



Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
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DOCTORAL THESIS

The role of the School Mediator in the Educational Inclusion of roma students in Romania

Scientific Coordinator: Professor Alina-Felicia Roman, PhD

PhD. Liliana Lăcătuș (căs. Chiriac)

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to deeply analyze a fundamental yet often underexplored aspect of educational inclusion policies and practices in Romania: the role of the school mediator in supporting the integration of Roma students into the educational system. School mediators represent a relatively new professional category, introduced in the context of post-communist reforms, which has nevertheless emerged as an essential vector for facilitating access to and participation in education among marginalized social groups—especially Roma communities. In an educational system still marked by inequalities and various forms of exclusion, the presence of the school mediator becomes indispensable in mediating communication between educational institutions, the community, and families, thus contributing to the creation of an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

In Romania, Roma students continue to face numerous structural and social barriers, ranging from school segregation and early school dropout to discrimination and limited access to quality educational resources. These forms of marginalization affect not only individual chances for success but also broader social cohesion. In this context, school mediators play a key role in reducing disparities, acting as bridges between school and community, promoting active parental involvement, and supporting students throughout the educational process. This study examines both the functionality of this role and the limitations imposed by institutional, cultural, and social barriers that restrict the mediators' potential.

The analysis includes a personal and professional perspective, drawn from over 15 years of experience as a school mediator, Romani language teacher, and school inspector for Roma minority education in Cluj County. This direct field experience provided in-depth insight into the complex realities faced by Roma students and the persistent challenges in ensuring equitable access to education. Over the years, I have witnessed both notable successes—such as the expansion of Romani language teaching and the hiring of an increasing number of mediators—and significant obstacles, such as the lack of recognition for the mediator's role in some schools or resistance to change within certain administrative environments.

Historically, the Roma community has been systematically marginalized, and access to education has remained limited by multiple socio-economic and cultural constraints. In response, Romanian authorities have implemented a series of legislative measures and

educational programs aimed at supporting Roma students' inclusion. These include, among others, the allocation of reserved seats in high schools and universities, as well as the launch of educational support projects over the past two decades. However, the most important and enduring instrument supporting Roma children's access to education has undoubtedly been the introduction of school mediators, a profession initially supported through pilot programs developed by NGOs and later institutionalized through the PHARE Program "Access to Education for Disadvantaged Groups."

The term *mediator* derives from Latin, meaning "one who mediates" or "intervenes between parties," and in the educational context, the school mediator is an impartial figure tasked with facilitating dialogue, reducing tensions, and promoting mutual understanding between schools and communities. The PHARE program played a decisive role in the consolidation of this profession, ensuring both the professional training of mediators and their official employment in the education system. Furthermore, the program included training for school inspectors in inclusive education, thereby promoting an integrated approach to the educational process that responds to the cultural and social diversity of students.

School mediators have thus become indispensable actors in reducing school dropout, facilitating Roma children's access to education, and strengthening the connection between school, family, and community. Their responsibilities include facilitating dialogue between schools and communities, supporting school participation for all children, involving parents in educational life, and cooperating with local authorities and NGOs to identify and address barriers to education. In addition, mediators manage conflict and help prevent bullying, fostering an educational environment grounded in respect and inclusion.

From a legislative standpoint, the activity of school mediators is regulated by a legal framework that reflects Romania's commitments to human rights and equal opportunities, including the national strategy for Roma inclusion and recommendations from the European Union. However, in practice, there are discrepancies in the recognition and valuation of this role across different educational institutions, and in some cases, school principals show reluctance to hire mediators, ignoring the positive impact they can have.

This study aims to offer a comprehensive perspective on the role of the school mediator, integrating a theoretical and legislative analysis with quantitative research conducted among active mediators. The research seeks to highlight mediators' perceptions of their roles, the challenges they encounter in practice, and the solutions they have identified for optimizing their interventions. In doing so, this study contributes to the academic

literature and provides concrete recommendations for developing more effective educational policies that ensure genuine and sustainable inclusion for Roma students.

The relevance of this topic is further emphasized by the current socio-cultural context, in which prejudice and ethnic discrimination continue to negatively affect the educational access and performance of Roma children. In this sense, school mediators emerge as vital institutional bridges, meant to counter these phenomena and promote mutual respect and collaboration among all actors involved in the educational process. The consolidation and expansion of this role in all schools with significant Roma student populations is becoming an urgent necessity for achieving equity and social inclusion objectives.

The personal and professional experience I have gained as a teacher, mediator, and school inspector has provided me with a unique perspective on the complexity of this issue. I have actively contributed to the implementation of successful projects in Cluj County, such as the introduction of Romani language teaching at preschool and primary levels, the employment of 32 school mediators, and the promotion of Roma teachers to leadership positions. These initiatives have generated positive outcomes, but they have also highlighted the need for more systematic and coherent interventions at the legislative and institutional levels. Moreover, field observations underscore the necessity of better social and professional recognition for school mediators, as well as continued support from authorities and the educational community.

In conclusion, this work represents a comprehensive investigation into an essential yet often underestimated component of educational inclusion policies in Romania. By highlighting the role of school mediators, their impact, and ways to optimize their work, this research seeks to contribute to the development of a more inclusive, equitable, and effective educational system—one that meets the real needs of Roma students and helps reduce persistent social disparities. Recognizing and supporting school mediators thus becomes imperative in guaranteeing the fundamental right to education and promoting a society based on respect, acceptance, diversity, and solidarity.

PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES, AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the role of the school mediator in facilitating the educational inclusion of Roma students within the Romanian education system. It seeks to provide a detailed perspective on the professional and personal profile of school mediators, as well as on how they perceive and manage major challenges such as school dropout and absenteeism—phenomena frequently encountered among students from disadvantaged communities. The research is based on the premise that the school mediator represents a vital link between school, family, and community, contributing to the development of an inclusive educational environment through practices and strategies designed to prevent educational exclusion. Simultaneously, the study explores the systemic resources and conditions that influence the activity of mediators, aiming to identify both the limitations and the potential of this role in promoting equal educational opportunities.

Specific Research Objectives

- **Specific Objective 1** – To conduct an in-depth analysis of the socio-professional profile of school mediators, including aspects such as age, educational background, professional experience, and community affiliation, in order to better understand the human resources and competencies they bring to their role.
- **Specific Objective 2** – To investigate the personal and professional motivations that led individuals to pursue a career as school mediators, as well as their professional trajectories, in order to highlight the connection between life experiences, individual beliefs, and commitment to promoting educational inclusion.
- **Specific Objective 3** – To explore mediators' perceptions regarding the main causes of school dropout and absenteeism among Roma students, as well as the methods and practices used to prevent and combat these issues, with the aim of identifying the most effective community- and school-level interventions.
- **Specific Objective 4** – To evaluate the role of school mediators in their interactions with students, families, and the wider community, and to analyze how they contribute to creating and strengthening an inclusive educational climate where cultural and social diversity is respected and valued.

- **Specific Objective 5** – To identify concrete challenges faced by mediators in their day-to-day work—such as lack of resources, institutional barriers, or resistance to change—and to formulate recommendations regarding the resources and systemic conditions needed to support more effective and sustainable interventions for Roma students.

Research Hypotheses

- There is a positive and significant relationship between close collaboration among school mediators, Roma students’ families, and teaching staff, which facilitates educational inclusion and contributes to improved academic performance among Roma students.
- Ongoing and consistent mediation activity conducted by school mediators between Roma communities and educational institutions reduces ethnic prejudice and stereotypes present in school environments, fostering a climate of mutual respect and cooperation.
- Continuous professional development of school mediators has a direct and positive impact on the quality of the educational interventions they implement, enhancing their ability to respond to the complex and specific needs of Roma students.
- School mediators, through their cultural and linguistic competencies, provide essential support in the process of cultural and linguistic mediation, thereby contributing to the development of an inclusive climate in schools with significant Roma student populations.
- The active presence and involvement of the school mediator positively influence the relationship between families and schools in Roma communities, leading to improved communication, engagement, and support for children’s education.

Research Design

The present study begins with an introduction that offers a personalized presentation of the research topic, integrating reflections and observations from multiple professional perspectives: that of a school mediator, Romani language teacher, and school inspector for

the Roma minority. This subjective approach adds authenticity and commitment to the scientific endeavor, offering an insider's view of the educational challenges faced by both Roma students and the teaching staff involved in the inclusion process. In this sense, the introduction provides a clear foundation for the theme of the paper and highlights the personal motivation that underpins the research, emphasizing the importance of direct community engagement and understanding the realities on the ground.

