the quintessential application of the investigative approach undertaken during the doctoral stage. This chapter begins with the presentation of the geographical space in the North-West Region of Romania where we conducted our research, focusing mainly on the analysis of rural communities in Bistrița-Năsăud County. The territorial split allowed the elaboration of some explanatory aspects of the differences between development regions in terms of education. Paradoxically, the North-West Region together with the Bucharest-Ilfov Region and the West Region stand out from the rest of the administrative territories, recording high levels of education. However, the mainly rural configuration of Bistrița-Năsăud County also implies an ethnic character of poverty, and despite the economic development of recent years, extreme material deprivation is still present in some localities of the county, where situations of illegality, abuse, illiteracy and administrative negligence persist. Chapter 4 was designed to document, among other things, the writing and reading difficulties of the sample analysed, observable in interaction with a public service. The report presents an overview, framed in time, of the population of Bistrița-Năsăud County, a picture captured through direct and participatory observation in the Triage Tent of the Bistrița-Năsăud County Emergency Hospital (SJUBN), set up as a measure to combat the COVID-19 epidemic. The survey was carried out from 29 August 2020 to 07 September 2020. During the observation period several research tools and techniques were used such as field diary, observation grid and document analysis. To make the observation systematic, we used the observation grid built on Likert scale principles, where we went for a high degree of detail on the frequencies of some behaviours in the illiteracy spectrum.

In the same chapter, we shared through the Serendipity Report the journey of purely serendipitous discoveries, which gave us the opportunity to identify certain overlooked presumptions. The surprise of unintended consequences meant for us as researchers, the discovery of illiteracy infiltrating systems that we had not considered in the first place and that were not in direct connection with our target group.

In **CHAPTER 5 - INTERVIEW WITH ACTORS INVOLVED IN THE EDUCATION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS IN THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT**, we planned to focus mainly on the relationship between the community (particularly the disadvantaged) and various state institutions, conducting in-depth individual interviews

between December 2020 and January 2021. Starting from the double-interrogation "*Can a profile of community actors be drawn up based on their perception of the phenomenon under study? Is this profile uniform or does it differ from one community to another?*" we targeted a sample of 73 rural communities, 58 of which are in Bistrița-Năsăud County. For the study to be representative at the level of the North-West Region, we extended the research to 3 administrative units in each component county. The results of the 292 in-depth individualised interviews with local government, educational establishments, health services and local police stations in rural areas have been compiled in the sub-chapter *Data analysis. The seven segregationist tendencies in rural Romania.*

To obtain qualitative data on parents' involvement in their child's school pathway, we set up **CHAPTER 6 - PARENTAL PERSPECTIVE IN FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP. INTERVIEW WITH PARENTS LIVING IN RURAL ENVIRONMENT.** We assessed parents' perspectives on the educational process using the method of questioning with the instrument known as a semi-structured interview. Since the intersection of the two habitus (school and family) is unavoidable in defining the educational path of children, the application of this instrument in the extension of the research of the administrative profile in rural communities meant a simplified intra-family anamnesis reduced to parental perspectives in the literacy sphere. Education in the public system represents a vast field, characterized by topics that maintain a perennial validity and is often described as an entity that is not adapted to the new movements and paradigms that set the tone in terms of quality of Romanian education. For the elaboration of this chapter, we looked at elements of convergence and divergence from a parental perspective and even if the exploratory analysis was only done at the level of the trends spotted during the interviews, we believe that they are part of the descriptor of school failure. As a result of the analysis and classification of the data obtained, we were able to intercept several trends that converged or diverged with the school perspective on taking responsibility for literacy.

**CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSIONS, REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS** summarizes the most important results generated by the conceptual and statistical analysis of the phenomenon studied, to which we have attached several limitations specific to the research method through which they were investigated. At the same time, we have presented our own contributions, not only in the form of reflections and recommendations, but especially in the form of suggestions for integrating and exploiting new perspectives in the field of social sciences and public policy in education. The last part of this chapter also includes some potential directions for future research.