Chapter I is structured into several sections and provides an in-depth analysis of the historical background of the Roma people, considered essential for understanding the cultural heritage of this community. It emphasizes how values, traditions, and historical experiences influence the community's relationship with education. This foray into the past is crucial for the reader, as it creates the necessary reference framework for understanding the cultural and social particularities that have shaped the current state of access and participation of Roma in the educational system.

Chapter II analyzes the socio-economic context of the Roma community, highlighting the direct and significant impact that living conditions have on the educational opportunities of Roma children. It addresses issues such as poverty, social marginalization, limited access to resources, and inadequate housing conditions—all identified as determining factors in educational exclusion. This analysis is complemented by a section dedicated to institutional, cultural, and social barriers that limit Roma children's access to education, including discrimination, prejudice, school segregation, inadequate educational resources, and difficulties in maintaining school attendance.

Together, these two chapters provide a strong conceptual and contextual framework essential for a deeper understanding of the issue of Roma educational inclusion, thus preparing the ground for the theoretical and practical analysis in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter III offers a comprehensive overview of the theoretical framework supporting the analysis of Roma access to education, highlighting key concepts and theories that help explain educational inequalities and identify strategies for inclusion. Structured into three main sections, the chapter clearly distinguishes between conceptual, empirical, and normative levels involved in the research process.

The first section, dedicated to educational inequality from a conceptual perspective, provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing the phenomenon. It introduces the concept of educational stratification, explaining how educational systems reproduce social hierarchies and influence individuals' access to educational opportunities based on socioeconomic and ethnic status. It further explores Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural

capital, illustrating how access to symbolic and cultural resources can facilitate or hinder educational trajectories, especially for students from marginalized communities such as the Roma. This is complemented by the theory of intersectionality, which provides a framework for understanding how multiple social identities (ethnic, class, gender) intersect to create complex forms of educational inequality.

The next section examines the concrete manifestations of educational inequality in the case of the Roma community, detailing processes such as social exclusion and school segregation. It analyzes the impact of these phenomena on the quality of education and equal opportunities for participation. It also discusses the dimensions of racism and "anti-Gypsyism," highlighting both overt and subtle forms of discrimination that affect Roma students' school experiences, influencing their relationships with peers, teachers, and institutional policies.

Finally, the chapter introduces the concepts of educational inclusion through a normative approach aimed at identifying theoretical and practical solutions. It discusses theories such as educational inclusion, which advocates for a flexible system capable of responding to social and cultural diversity, and the theory of educational equity, which promotes correcting inequalities through compensatory policies tailored to the needs of disadvantaged communities.

The chapter concludes by presenting concrete inclusion practices for Roma students, showcasing strategies, projects, and best practices that can effectively support their integration into the educational system. Thus, the chapter offers not only a synthesis of relevant theories but also essential practical perspectives for combating educational inequalities affecting Roma communities.

Chapter IV focuses on the legislative and institutional framework that regulates and supports the educational inclusion of Roma students in Romania, providing an overview of key policies, programs, and institutional interventions. It examines foundational documents, starting with the Romanian Constitution, which guarantees equal opportunities, the right to education, and the prohibition of ethnic discrimination. The National Education Law is analyzed as the primary normative act ensuring an inclusive educational system through its provisions on minority protection and cultural diversity promotion. Special attention is given to Order no. 1539/2007, which regulates the status and responsibilities of school mediators. The chapter then details the role of the school mediator in the inclusion process, emphasizing the importance of this profession as a key element in implementing educational policies for Roma communities. It explores the evolution and definition of school mediation in Romania,

underlining the mediator's role as a bridge between school, family, and community, as well as their contribution to preventing school dropout and facilitating intercultural communication.

Chapter V presents the quantitative research conducted among school mediators, aiming to capture their perceptions of the educational inclusion of Roma students. The methodological process is detailed, including sample selection, questionnaire structure, and specific objectives focused on identifying educational barriers, assessing the mediators' impact, and highlighting best practices. The study's limitations are also discussed, such as the subjectivity of perceptions and the difficulty in generalizing results.

The data collection process is thoroughly described, highlighting the application of questionnaires under controlled conditions, assurance of anonymity, and the diversity of participants. The data analysis employs descriptive and inferential statistical methods to highlight significant trends and correlations between variables.

The results are structured into three main areas: profiling school mediators, identifying perceived school barriers, and proposing inclusive measures. The study confirms the essential role of mediators in facilitating inclusion, while also revealing the contextual and institutional obstacles they face. The conclusions emphasize the need for continued applied research and the development of flexible educational policies that capitalize on mediators' experience in decision-making processes.

Chapter VI offers a qualitative analysis of the intervention models used by school mediators, exploring in depth their experiences, perceptions, and strategies in relation to students, schools, and the community. It presents the theoretical framework of qualitative research and justifies the relevance of this method for studying the complex social processes involved in inclusion.

The data collection methods are detailed, including semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, followed by procedures for coding and data interpretation. The thematic analysis highlights key emerging themes such as communication difficulties, institutional resistance, student motivation strategies, and family involvement.

The interpretation of results emphasizes the role of the mediator as a social change agent and the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration for successful educational interventions. Concrete examples are provided to illustrate the positive impact of school mediation, along with persistent challenges that require innovative and contextually adapted solutions.

In conclusion, this study offers an integrated perspective by combining theoretical approaches, legislative analyses, and empirical studies that significantly contribute to understanding and promoting the educational inclusion of Roma students. By drawing on direct experiences and collected data, it proposes relevant recommendations for educational policy, the training of school mediators, and intervention strategies aimed at creating a more equitable and inclusive educational system.

Historiography And Relevance Of The Research Bibliography

The research was based on a broad and diverse range of bibliographic sources, which served as a solid foundation for the study on the educational inclusion of Roma students and the role of school mediators. These resources come from interdisciplinary fields such as sociology, education, public policy, psychology, and law, thereby providing a complex and well-grounded analytical framework for understanding and interpreting the studied phenomenon.

Historical and sociological works by authors such as Achim (1998), Gheorghe (2003), Kogălniceanu (1900), Miklosich (1872), and Marushiakova & Popov (2002) are essential for understanding the social and cultural evolution of Roma communities in Romania and Europe. These sources provide a historical context that enables the interpretation of marginalization processes and institutional integration efforts, particularly in the field of education.

From the perspective of stereotypes and social perceptions, studies conducted by Cobianu Băcanu (1996), Gog (2015), Dămăceanu (2014), and Goffman (1963) contribute to understanding the subtle mechanisms of exclusion and stigmatization affecting the Roma. At the same time, Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduces the concept of intersectionality, which is fundamental for analyzing the complex forms of multiple discrimination faced by this minority group.

Theoretical concepts regarding educational inequality and social stratification are supported by classical and contemporary works by Bourdieu (1986), Bernstein (1971), Jenkins (1978), Jackson et al. (2007), Afonso et al. (2015), Breen & Goldthorpe (2018), and Birkelund (2020). These works highlight the role of cultural capital, linguistic codes, and social structures in shaping access to and performance in education.

In the field of public policy, the foundational works of Anderson (1994), Zamfir (2002), and Mihăilescu (2013), alongside reports and analyses by international organizations such as UNESCO (2012, 2015), UNICEF (2003), UNDP (2012), Council of Europe (2011),

European Commission (2010), and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2018, 2022), offer a broad perspective on the strategies and measures adopted at both national and European levels to promote the inclusion of Roma in education. The critiques presented by Eisenberg (2017) and Ferreira (2015) add a reflective note on the limitations and challenges of these policies.

The literature on inclusive education is represented by experts such as Banks (2004, 2008, 2009), Andreozzi & Pietrocarlo (2017), Booth (2018), Alexandersson (2011), and Hodkinson (2011), who develop theories and practical models for implementing equitable and non-discriminatory educational environments. These contributions are essential for understanding the role of school mediators as cultural and educational bridges.

From a methodological standpoint, works by Băban (2008), Chelcea (2001, 2007), Gheorghe R. (2016), Ion (2010), Kvale (1996), and Merlo et al. (2005) were used to substantiate the qualitative and quantitative methods essential to field research. Official statistics provided by the National Institute of Statistics (2021), alongside studies by the OECD (2012), the Open Society Institute (2007), and Munteanu & Rusu (2015), offer empirical robustness to the research approach.