### 3. Research methodology

This PhD thesis is part of the social sciences but not limited to them, thus acquiring an interdisciplinary character as it draws on educational theories and public policies in education. The study aimed to explore the extent to which educational policies and practices belonging to different communities in the N-W Region of Romania protect vulnerable classes from social exclusion perpetuated by the existence of intensive forms of segregation against the background of illiteracy.

The first phase of the research is conceptual and delimits the area of study, defines the problem to be investigated, captures from an overview the essential critical points and, at the same time, represents the core of the reflections on the relevance of the subject to scientific thinking. The second phase - conceptual-methodological - consists in planning the trajectory we wish to follow, detailed in research tools and techniques of the phenomenon under analysis.

**The aim of Chapter 2** was to identify perceptions, theories, forms of manifestation, models of intervention and strategies for sustainable development of education by reviewing literature on the phenomenon studied, reports issued by national and global bodies, and other similar studies and research.

The second chapter is structured under the aegis of the first **specific objective SO1 - Mapping of data and results related to the studied problem**, which we partially achieved using as a research method the **analysis of official documents** (conceptual and theoretical) in the spectrum of the investigated issue. The specific objective was divided into several **derived objectives** as follows:

- DO1. Exploring the evolutionary movements traversed by absolute and functional illiteracy;
- DO2. To become familiar with the distribution of the phenomenon in the national, European and global context through the analysis of relevant reports (PISA, RPL);
- DO3. Examine the role played by the digital divide in terms of access to the use of information technology, both between individuals and between demographic groups;
- DO4. Detailing the mechanisms of learning and exploring the likely causes of school failure as set out in interdisciplinary theories;
- DO5. Analysis of the relationship between illiteracy and socio-economic footprint;
- DO6. review the literature on school achievement examined in interdependence with language performance;
- DO7. Understanding the Intergenerational Poverty Transfer Process (ITP).



Since Romania has frequently ranked unfavourably in the statistics of European countries regarding the aims of education, partly because the education system has always been intended to be reformed, the documentation began with a review of the legislative framework covering the topic addressed, arguing that the analysis of the bibliography outlining the legal background of the education system on the three levels (global, European and national) is elementary.

**The aim of Chapter 3** was to present the legislative framework developed by international, European and national bodies, with the role of regulating the right to education for children in rural Romania.

The first **specific objective** - *SO1 - Mapping of data and results related to the studied problem* could not be fully achieved without checking the related legal framework. To this end, we resorted to the **analysis of official documents** (documents and public policies in the field of education and social sciences, global action programmes, conventions, declarations, etc.). The direction of the legislative review was given by a number of **derived objectives**:

- DO1. Review national and international policies governing children's right to education;
- DO2. Analysis of the financing mechanisms of Romanian education;
- DO3. Review of the most important reform movements;
- DO4. Inspection of some models of good practice found in successful education systems around the world.

**The aim of Chapter 4**, which presents the case study that was concretised through the field research, was to document the mechanisms of social exclusion of rural communities against the background of writing and reading difficulties observed in interaction with a public service.

The case study unit was selected according to three major criteria: (1) On the one hand, an institution was chosen that is addressed by a large number of inhabitants, both rural and urban, of all age, gender and cultural diversity categories; (2) On the other hand, an important criterion was the dynamics created against the background of national health events, the unit representing a very busy call centre during the observation period; (3) A third argument lay in the institution's willingness to grant unrestricted access for the study, which had been requested in advance in an official letter to the manager of the medical unit. It is also worth mentioning here that between 11 March 2020 and 2 February 2021, most of the schools in Romania were closed, which is why I had to carry out the survey in an area where there is a continuous flow of referrers, perhaps the highest in the county.