Regarding practical intervention, the contributions of Ionescu (2016), Chiriac (2024), Urea (2015), Van Caeneghem & Van Caeneghem (2019), and Varga (2021, 2022, 2024) are of critical importance. These works offer both analyses of the school mediator's role in preventing dropout and perspectives on the rights of Roma children and community leaders in Transylvania, including Cluj County.

For a deeper understanding of cultural and psychosocial aspects, studies by Vecchi and Želinský (2019) and Velentza (2020) explain how community traditions influence school participation. Meanwhile, Viana-Orta (2013), Webb et al. (2002), and Yang et al. (2022) make essential contributions to the theory of cultural capital and intercultural mediation in education.

Finally, authors such as Tatum (1997), Tismăneanu (2013), Toma (2013), Torotcoi & Pecak (2019), Tudor (2006), and others provide complementary perspectives on segregation, poverty, and social exclusion affecting Roma communities, emphasizing the need for educational policies and practices that promote equity and inclusion.

CHAPTER I – The Context of Roma Existence in Romania

This opening chapter provides a comprehensive and detailed overview of the historical, social, and demographic context of the Roma community in Romania—an essential background for understanding the realities and challenges faced by this minority group. From the origins of the Roma people to their current situation, the chapter analyzes both the defining elements of Roma identity and the factors that influence their social and educational integration.

The first section is dedicated to clarifying the origins of the Roma people, drawing on linguistic and historical evidence that confirms their roots in India, thereby dispelling outdated and unfounded theories. This perspective is essential for understanding Roma identity within the European context and how historical migrations have shaped contemporary communities.

Subsequently, the chapter outlines key moments in the history of the Roma in Romania, including the period of enslavement and the ways in which they have been either integrated into or marginalized by the majority society. The current demographic situation is also examined, highlighting the distribution and characteristics of the Roma population.

Finally, the main challenges faced by this community are discussed, particularly the difficult socio-economic conditions and limited access to education. The text emphasizes the strong connection between poverty, social exclusion, and the educational integration issues of Roma children, underlining the urgent need for appropriate educational and social policy interventions.

1.1. Historical and Demographic Context

The origin of the Roma population has been the subject of numerous debates and varying interpretations in scholarly literature. Mihail Kogălniceanu rejected the long-standing theory suggesting that the Roma originated from Egypt, emphasizing the need for a rigorous analysis based on historical and linguistic evidence (Kogălniceanu, 1900). In this regard, Austrian philologist Franz Miklosich demonstrated through comparative methods that the Romani language derives from Sanskrit, thus linking the Roma's origin to northwestern India and discrediting the Egyptian hypothesis (Miklosich, 1872). Nicolae Iorga supports this theory, adding that the Roma migration to Europe was a gradual process that occurred over a long period, which explains their presence across various geographical areas of the continent (Iorga, 1997).

Gheorghe Sarău elaborates on the migration routes, highlighting their trajectories through the Caucasus and the Balkans, as well as into North Africa and Western Europe, depending on the historical circumstances of each era (Sarău, 1997). These multiple perspectives support the Indian origin of the Roma, accompanied by a complex historical and cultural evolution reflected in both their language and traditions (Netea, 2022; Coteanu, 2000).

The earliest documented records of Roma presence in today's Romanian territories date back to the 14th century, during the period of enslavement, as seen in records of princely donations to monasteries (Grigore & All, 2007). The connections to the Mongol invasions and the presence of Tatars in the region, who brought Roma individuals as slaves, were analyzed by historians such as Nicolae Iorga and T.G. Bulat. This provides insight into the Roma's socio-political condition during the medieval period (Achim, 1998; Gheorghe, 2003).

1.2. Socioeconomic Status

At the European level, the Roma population is estimated to range between 10 and 12 million people, making it the largest ethnic minority on the continent, with a predominant distribution in Central and Eastern Europe (Marie, 2025). Statistical data indicates significant Roma communities in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Spain, and Slovakia, where their proportion varies between 1.7% and 30% of the national population (La Voix des Roms, 2019).

In Romania, official estimates from 2011 report a Roma population of approximately 625,000, although experts suggest the real number may be double, due to underreporting and issues related to self-identification (Pop & Balea, 2017). The 2022 census confirmed that Roma represent 3.4% of the total population, with relevant regional variations (INS, 2022).

The religious affiliation of most Roma reflects the cultural influences of the surrounding majority communities, with Eastern Orthodoxy being predominant, followed by a significant rise in Pentecostalism over recent decades (INS, 2021; Cace et al., 2012). Socioeconomically, poverty and social exclusion remain major challenges, as poverty rates among the Roma are significantly higher than in the general population, and housing conditions and access to social services are still poor (Kahanec & Zimmermann, 2011; FRA, 2015).

1.3. Educational Situation of Roma

Education is a fundamental pillar for social integration. However, data shows that access to and completion of formal education remain limited among Roma children. According to EFR data, over 20% of the Roma population is illiterate, and early school dropout rates reach alarming levels, around 70% (EFR, 2016, 2022). Segregation in predominantly Roma schools and reported discrimination within the educational environment are factors that perpetuate the marginalization of this community (EFR, 2022).

Across Europe, the percentage of Roma individuals who complete high school or tertiary education is extremely low, a situation that also reflects in countries neighboring Romania (Nelaj et al., 2012).

1.4. Obstacles to Roma Children's Education

The main barriers to Roma children's education are multifactorial, including systemic discrimination, poor economic conditions, and limited access to quality educational services. These factors significantly reduce the chances for educational inclusion and perpetuate the cycle of poverty and social exclusion (EFR, 2022; FRA, 2011). Thus, education represents both a challenge and a critical opportunity for improving the social status of the Roma population in Romania and across Europe.

CHAPTER II – Theoretical Approaches and Social Realities Regarding Educational Inequality and the Inclusion of Roma People

2.1. Educational Inequality – Conceptual Delimitations

This section aims to clarify the concept of educational inequality by exploring how it is defined in the specialized literature and identifying relevant explanatory theories.

Essentially, educational inequality refers to imbalances in access to resources, opportunities, and school outcomes among different social groups. These disparities are generated by economic, cultural, and institutional factors and are particularly pronounced among marginalized communities.

An important dimension of this analysis focuses on forms of educational inequality affecting Roma communities. According to Pop and Balea (2016), the intervention of school mediators is essential in reducing these inequalities by facilitating the integration of Roma children into the education system. In situations where school participation is hindered by poverty, discrimination, and cultural distance, the presence of a mediator who facilitates the relationship between the school, student, and family becomes indispensable (Van Caeneghem & Van Caeneghem, 2019).

To deeply understand the mechanisms generating educational inequalities, a multidimensional theoretical approach is needed. The theory of educational stratification highlights the influence of social position on access to education and academic success, thus contributing to the reproduction of social hierarchies. Complementarily, cultural capital theory emphasizes that school success is influenced by the alignment between students' cultural values and those promoted by schools, favoring those from dominant classes. Moreover, intersectionality theory draws attention to how inequality manifests through the overlap of multiple identity factors—such as ethnicity, gender, or social status—producing complex forms of exclusion.

Broadly, inequality refers to the lack of fairness among individuals, particularly in relation to social status, rights, access to opportunities, and resources (Afonso et al., 2015). It manifests in income disparities, living conditions, access to education and healthcare services, as well as legal and political forms of discrimination. Analytically, inequality can be understood in two ways: outcome inequality, visible in levels of education or income achieved, and opportunity inequality, influenced by external factors such as family background, gender, or ethnicity (Afonso et al., 2015).

Cochran-Smith (2016) notes that educational inequality is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes that occurs and perpetuates both within and across social and geographic spaces. It is often reinforced by "intersectional systems" of inequality (Crenshaw, 1989; Walby, 2007), involving interactions between multiple factors—such as gender, race, or social class—and perpetuated through the functioning of educational systems both nationally and internationally.

Educational inequality remains one of the most persistent contemporary social problems, with major implications for school access and achievement among specific social categories. Research shows that educational disparities contribute to maintaining and deepening economic and social inequalities (Codioli McMaster & Cook, 2019). Thus, educational inequalities refer to systematic differences in access to education, learning experiences, and academic outcomes, influenced by variables such as gender, ethnicity, social class, or migrant status (Gross et al., 2016b; Jacobs, 1996).