Through this chapter I aimed to achieve the **specific objective SO2** - *Examination of the variations in illiteracy manifested by the population of Bistrița-Năsăud County, in interaction with a public service*. During the course of the direct and participatory observation stage, several research tools and techniques were used such as **field diary, observation grid and document analysis**, however, the texts herein do not aim to provide an exhaustive picture of the subjects through the lens of literacy levels nor to generate generally valid statements, but rather we intend to highlight how a health (or any other) crisis highlights the government's failure in population literacy.

In our investigative approach we have attempted to answer two **research questions**:

*Q1. What is the distribution of manifestations of the illiteracy spectrum as measured by the observation grid items?*

*Q2. Is there an association between the forms of illiteracy observed among the group studied and their background (rural/urban)?*

**The aim of Chapter 5** was to seek the perceptions of local actors on the incidence of illiteracy in rural areas and to test whether or not the *Presumption of Variation between Similar Communities (P1)* and the *Presumption of Double Threat (P2)* are confirmed, on the basis that these communities are similar and different in terms of their demonstrated commitment to increasing literacy.

In this scientific endeavour we aimed to address the three **specific objectives**:

SO3. Establishing the administrative profile of the actors involved in rural community literacy;

SO4. Identifying the perception of illiteracy incidence in distinct rural environments located in the North-West Development Region;

SO5. Evaluation and comparison of the opinions of the four local actors (City Hall, Police, Medical Center and School) on the studied phenomenon;

In carrying out the actual field survey, we followed a pre-established, unitary methodological scenario and combined several research techniques adjusted according to the specificity of the community and scientific interests. The investigation focused mainly on the relationship between the community (particularly the disadvantaged) and various public institutions, so that no less than **292 interviews** were conducted with the local administration, educational establishments, health services and local police stations. We interviewed employees occupying key positions or decision-making positions in institutional relations with the rural community who represented the target group/sample: (1) Mayors or vice-mayors - in

a few cases local councillors and social workers from the town hall; (2) Teachers and/or people in the management of educational establishments; (3) Heads of post and/or police officers; (4) Family doctors met at the local dispensary and/or nurses.

The interview survey with actors involved in educating vulnerable groups in rural areas was designed to answer the **triple question**:

*Q1. Is it possible to draw a profile of community actors based on their perception of the phenomenon studied?*

*Q2. Is this profile uniform or does it differ from one community to another?*

*Q3. What are the trends in early literacy in rural communities?*

The research method used was the **in-depth individualised interview**, a tool that allows detailed investigation of respondents' perceptions.

Since the intersection of the two habitus (school and family) is inevitable in defining the educational path of children, the application of this instrument in the extension of the research of the administrative profile in rural communities meant a simplified intra-family anamnesis reduced to parental perspectives in the literacy sphere.

**The aim of Chapter 6** was to obtain qualitative data on parental involvement in the child's schooling pathway, as well as to capture some perceptions of the educational process.

We used the method of questioning with the instrument known as **semi-structured interview**. Usually, interviews are carried out as a secondary stage, after the bibliographic documentation, but we preferred to apply it at the end, in order to confirm or contradict tendencies intercepted with the public administration interview.

From a methodological point of view, the interview was applied in groups representative of the topic analysed, respecting the pre-established geographical area. The questions asked were prefaced by an introductory section summarising the purpose of the investigation and providing information on the collection of personal data. We used influence and determination schemes with regard to the phenomenon under investigation, so that the interview guide was built on a solid structure of indicators, free from bias and subjectivity. With the intention of testing the validity of *P3. The assumption of convergent tendencies* established as a secondary hypothesis of the whole research which states that parents' formal education is reflected in children's literacy scale scores, we developed the **specific objective**:

SO6. Assessment of the degree of parental involvement in children's literacy.

This specific objective has been divided into several **derived objectives**:

DO1. Observation of habits and cultural patterns found in the family, in the form of book consumption and extracurricular activities;

DO2. Outlining the thought pattern regarding responsibility for student success/failure from a parental perspective;

DO3. Identify the literacy (writing, reading, mathematics) bottlenecks faced by students from a family perspective.

We have operationalised these objectives in the set of 14 main questions (4 of which are socio-demographic) and in the set of 13 branching questions related to the interview guide, which can be consulted in Appendix 5.

The target group consisted of 11 parents whose children are enrolled in the fourth grade at a state school and reside in one of the 6 counties where the preliminary investigation was conducted.

The most important variables present in the qualitative analysis were:

- socio-demographic variables - age, biological sex, area where the subject lives, residence environment (urban/rural);
- socio-economic variables - occupation and level of education;
- educational capital variables - time allocated to reading, extracurricular activities carried out in the family, difficulty of homework, performance and literacy level of the child;
- psycho-social variables - behaviours and attitudes related to responsibility for the child's school success/failure.

#### **4. Main findings**

The cumulative effects of school failure caused by exogenous factors (family and spatial), have a strong weight in the student's inner forum and are reflected in deviant behaviour such as absenteeism, dropping out, violence or delinquency. Moreover, the Moranist model has shown that those children born into the process of intergenerational transfer of poverty (ITP) and who are not supported to detach themselves from the inherent preconditions will complete and reset the vicious cycle for future generations. Literature has also shown us that education depends on both environment and heredity. Although many of the variables entering the education system are controllable (financial, human, material resources and means), the input-output transformation scheme devised by economist Philip H. Coombs, also has a less observable component such as the cultural equipment of the individuals involved in the process

(norms, prejudices, behaviours, stereotypes). Even if the education system were flawless, it could not compensate for an inheritance of socio-cultural handicap, which is why integrative literacy measures for the village child must start from the origin of the deficiency.

The transformation of the entire administrative system to solve the problem of inefficiency of public policies of a social nature remained a goal set out in the government's objectives, but not completed. As the effects of social protection and assistance programmes on beneficiaries have been slow to materialise, citizens' confidence in the state's ability to respect their rights has followed a downward trend. Quantitatively, multiple forms of support were indeed initiated through the legislative framework, but they were so fragmented across public bodies that they became ineffective in relation to the complexity of social phenomena and the dynamics with which they affected the lives of vulnerable groups.

Beyond the positive developments in terms of inclusion and equal opportunities legislation, we believe that disadvantaged groups are still spatially or symbolically isolated from the rest of society, forming those segments of the undesirable population whose condition cannot be resolved by current regulations and who risk remaining, permanently, in the vicious circle of structural powerlessness. The more so as administrative abandonment, discrimination and segregation flagrantly violate children's rights to a quality education, it is worth examining legislation in this area to see to what extent it can combat the legitimacy of development inequalities.

We have found it difficult to pinpoint the causes that have led to the repeated failure to implement strategies to increase literacy in Romania, but one of the most visible determinants manifests itself from the very formulation of the legislation, namely that all government plans, ambitious as they are, emphasize "what" the goals are, without explaining "how" they will be achieved. And if long-term implementation guidelines are addressed, they are nothing more than general considerations, not harmonised and often divorced from social reality.

**Direct observation and participatory research** placed the researcher amidst an intensive inquiry into the illiteracy manifested by the community in relation to a public health agency. The main advantage in participatory direct observation was the collection from within of data that could not have been obtained through any other investigative tool. The conclusions drawn from the presented case study do not reflect an indisputable portrait of the citizens of Bistrița-Năsăud County. We believe that community analyses do not fit into a well-defined ideological horizon, and as such we do not claim that our case study is useful for sociological theories. Nevertheless, we have achieved our specific research objective *SO2 - Examination of the variations in illiteracy manifested by the population of Bistrița-Năsăud County, in*

*interaction with a public service* by presenting the cultural characteristics of the sample, by residence background. Literacy indicators can be a starting point for assessing the literacy level of the population, especially as they accurately describe the gaps between the two spatial dimensions.