In this logic, educational inequality reflects the gaps between students from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds, differences that affect both access to and the quality of education (Blanden, Doepke & Stuhler, 2022). Breen and Goldthorpe (2018) observe that these class-based inequalities have direct effects on the educational performance of disadvantaged children, limiting their development and social mobility prospects.

The long-term persistence of educational inequality (Shavit et al., 2007) leads to the erosion of education's equalizing function, which instead becomes a factor in consolidating social differences. Ideally, the educational system should provide equal opportunities for all students regardless of their social origin (Levin, 1976), but reality shows that education can actually exacerbate existing social disparities (Pop & Balea, 2016).

DiMaggio (1988) warns that educational inequality is not solely determined by intelligence or abilities, but also by the extent to which students conform to dominant norms within the educational system. Thus, students from disadvantaged backgrounds face additional obstacles, even when their cognitive level is similar to that of peers from advantaged backgrounds. These differences are often invisible but have a considerable impact on how students are evaluated and supported.

Educational stratification is therefore closely linked to educational inequality. Belonging to a certain social class influences not only access to educational resources but also the educational trajectories students follow. Research by Müller and Pollak (2009) and Birkelund (2020) confirms that students from lower social classes are less likely to attend elite institutions and are directed toward educational paths with limited professional prospects.

A significant theoretical contribution to the analysis of educational stratification comes from Boudon (1974), who distinguishes between primary effects—linked to academic performance influenced by social background—and secondary effects—related to educational decisions shaped by socio-cultural context. According to this perspective,

students from disadvantaged backgrounds face multiple barriers in their educational journey, including limited access to materials, activities, and school support.

Subsequent studies (Erikson & Jonsson, 1996; Shavit et al., 2007) detailed the factors influencing these effects: economic and cultural resources, significant social influences, placement in educational tracks, and families' decision-making motivations. For instance, higher-income families can invest more in their children's education, and those with high cultural levels offer models and tools that are valued by schools.

The theory of cultural capital, formulated by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986), provides an explanatory framework for understanding these inequalities. Cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, behaviors, and skills acquired through family and community socialization and exists in three forms: embodied (lasting dispositions of the mind and body), objectified (cultural goods), and institutionalized (diplomas and official qualifications). Students who possess such capital have clear advantages aligned with the demands and values promoted by the educational system.

Webb, Schirato, and Danaher (2002) consider academic diplomas as typical forms of cultural capital, while Nunes & Andrade (2024) emphasize the family's role in accumulating it. In the case of Roma students, the lack of appropriate cultural capital can lead to difficulties in school integration and poor academic performance despite individual potential. Therefore, cultural capital theory offers a deep understanding of the mechanisms through which educational inequality is produced and perpetuated in society.

2.2. Educational Inequality Among the Roma Population

According to the National Strategy for the Integration of Roma People (2019), approximately 68% of Roma children are at risk of early school leaving. In a broader context, over 80% of children who do not participate in the educational system come from Roma communities, while at least 18% of them receive no formal education at all. Moreover, the rate of functional illiteracy among the Roma population remains alarmingly high, reaching 28% (Rotaru, 2019).

A report published by the "Împreună" Agency in 2022 indicates a slight increase in the number of Roma individuals completing higher education, with the percentage reaching 2%. This trend is also confirmed by the 2021 census data, which shows an increase from 1% in 2011 to 2% in 2021 in terms of Roma with higher education degrees (Coșmeleată et al., 2022). However, this positive development must be interpreted in the context of a potential

demographic decline: between 2011 and 2021, the self-declared Roma population decreased from 621,600 to 569,477 individuals (INS, 2021).

According to the analysis conducted by Avery and Hoxhallari (2017), numerous obstacles hinder Roma children's access to education, the most pressing being poverty and social exclusion. Roma families facing severe economic hardship are unable to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, or school supplies. Additionally, children's involvement in household chores or labor from an early age significantly limits their educational participation (Stark & Berlinschi, 2023). Beyond these material challenges, discriminatory attitudes among the majority population—fueled by anti-Roma stereotypes and prejudices—contribute to educational exclusion (Rostaş, 2017). Other socio-cultural factors mentioned in the literature include the absence of educational role models within Roma communities and the practice of early marriage, prevalent in traditional Roma groups, which particularly affects girls' access to education (Velentza, 2020).

2.3. Social Exclusion

A crucial dimension of educational inequality deeply affecting the Roma community is social exclusion—a multidimensional phenomenon deeply rooted in societal structures. Numerous studies (Varga, 2021; Moisa & Roth, 2011) emphasize the complexity of this process and its profound implications for vulnerable individuals and communities. Social exclusion implies the limitation of certain groups' active participation in economic, social, and political life, manifested through restricted access to essential resources such as education, healthcare services, and employment (Francis, 2002).

Scullion and Brown (2016) identify several contributing factors to the phenomenon of exclusion, including discrimination, health issues, geographic isolation, and ethnic identity. According to Levitas et al. (2007), social exclusion goes beyond economic dimensions, encompassing the absence or denial of resources, rights, and opportunities necessary for individuals to participate equally in community life. This lack of participation impacts not only economic but also social, cultural, and political spheres.

Roma individuals living under conditions of social exclusion simultaneously face educational inequalities, as exclusion is closely linked to poverty, low socioeconomic status, and the lack of fundamental resources necessary for educational development (Varga, 2021). In a vicious cycle, the lack of adequate education perpetuates social exclusion, which in turn further limits access to education (Mittler et al., 2002).

Economically, Roma in Romania often live in extreme poverty and face severe forms of exclusion. According to recent research (Parno & Vasiliuță, 2021; Patache et al., 2018), the risk of poverty among Roma is approximately ten times higher than among the majority population, regardless of age, education level, or region. Data from the FRA (2022) show that 80% of European Roma are at risk of poverty, compared to the European average of 17%.

The Romanian Government's Strategy for 2022–2027 highlights the critical situation of Roma communities: in 2018, over half of Roma (52%) lived on less than 1,500 lei per month, while only 24% of majority citizens were in the same situation. Moreover, only 15% of Roma had a monthly income higher than 2,000 lei, compared to 52% of the majority population.

2.4. School Segregation

Social segregation, understood as the absence of positive relations between diverse social groups, contributes to the isolation of certain communities and the perpetuation of inequalities. This phenomenon hampers intergroup interactions and generates discrimination, exclusion, and stigmatization (Enos & Celaya, 2018). In educational contexts, school segregation represents a form of systemic discrimination that hinders vulnerable children's access to equitable and quality education (Gallego-Noche & Goenechea-Permisán, 2020).

Despite legal prohibitions and judicial interventions, school segregation persists in many European educational systems. Key contributing factors include residential segregation, poverty, and parental choices (Frankenberg, 2013). Children are often enrolled in schools close to home, and in disadvantaged neighborhoods, these institutions become "ghetto schools," predominantly attended by students from marginalized backgrounds (Wilson & Bridge, 2019; Orfield, 2016). This type of segregation limits educational options and deepens inequalities.

Poverty also plays a critical role in the emergence of socio-economic segregation in schools. Families with limited resources cannot afford better schools, leading to the concentration of vulnerable students in certain institutions. Consequently, a phenomenon of "double segregation" arises, where students are marginalized both ethnically and economically (Orfield, 2016).

In Romania, the 1998 study conducted by ICCV, ISE, and MEC (Jigău & Surdu, 2002) provided a detailed picture of segregation in rural areas. Out of a sample of 20,000

schools, three categories were identified: mixed schools (1–50% Roma students), schools with a Roma majority (50–70%), and predominantly Roma schools (over 70%). According to the data, 87% of rural schools were mixed, 6.4% had a majority of Roma students, and 5.8% were completely dominated by Roma students. In over half of these institutions, Roma students were educated under segregated conditions.

The study revealed that segregation was significantly more prevalent in primary (grades I–IV) and lower secondary education (grades V–VIII), accounting for 87.55% of the identified cases. In contrast, segregation was less prevalent in preschool (5.15%) and upper secondary education (8.3%). The low presence of Roma students in high schools and vocational schools contributes to the persistence of segregation in later educational stages (Surdu, 2007).

A report published by the Center for Advocacy and Human Rights (CADO) in 2016 and analyzed by Varga (2022) monitored 407 educational units in the North-East region. Of these, only 292 provided complete data, and 82 schools (20.1%) were identified as exhibiting forms of school segregation. The refusal of 100 schools to provide information hindered a comprehensive assessment of the phenomenon. Varga (2022) concludes that, despite more than two decades having passed since the Jigău & Surdu study, school segregation remains a persistent phenomenon requiring urgent and coherent intervention from authorities.