The observation grid with disjointed items was developed based on condensed bibliographical material and is a reference framework for multiple observations. Quantification of the results led us to several conclusions, including:

- rural background is closely connected with adult illiteracy and this is why a much higher proportion of village subjects, as opposed to city subjects, continue to have basic semantic difficulties;

- by evaluating the scores obtained on the Likert scale, we can assess that the literacy level of the population that presented to the Triage Tent of SJUBN in the period 29.08.2020-07.09.2020 is relatively favorable, the manifestation of the inability to write, read and understand the text being a little more than halfway between 0 and +1, i.e. in the vicinity of sometimes and rarely present manifestation;

- the raw data show that 58.66% of the subjects had one or more difficulties in the area of illiteracy;

- the subjects' environment of residence proved to be a key variable and vehicle in estimating the cultural contour of the sample.

The same tool of direct and participatory observation allowed the generation of consolidated answers to the two research questions: *Q1. What is the distribution of manifestations of the illiteracy spectrum as measured by the observation grid items? Q2. Is there an association between the forms of illiteracy observed among the group studied and their background (rural/urban)?* The correlational data support the assumption that there is an association between the forms of illiteracy observed among the study group and their background (rural/urban). The phenomenon under investigation has a corresponding social reality as the total score of the items on the Likert scale is positive (0.65).

A first instrument that implied an interpretative direction and that captured the points of view of the actors involved in the educational process in the rural area of the North-West Region of Romania, was the **interview guide applied to local actors**. The attitudes of the local authorities are ambiguous, apparently open to inclusion, but based on a muzeified conception of the local cosmos where the obligation of the community towards individuals belonging to disadvantaged groups is limited to keeping them in the same socio-economic position.

The first conclusion that emerges clearly from the data collected through the interviews is the reflexive tendency of respondents (especially mayors and deputy mayors) to reject the idea of a research that wants to uncover possible societal disorders, which are directly responsible for the representatives of the local authorities. We found that the local decision-makers did not hesitate for a moment when they affirmed the civic participation of vulnerable groups in the community, moreover, they were disturbed by the survey on rural literacy in the administrative-territorial units they manage and where, they claim, there are no social or educational problems. This instinct is perhaps pertinent when discussing those aspects of the community that conflict with long-term development strategies or even with untouched indicators of rural well-being, exiled to the periphery of public discourse.

Through the results of the empirical interview-based research we achieved our aim of probing the perceptions of local actors on the incidence of illiteracy in rural areas, results that have been compiled in The Seven Segregationist Trends:

- Child abuse, neglect and exploitation
- The legitimacy of inequality of opportunity
- The imprint of family climate
- The myth of meritocracy
- Social immobility
- "Firefighting" attitudes to crisis situations
- The digital divide

These trends describe the inequalities present in Romanian villages and throw into disrepute any long-term social rebalancing intervention. According to teachers' statements, pupils are trapped between two different social realities: that of school, where they have to respect certain norms, and that of everyday reality, where they are guided by completely different values. The bridges of communication between these two worlds are, in our opinion, too few and insufficiently exploited. In other words, the presence of these preconditions strongly destabilizes the school career of rural children.

*The presumption of variation between similar communities (P1)* is confirmed by the achievement of SO3 Establishing the administrative profile of the actors involved in rural community literacy, which shows us that the main actors of the 73 communities analysed have similar interests in increasing literacy levels. The perception of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds continues to be that of a homogenous group who start out with a spatial handicap and whose shortcomings are more likely to result from an inability to adapt to the public education system or to society in general. To test the third assumption (P3), the Convergent

Tendencies Assumption, which focuses on family climate analysis and states that parents' educational attainment is reflected in the literacy scores of children in their care and furthermore, the risk of poverty and social exclusion may become transmissible, we used **11 interviews with parents**.

The cardinal points of the educational act are developed from different perspectives, each of which is rigorously grounded and inoculated in the minds of key actors. Lack of cross-sectoral collaboration and limited willingness to take responsibility for student success portrays another barrier to the dethronement of early illiteracy. Alongside the dispersion of responsibilities lie some dense, hard-to-control regressive tendencies, translated into the cultural habits and patterns found at home.

These findings are not sufficient to validate the *Presumption of Convergent Tendencies (P3)* which states that formal parental education is reflected in children's literacy scores, but we can draw several conclusions as a result of meeting the specific objective *OS6. Assessment of the degree of parental involvement in children's literacy* and the 3 derived objectives:

- *DO1. Observation of family habits and cultural patterns in the form of book consumption and extracurricular activities* - Learning difficulties and dyslexia flourish in the fertile soil within the family. While 9 out of 11 children spend their free time in front of a screen, according to mothers, mothers unanimously admit that social platforms are also a major part of their daily activities. We found that where an activity is often invoked by the parent, children follow the same pattern. The data collected shows that the lack of concern for reading by adults can be transferred to children from their early years. The socio-cultural handicap is likely to be inherited through intergenerational lines; if faulty patterns such as an appetite for virtual dimensions (social networks, virtual games) coexist in the family to the detriment of reading, it is very likely that the parental pattern will be taken over by the child.
- *DO2. Shaping the pattern of thinking about responsibility for student success/failure from a parental perspective* - Very often, in the hierarchical ordering of the entities delegated with the child's educational advancement, parents almost instinctively place responsibility in the court of the educational institution, followed by the local government. The data suggest perpetuating mechanisms for delegating responsibility for the educational act as far away from the family as possible. The influence of inherited capital does not seem to be as relevant as the duties of educational establishments, called to the forefront to prevent, control and coordinate



the risks of decay in the primary cycle and if possible, even to compensate for the incomplete set of knowledge acquired at home.

- *DO3. Identification of literacy (writing, reading, mathematics) bottlenecks faced by pupils from the family perspective* - Against the background of the risks associated with early illiteracy, parents' responses to the question on the child's reading or narrative skills are at odds with the results of the EN IV 2022 and a fortiori with the prospects of the educational institution. There is a shift from acceptance of the child's level of development to an inclination to hide the deficiencies they face. Subjects do not usually encourage critical thinking in children in their early years, focusing rather on making them responsible for staying in the good graces of teachers. In a spontaneous way, individuals "tend to filter out dissonant information and withhold consonant information" (Chelcea, 2001, p. 8), so we intuit that subjects advocated overestimating what is considered socially accepted and rewarded.

## **5. Main recommendations**

Integration into the community (rather than society) is the first aspect that I have suggested as a measure to balance the disparities in educational progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Traditional social policies suggested that imperative to place each citizen 'in line with the world', but postmodernity recognises tolerance of diversity and individualisation of needs, which means that citizens have the ability to choose their own paths to integration. For example, welfare benefits are simply palliatives that address the effect and not the cause. Bottom-up literacy programs instead give students the chance to remain active in the education system and connected to the dynamics of everyday life. So social reforms should juxtapose two guiding principles: empowerment and participation in community life.

The rural environment faces a triple challenge, that of the vicissitudes of vulnerable groups in particular, combined with local budgets that are derisory for the scale of the needs and the administrative apparatus' disinterest in aligning development strategies with community realities. Too few of the social recovery measures advocated in public discourse are applicable in the rural dimension and, when they are, they produce modest results, unable to offset the difficulties they address. In these circumstances, it is difficult to determine why most of the strategies implemented to ensure unrestricted access to education have failed, but we believe that one main reason is the structural inability of the public administration to diagnose and forecast the long-term implications of illiteracy.