2.5. Antigypsyism

Antigypsyism represents an explicit form of racism directed against Roma people, grounded in irrational fear and hostility perpetuated and sustained within society. This phenomenon is deeply embedded in the institutional mechanisms of the state, directly influencing public policies and the functioning of institutions (Rostas, 2017).

Manifestations of antigypsyism are found across multiple social domains, such as education, healthcare, the labor market, and public administration. Often, this type of racism is transmitted intergenerationally within families, beginning in early childhood. For example, parents instill negative stereotypes in children through expressions like “If you don’t behave, the Gypsies will come and take you” (Kyuchukov, 2012), which fosters fear and rejection of Roma and limits the possibility of normal social relationships between children.

According to Magano and D’Oliveira (2023), antigypsyism is a defining feature of discrimination against Roma, often tacitly accepted by the majority of societies. This attitude constitutes a major obstacle in the process of social integration. The European Union Agency

for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2018) emphasizes that negative prejudices and stereotypes associated with Roma contribute to their exclusion and hinder improvements in their living conditions. Due to discrimination, harassment, and hate crimes, many Roma continue to face systemic challenges that the European Union should have already addressed.

In the field of education, antigypsyism has been thoroughly documented by numerous scholars (Rostaş, 2012, 2017; Torotcoi & Pecak, 2019). Studies conducted by Varga (2022), Avery and Hoxhallari (2017), and Dargos (2019) demonstrate that anti-Roma discrimination is the main cause of marginalization, exclusion, and segregation of Roma in the educational system. Frequently, Roma children are placed in separate classes or schools due to negative perceptions held by parents, teachers, or school administrators, who view them as an undesirable influence on other students. These perceptions are often fueled by the disadvantaged socio-economic context of Roma families, frequently associated with a nomadic lifestyle, poor living conditions, poverty, and low educational attainment (Hancock, 2002).

In the school environment, antigypsyism manifests through institutionalized segregation, hostile attitudes from teachers and non-Roma students, a lack of educators trained in diversity, the absence of educational policies that promote the linguistic pluralism of Roma, and an insufficient number of Roma teachers (Rostaş, 2017; Varga, 2022; Kyuchukov, 2023). These deficiencies contribute to the perpetuation of educational disparities and, implicitly, to the social exclusion of Roma people.

2.6. Educational Inclusion

Inclusion is a complex and multidimensional process aimed at ensuring the active and equal participation of all members of society, regardless of individual differences (Hodkinson, 2010). A crucial distinction must be made between the concepts of integration and inclusion (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Emanuelsson (1998) asserts that integration involves placing individuals into already existing structures without significantly adapting them to the needs of those being integrated. In contrast, inclusion entails modifying the context to enable equitable participation for everyone. Therefore, inclusion is a more favorable concept, as it seeks the active involvement—not just the physical presence—of individuals within the educational environment.

Andreozzi and Pietrocarlo (2017) define educational inclusion as the organization of strategies and educational policies aimed at preventing and eliminating learning barriers, ensuring equal access and participation for all students regardless of social, cultural,

economic, or ability differences. In this context, the education system has the duty to become genuinely inclusive (Booth, 2018).

2.6.1. Social Interaction Theory

In the context of educational inclusion, interaction is a key factor (Hofkens, 2023), understood as a process of communication between individuals. Creating spaces that facilitate interaction among children is essential (Rutanen, 2014). In educational settings, interaction includes exchanges between students and teachers as well as peer interactions (Heron, 2021; Tsui, 2001), being considered a central element of the learning process (Jung, 2002).

Vincent Tinto (1975) argues that the degree of educational integration reflects the quality of interactions between the academic environment and the student, suggesting that the absence of such interactions may lead to school dropout. Rosa and Menezes (2019) emphasize that for vulnerable children—particularly those with disabilities—social interactions in school are essential for the development of their skills. The lack of these interactions is correlated with learning and behavioral difficulties. Moreover, interactions help reinforce cooperation and manage conflicts (Pilkington, 2001), promoting positive peer relationships (Rademaker, 2020).

According to Alexandersson (2011), education is founded on student-teacher communication, and this aspect is crucial in the process of social inclusion, indicating the child's real participation in school activities. Ahlberg (2001) asserts that students' active involvement becomes visible through the communication relationships established with teachers. Hamalik (2005) describes the educational act as a teaching-learning interaction based on mutual understanding. Rademaker (2020) classifies relationships among students in inclusive education into four dimensions: social acceptance, positive interaction, friendship formation, and the perception of being accepted in the group.

2.6.2. Theory of Educational Equity

The theory of educational equity advocates for providing equal opportunities to all students, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, or background (OSCE, 2018). The goal of this principle is not to standardize outcomes but to eliminate the negative influences of external factors that may affect educational pathways and social integration. Equity also entails fair access to post-secondary education, facilitating social mobility and professional success (OSCE, 2018).

Equal opportunity in education is recognized as a fundamental right, essential for full participation in democratic life. However, this right is undermined by visible obstacles—such as economic or legislative barriers—as well as subtle ones, like lack of information or cultural capital, particularly in the case of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Levinson and colleagues (2022) expand on educational equity within the inclusion framework, proposing the following dimensions:

- **Equitable access to resources** – All students should benefit from similar educational resources: trained teachers, infrastructure, technology, and learning materials.
- **Equity in outcomes** – Academic performance should be comparable across groups, regardless of social or ethnic background.
- **Equal levels of progress** – All students should have the opportunity to reach the same level of cognitive and personal development.
- **Balanced educational experiences** – All children should be treated with dignity and have access to meaningful opportunities for learning and personal growth.

2.6.3. Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory functions as both a theoretical and analytical framework, based on two essential hypotheses (Keller et al., 2023). The first refers to the interdependence of social categories—such as gender, ethnicity, social class, or migrant background—that define individuals' social positioning. The second hypothesis posits that personal experiences are shaped by the interaction between structures of power, privilege, and oppression (Beccia et al., 2021; McCall, 2005).

Regarding education, Codioli McMaster and Cook (2019) highlight that gender, class, ethnic, or migrant origin inequalities are among the most prevalent. Gender inequalities manifest through performance and access differences between boys and girls (Keller et al., 2023), while ethnic or racial disparities affect minorities through discrimination and limited access to educational resources (Heath et al., 2008). Educational stratification is used to highlight how class inequalities reflect unequal access to social, cultural, and economic capital (Shavit et al., 2007).

Unlike unidimensional approaches, intersectionality analyzes these forms of inequality simultaneously (Meili et al., 2022). The concept, developed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), emphasizes that disadvantages are not isolated but layered, forming a complex system of marginalization.

Kabeer (2016) further develops this idea, showing that intersectionality creates a cumulative disadvantage. An example offered by Keller et al. (2023) is that of Black girls in the United States, who are simultaneously affected by poverty, racial discrimination, and sexism (Merlo, 2005), which significantly reduces their actual chances of educational and professional success.

CHAPTER III – Inclusion Policies for Roma Pupils in the Educational System

This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of public policies aimed at the Roma population, with a particular focus on the complex historical and identity-related dimensions of this community. Drawing upon foundational theories of identity and the social construction of nations, such as those developed by Benedict Anderson and Richard Jenkins, the text emphasizes that Roma identity is not a static entity but a dynamic process, often shaped by external perceptions and stereotypes. In this context, public policies have fluctuated between marginalization and attempts at integration, and their effects are

examined through the historical, legal, and socio-cultural lenses specific to the Romanian context.

A detailed overview is provided of the main legislative and strategic frameworks targeting the Roma community since 1990, including the Romanian Constitution, the National Education Law, and the National Strategy for the Improvement of the Situation of the Roma. The role of school mediators—as key actors in facilitating access to education and preventing school dropout—is analyzed through legal frameworks and practical field experiences. Moreover, the chapter explores how recent policy measures for the 2021–2027 period reflect the state’s commitment to more effective educational inclusion tailored to the specific needs of Roma pupils.

In its final section, the chapter reflects on the evolving nature of the school mediator profession and its significance as a bridging mechanism between the community and the educational system. It underscores the necessity of a participatory and context-sensitive approach that values Roma cultural identity and contributes to the reduction of structural inequalities.

A theoretical framing of public policy analysis concerning the Roma population is essential, requiring careful consideration of both the historical complexity of the community and the symbolic constructions that have contributed over time to the formation of a collective identity. Benedict Anderson (2000) asserts that nations are not natural entities but imagined constructs—“imagined communities”—where members may not know each other personally but share a symbolic framework that fosters a sense of unity. Richard Jenkins (1997) complements this perspective by arguing that identity is not a fixed given, but is constructed in interaction with others within specific social contexts. In the case of the Roma, identity has often been externally imposed, with public policies shaped more by stereotypical perceptions than by genuine understanding of the community.

In Romania, as in other European states, approaches toward the Roma have oscillated between marginalization and attempts at integration. The historical roots of this duality can be traced to the medieval period, when Roma people were considered slaves and owned by monasteries, nobility, or the state. Following their emancipation in 1856, Roma individuals did not benefit from real inclusion policies and remained excluded from economic, social, and educational systems. Sociologist Marian Stanciu (2015) highlights that this historical exclusion persisted during the communist period through forced “integration” measures that ignored cultural specificities. In the post-communist era, policies have often been inconsistent or implemented in a superficial manner, lacking tangible impact.

To understand how policies targeting the Roma are formulated, it is crucial to examine the concept of ethnic identity within public administration. Avishai Margalit (2006) and Avigail Eisenberg (2009) highlight the tension between formal equality and the recognition of difference. In the case of the Roma, public policies must balance two imperatives: ensuring equal access to fundamental rights while also acknowledging and valuing cultural specificity. Standardized policies that fail to consider local contexts risk producing outcomes that counteract the goals of inclusion.

A closer examination of the Romanian legislative and institutional framework reveals a slow evolution of institutional concern for the Roma. After 1990, the first official documents emerged that explicitly recognized the Roma as a distinct ethnic minority. The 1995 National Education Law introduced affirmative measures for Roma pupils, while the 2001 National Strategy for the Improvement of the Situation of the Roma marked a turning point by addressing inclusion across multiple domains—education, health, employment, and housing. However, the implementation of these policies has frequently been hindered by lack of resources, political will, or local administrative resistance.

Anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu (2002) argues that policies aimed at Roma communities must be grounded in a deep understanding of their cultural contexts and avoid universalizing approaches. Similarly, Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov (2005) warn against treating the Roma population as a homogeneous bloc, noting that such an approach leads to ineffective and even harmful measures. Susana Ferreira (2009) further analyzes the relationship between identity, belonging, and civic participation, stressing that effective public policies are those that encourage the active involvement of Roma individuals in decision-making processes.

From the perspective of public policy theory, it becomes apparent that Roma-related policies have often been developed within a technocratic framework, without genuine consultation with members of the community. In many cases, Roma have been the objects of policy, rather than active subjects in the formulation of such measures. This approach contradicts the principles of participatory governance, which advocate for the active involvement of citizens in defining problems, shaping solutions, and implementing them. The absence of such participation has undermined the legitimacy of many policies and contributed to their practical ineffectiveness.

In conclusion, public policies addressing the Roma must transcend administrative formalism and be grounded in a genuine understanding of the community's social, cultural, and historical contexts. Only by integrating Roma perspectives at every stage of the decision-

making process can sustainable interventions be designed to respond to real needs and mitigate structural inequalities. Roma identity, understood as an "imagined reality" in Anderson's terms, can become a valuable resource for social cohesion—provided it is authentically recognized, respected, and valorized.

3.1 National Policies and Support Programs

This subchapter analyzes the main educational policies that impact Roma access to education, particularly the Romanian Constitution, Order 1539/2007 on school mediation, and the Romanian Government's Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma Citizens (2021-2027). It evaluates both the progress made and the persistent challenges in order to provide a comprehensive view of post-communist policies and their effects on Roma integration.

3.1.1 The Romanian Constitution

The 1991 Constitution, revised in 2003, marks a major shift from the communist regime by recognizing the rights of Roma to preserve their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity, and by guaranteeing the use of the mother tongue in relations with public authorities. It also provides free education and scholarships for children from disadvantaged families, ensuring equal access to general, secondary, and vocational education. The first effects of the Constitution became visible as early as 1990, with the founding of the Ethnic Federation of Roma and increased political representation at local and county levels. In 1992, the Ministry of Education introduced special university places for Roma students, later expanding this measure to secondary and vocational education in 2000. This program contributed to the formation of a generation of Roma professionals, positively impacting access to higher education.

3.1.2 Fundamental Legislative Milestones in Romanian Education

The National Education Law no. 1/2011 represented a significant step towards Roma inclusion by mandating compulsory schooling and supporting equal access to education, particularly for children from marginalized backgrounds. It promotes the principle of equal opportunities, prohibits discrimination, and supports the adaptation of educational measures to students' diverse needs. However, implementation remains uneven, depending on local resources and multi-sectoral cooperation.

The Pre-University Education Law no. 198/2023, developed with Roma representatives' participation, includes essential provisions for the right to mother-tongue

education, combating school segregation, ensuring transportation and housing for students from vulnerable communities, and offering specific support measures for national minorities, including Roma. This law prohibits segregation based on ethnicity and promotes inclusion by allowing the creation of mother-tongue instruction classes without categorizing them as segregation. It also provides a legal framework for preventing discrimination and protecting vulnerable students.

The European Commission report confirms that while progress has been made in reducing Roma dropout rates, segregation and discrimination remain major barriers. The report recommends expanding social scholarships and intensifying efforts to eliminate stereotypes that hinder Roma access to higher education.

3.1.3 Order No. 1539/2007 on the Role and Activity of School Mediators

This order defines the role of the school mediator as essential in facilitating Roma children's access to education and supporting their integration into the school system. School mediators are tasked with overcoming educational barriers and promoting inclusion through active engagement in communities and close collaboration with schools, families, and local authorities. It is the first legal act to clearly define the duties, professional profile, recruitment conditions, and role of the school mediator in the context of educational inclusion, particularly for Roma children and other vulnerable groups.

The need for this order arose naturally following pilot educational mediation programs implemented under PHARE initiatives and other NGO-supported projects that demonstrated the importance of a professional acting as a bridge between school, family, and community.

According to the methodology outlined in Order no. 1539/2007, the school mediator is an auxiliary education staff member who facilitates communication between the family and the school institution, supports the inclusion of vulnerable students, and prevents school dropout. The mediator also contributes to creating an educational environment based on tolerance, respect, and cultural diversity. Their role is vital in identifying unregistered or at-risk students, mobilizing parents to enroll and retain children in school, and offering direct support to teachers in adapting educational practices to Roma students' cultural backgrounds.

3.2 Romanian Government Strategy for Roma Inclusion (2022–2027)

The 2022–2027 Strategy introduces major innovations, including the recruitment of school mediators and the creation of the Roma School Inspector position. These measures

demonstrate the state's commitment to adapting education to the needs of Roma communities by facilitating intercultural communication and enabling rapid intervention in the face of obstacles affecting school integration (Government of Romania, 2022).

Sociologist Sorin Gog highlights that the main barrier to Roma student integration is the deep marginalization of their communities. Policies targeting vulnerable groups are essential not only to reduce educational disparities but also to increase school participation and strengthen inclusion within the formal education system (Gog, 2015).

The recruitment of school mediators and the Roma school inspector role have had significant positive effects, also confirmed through personal experience as a school inspector in Cluj County. The impact includes improved access to education, better academic outcomes, and stronger relationships between students, parents, and schools, especially in primary and lower secondary education (Tănăsescu, 2018).

Tănăsescu underscores the mediators' role in facilitating communication between families and schools, particularly when cultural or linguistic barriers exist, and regards them as key actors in the early identification of dropout or discrimination risks (Tănăsescu, 2018).

Another pillar of the strategy includes academic support programs such as "School after School" (Law no. 198/2023), which provide Roma students with additional resources to fill learning gaps and prevent dropout by monitoring attendance and school progress (Radu, 2016).

The inclusion of intercultural education in the curriculum and continuous teacher training represents a fundamental shift aimed at creating an inclusive environment that values diversity and promotes mutual respect. Adapting school infrastructure in segregated or isolated communities is also a priority in addressing the root causes of inequality. Integrating the Roma language, culture, and traditions into education strengthens cultural identity and increases Roma students' motivation, thereby reducing dropout rates. At the European level, these measures reflect Romania's commitment to EU principles regarding non-discrimination and long-term social cohesion (Government of Romania, 2022).