”In light of the complexity that rural literacy represents in relation to the resilience of the population to the dynamics of change, we believe that multi-layered strategies to mitigate the gaps are needed. These action plans will need to consider several levels of hierarchical decision-making: governmental, organisational, community and individual, without ignoring the contribution that research and higher education structures can make. This identifies several strategic directions designed to ensure the functioning of the education system in troubled times:

- *increasing access to digital technologies and the Internet*: both work equipment and Internet connectivity are central to efforts to reduce digital inequalities. A first step in recognising the gaps is to map vulnerable households living on the poverty line, which is easily achievable given the statistical information already available, and to allocate funds to provide the necessary infrastructure for e-learning.

- *Increasing digital literacy* by regulating and using a digital tool in the educational process, allowing synchronous or asynchronous interaction between students and teachers. Changing the curriculum is an arduous, time-consuming and resource-consuming process, which is why digital literacy must be integrated into a long-term education policy.

- *implementing a protocol for monitoring vulnerable families* with children in the education system, in order to prevent and manage as effectively as possible any gaps that may occur during a crisis, whatever its nature.

Over the last few years, there has been a restructuring of digital literacy principles, with some losing their validity, others emerging along the way, and the content of those used undergoing constant improvement. Today, the notion no longer prioritises digital access alone, but shifts the focus to developing basic skills that enable individuals to use ICT in a meaningful and beneficial way. From this point of view, digital literacy is not an outcome in itself, but rather a fundamental right and a means to quality education, well-being, employment, inclusion and social participation (Hidan, 2022b, pp. 49-50)”.

- Strong student-focused support is made possible by transferring responsibility from public authorities, which maintain their role as regulators, to the non-governmental sector and the community to which the beneficiaries belong. The first step in the child's rehabilitation is the recognition of impairments, and this happens in proximity. It is not the government apparatus that is best placed to stop the decline, but the key actors who have direct contact with the child and have the capacity and role to identify signs of early illiteracy.

- *measures to raise awareness of the role of the family-school partnership*, which is not only an obligation laid down in the Education Act (Article 180), but also an ethical issue

embodied in consistent horizontal cooperation between decision-makers. At present, not only is parental involvement in the education process insufficient, but there is also a clear gap between the school's mission and the prevailing vision in the rural family cosmos.

- *Prioritising pupils who are not part of the school elite* and dismantling the theory that a successful education system is measured in the number of Olympians. There are natural differences between children and yet the school demands similar performance from all on the principle of meritocracy. From our research, we found that most teachers believe that the child's failure is due either to himself or to the family he belongs to. Few openly acknowledged that school failure was also due to teachers failing to explore individual potential.

The North-West region of Romania does not benefit from articulated educational strategies to liberate itself from relative and absolute illiteracy. Because internal policies are incoherent and as such cannot cope with external pressures to standardise teaching results worldwide, our country continues to struggle with European and international marginalisation, losing the contours of its own identity at a rapid pace. We consider it imperative to rethink the functions of the local public administration responsible for rural education, with the involvement of all stakeholders. The data presented in this paper sound the alarm about the worrying crisis facing the Romanian countryside in terms of quality education, a crisis that can no longer be ignored under the pretext that we are in a smooth process of development. Negative developments, more than stagnation in mediocrity, call for stepping up the pace towards real and courageous changes in Romanian education.

## **6. Possible future research directions**

In accordance with the results obtained and the limitations of each research method used in this study, coupled with the frenetic pace at which illiteracy is having an impact on the Romanian rural environment, several future directions for further research on the subject were opened. The first direction focuses on the analysis of the pupil's school trajectory, subject to gender influence, through which we can capture the extent to which girls, as opposed to boys and vice versa, perform better in the formal education system. Another avenue worth investigating is also of an empirical nature and concerns the post-PISA educational pathway of low performers in the international assessment. Last but not least, with the mention that the opening of these new research avenues targeting the labour field was favoured by the serendipitous moment occasioned by the case study presented, it would be interesting to observe whether forms of illiteracy are infiltrating the administrative structures of the state.

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