3.3 Evolution of the School Mediator Profession and the Definition of School Mediation

The role of the school mediator was introduced in Romania in 2001 through pilot programs supported by the OSCE in counties with significant Roma populations. The goal was to facilitate communication between parents, students, and teachers, while addressing discrimination. Initially, funding came from international organizations such as the OSCE, UNICEF, and the World Bank.

The Romanian Government endorsed this initiative through the National Strategy for the Improvement of the Situation of Roma (2001), which emphasized the importance of training mediators and collaborating with NGOs and the Roma community (Government of Romania, 2002).

The school mediator profession was formally included in the Romanian Classification of Occupations through a PHARE project carried out by the Ministry of Education in 2001. In 2002, Government Decision no. 844 explicitly added school mediators to the official list of occupations in pre-university education, providing legal recognition and a regulatory framework (Government of Romania, 2002).

Roxana Urea highlights the importance of this formalization, which clarified the status of school mediators, ensuring their professional training and integration into the educational system (Urea, 2015).

According to the National Economy Activity Classification and Occupation Classification, the school mediator falls within the group of support services for education, with responsibilities including consultancy, evaluation, and organization of educational programs.

In 2007, Government Decision no. 1234 and Ministry of Education Order no. 1539 regulated the employment conditions and responsibilities of school mediators, strengthening their role in preventing dropout, facilitating integration, and monitoring educational programs in vulnerable communities (Government of Romania, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2007). Mihail Ionescu considers these normative acts fundamental for the formal recognition and clear integration of mediators into schools (Ionescu, 2012).

The National Education Law no. 1/2011 further strengthened the mediators' status by including them as auxiliary teaching staff with clear responsibilities in supporting children from vulnerable groups—especially Roma—in preventing school dropout and facilitating integration, along with appropriate professional training requirements (Parliament of Romania, 2011).

Ministry of Education programs have aimed to develop the intellectual potential of Roma youth and train Roma human resources under the coordination of designated Roma school inspectors at the county level, despite initial challenges in acceptance. Over time, school mediators were integrated into the educational system and coordinated by school inspectorates to ensure equitable access to education (Sărau, 2013).

School mediation, as defined by Law no. 192/2006, is a procedural mechanism for the amicable resolution of conflicts, including in education, through the intervention of a

neutral third party who respects confidentiality, impartiality, and free consent. Mediation facilitates dialogue among the school, family, and community, monitors student inclusion, and develops integration programs while reporting risk situations to the appropriate authorities (Parliament of Romania, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2007).

A Roma school mediator is defined as a person from the Roma community, recognized by that community, acting as an intermediary between the school and family to support the integration of Roma students into education.

3.4 The Role of NGOs in the School Mediation Process

NGOs play a crucial role in supporting school mediation, contributing indirectly but significantly to reducing conflicts in educational institutions. Through training programs, NGOs target both students and teachers, providing them with tools to foster relationships based on empathy and understanding. These training sessions are particularly effective as they help build communication and active listening skills—fundamental elements of high-quality mediation.

Moreover, NGO programs not only support the mediation process but also help individuals develop the ability to analyze conflict situations and address problems through constructive dialogue and mutual respect. Thus, NGOs go beyond providing simple resources or services; they act as true catalysts for shifting mentalities within the school environment. By promoting a culture of respect and understanding, they can create lasting positive effects on the entire educational community.

CHAPTER IV – The Quantitative Perspective: The Profile and Role of the School Mediator

4.1. Research Design

The quantitative component of this research aims to identify the profile of school mediators in Romania and their contribution to the educational inclusion of Roma students. The method employed is based on the analysis of numerical and measurable data, offering an objective perspective on the phenomenon and seeking to confirm or refute hypotheses related to mediators' activities.

Context and Problem: The school integration of Roma children remains a significant challenge, and school mediators serve as a bridge between school, family, and community to support participation and prevent dropout. However, there is a lack of systematic studies on the mediators' profiles, motivations, and challenges, and their professional recognition remains limited.

Research Aim: To analyze the professional, motivational, and educational profiles of school mediators and assess their role in the integration of Roma students within the current social and institutional context.

Research Objectives:

1. Identify the socio-demographic and educational characteristics of school mediators (age, gender, education level, field of training);
2. Explore the motivations underlying the choice of the school mediator profession and their career trajectories;
3. Evaluate the types of professional training courses in school mediation and their relevance to mediators' daily work;
4. Determine mediators' perceptions of the main causes of absenteeism and school dropout among Roma students;
5. Analyze the methods and resources used in mediation activities to support educational integration;
6. Identify institutional and community actors involved in the mediation process and assess the degree of collaboration among them;
7. Examine the perceived impact of mediators' activities on the educational and behavioral progress of Roma students.

Research Hypotheses:

1. School mediators are predominantly women over 40 years old with increasing levels of education after employment, indicating active participation in continuous professional development;
2. The choice of the school mediator profession is primarily driven by vocational and social motivations rather than financial incentives;
3. There is a positive correlation between specific training in school mediation and the perceived effectiveness of interventions in cases of absenteeism and school dropout;
4. Institutional resources and intersectoral partnerships significantly contribute to the success of school mediation activities;
5. Effective collaboration between mediators, teachers, families, and local authorities is essential in reducing absenteeism and school dropout among Roma students;
6. The activities of school mediators have a significant positive impact on the educational progress and inclusion of Roma students;

7. The involvement of local authorities and political leaders in supporting mediators' work is perceived as limited, despite their potentially important role.

Variables: The study analyzes independent variables (age, gender, education, training, employing institution, years of experience) and dependent variables (perceptions of dropout, inter-institutional collaboration, mediation impact, methods used, necessary resources, mediators' motivations).

Operationalization of Variables: Variables are defined through indicators and measured using demographic questions, attitudinal and self-assessment items, and multiple-choice or open-ended items.

4.2. Quantitative Analysis Methodology

According to data provided by the Ministry of Education and Research (Daragiu & Stoica, 2025), 484 school mediators with employment contracts were identified at the national level. These mediators are unevenly distributed, reflecting the geographic and demographic specificities of various regions, cities, and rural areas. This distribution highlights local variations in educational and social needs. In rural or disadvantaged areas with a significant proportion of vulnerable students, such as Roma or students with disabilities, there is a higher presence of school mediators, which also serves as a recruitment criterion.

An important aspect of the recruitment process is the recommendation from representative Roma community organizations, both locally and nationally, which must be included in the employment application. This recommendation has both symbolic and practical value, demonstrating community support and the active involvement of local actors in promoting the educational and social inclusion of Roma students.

This research follows a quantitative-descriptive paradigm and was conducted using a standardized questionnaire consisting of 31 items. The instrument was addressed to school mediators in Romania, aiming to investigate their socio-professional characteristics, the activities they perform, and the impact of their work on the educational inclusion process.

To delimit and define the research scope, the Ministry of Education and Research was requested to grant access to the national database of school mediators. This source was essential for analyzing territorial distribution, facilitating the sample selection, and supporting conclusions regarding the mediators' role in ensuring equal access to education.

4.2.1. Subject Sample

The sample was stratified and partially randomized, totaling 187 respondents. Their geographic distribution corresponds proportionally to the active mediator distribution in each county, also considering the level of engagement of local school inspectorates in supporting mediation activities. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the selection was made among mediators available during the questionnaire application period, which limits the sample's randomness.

Relevant demographic characteristics of the sample are as follows: 70.8% women and 29.2% men, with most mediators (63.6%) being over 40 years old. Regarding education levels, 68% of women had completed high school, and 54% held a university degree—a figure that increased to 74.5% post-employment. In terms of professional training, 35% completed school mediation courses (which do not provide formal certification in Romania or abroad), 12% studied psychology, and 10% studied social work. Regarding employing institutions, 63.4% work in lower secondary schools, and 22% in County Centers for Educational Resources and Assistance (CJRAE). Most mediators have between 11 and 20 years of professional experience. The geographical distribution of participants is diverse, with a higher concentration from Cluj County (13.37%).

4.2.2. Content Sample

The questionnaire included 31 items structured into thematic categories reflecting the variables investigated. The quantitative survey method, using a structured questionnaire, was designed and applied in accordance with relevant academic literature, taking into account the author's professional experience in the field.

The thematic areas covered by the questionnaire are:

1. Socio-demographic data (gender, age, education level, professional experience);
2. Professional training and sources of continuous education;
3. Motivation for choosing the school mediator profession;
4. Employing institutions and working conditions;
5. Perception of barriers to Roma students' education (absenteeism, dropout, cultural traditions, poverty, etc.);
6. Collaboration with other institutions and educational stakeholders;
7. Evaluation of mediation activity impact;
8. Identified needs for more effective mediation (workspace, resources, etc.);
9. Methods used to evaluate student progress;

10. Perceptions of actors involved in the school integration of Roma students.

4.2.3. Questionnaire Structure: Mediator Profile and Barriers to Education Access

The questionnaire was completed online by 187 school mediators via Google Forms, with an average completion time of 35 minutes. It was distributed through local and national information groups with the support of school inspectors for Roma minorities.

The instrument was designed to collect relevant data regarding mediators' activity in the context of inclusive education, focusing on the integration and educational support of Roma students. The 31 questions addressed aspects such as:

- Demographic and professional data;
- Professional training and types of courses completed;
- Motivation for choosing the profession and employing institution;
- Experience in the educational system, resources, and institutional relationships;
- Perceptions and practices related to absenteeism and dropout, and intervention methods;
- The mediator's role, encountered difficulties, proposed solutions, and needed resources;
- Mediation activity's impact on students and relationships with students, parents, and schools;
- Perceptions of legal support and profession evolution, with improvement proposals and future expectations.

To outline the mediators' profile and identify barriers to education access, a diversified set of seven types of questions was used, each playing a specific role in data collection.

The first type consisted of closed questions with predefined options (single or multiple choice), which facilitated quick coding and quantitative analysis. Examples include age group, merit grade eligibility, or completed mediation training courses.

The second type comprised semi-closed questions, allowing customized responses when predefined options were insufficient. For example, regarding course duration, respondents could add further details.

The third type was open-ended questions, requiring elaborate, qualitative responses useful for thematic analysis of mediators' personal experiences and opinions. Relevant

examples include how they handle absenteeism among disadvantaged students or suggestions for improving their work.

Next were identification and registration questions for socio-demographic data, used for sample segmentation and statistical correlation analysis. These included county of origin, gender, or current educational level.

Opinion and attitude **questions were used to assess perceptions** of social and educational issues, such as the legislation's effectiveness in supporting school mediators' work.

To capture practical working methods and their impact, evaluative **questions were included, asking about tools used to monitor student progress** and observed changes in students who had long-term collaboration with mediators.

The final type of questions focused on situational and behavioral examples, requesting concrete cases from mediators' personal experience showing how they managed difficult situations in their relationships with students or educational institutions.

4.2.4. Justification for Using Various Item Types in the Questionnaire

The questionnaire applied to school mediators was designed with a mixed structure of items to cover both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the research. Closed questions were used for quick coding and statistical analysis, identifying trends and differences across subgroups. Semi-closed questions added flexibility, allowing unanticipated responses. Open-ended questions enabled free expression of opinions and experiences, essential for understanding subjective contexts.

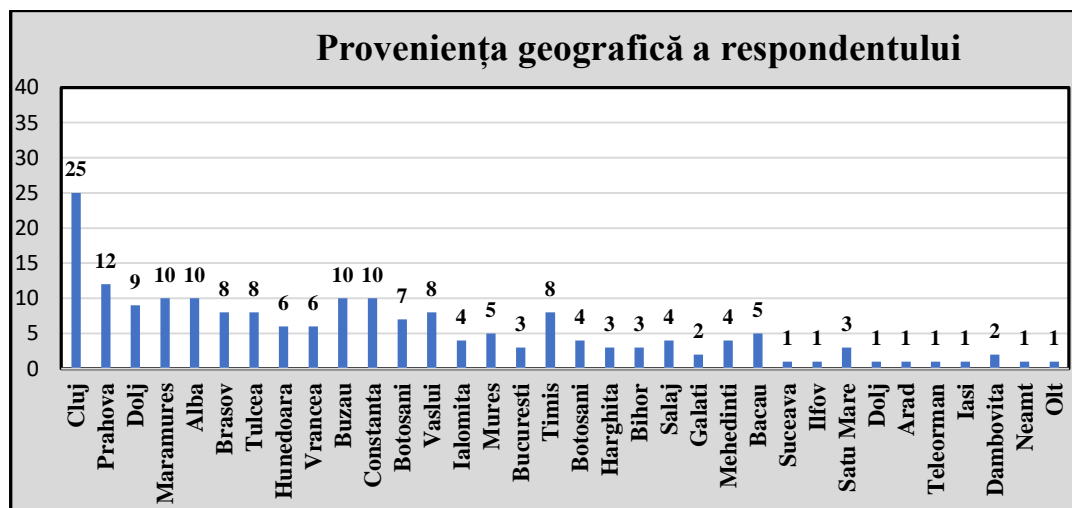
Socio-demographic data helped segment the sample and identify correlations. Opinion questions assessed mediators' views on policies and challenges, while evaluation questions provided insights into methods and impact on Roma students. Finally, situational questions offered concrete examples of interventions and handling difficult situations, completing the instrument with a practical and comprehensive perspective on school mediators' activities.

4.2.5. Data Collection

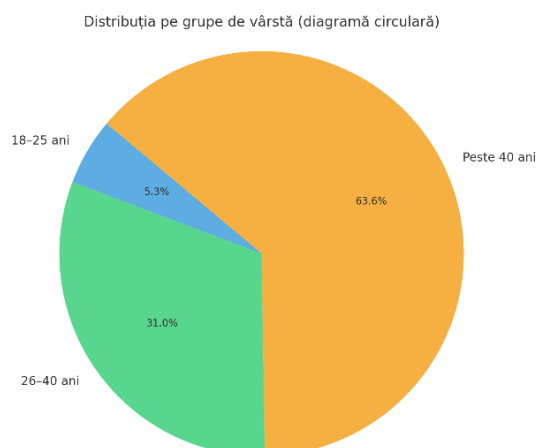
For data collection, a stratified representative sample was used, constructed according to the territorial distribution of school mediators nationwide. This enabled the capture of relevant geographical differences. The distribution of responses reflects county-level variations, significantly influenced by the involvement and support provided by school

inspectors responsible for Roma minorities. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were selected based on availability during the research period, introducing a limited random component based on accessibility and availability. This methodological approach ensures adequate sample representativeness, considering the specific constraints of research in inclusive education.

The analysis of responses reveals uneven geographical distribution, with Cluj County having the highest share (13.37%) of the 187 respondents, followed by Prahova (6.42%) and Dolj (4.81%). Other counties such as Maramureș, Vrancea, Buzău, and Satu Mare recorded significant participation rates, around 5.35%. Most counties had moderate representation, between 2% and 5%, while counties like Olt, Dâmbovița, or Harghita were underrepresented, each contributing only one response (approximately 0.53%).

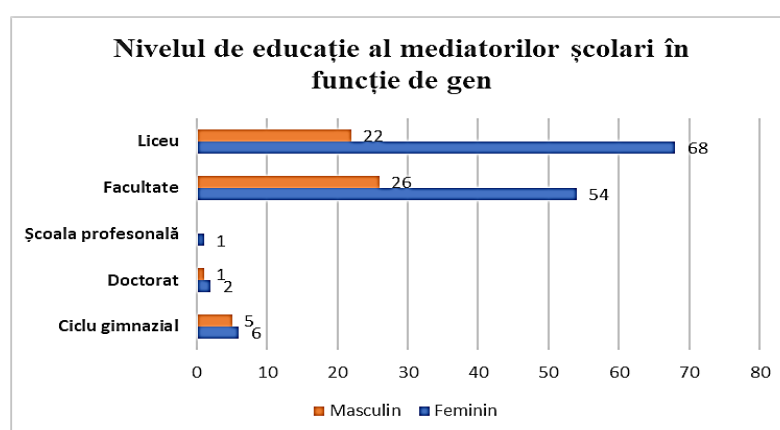


From a demographic perspective, the majority of school mediators are over the age of 40 (63.6%), while the 26–40 age group represents approximately 30.5% of the sample. This indicates a predominance of mature and experienced individuals among the respondents.



Gender-based analysis reveals a clear majority of female mediators (70.8%) compared to male mediators (29.2%), reflecting a specific tendency within the field of school mediation toward roles requiring empathy and communication skills—areas in which women are more frequently represented. This gender disparity does not imply a value hierarchy of perspectives, but rather highlights a participatory trend.

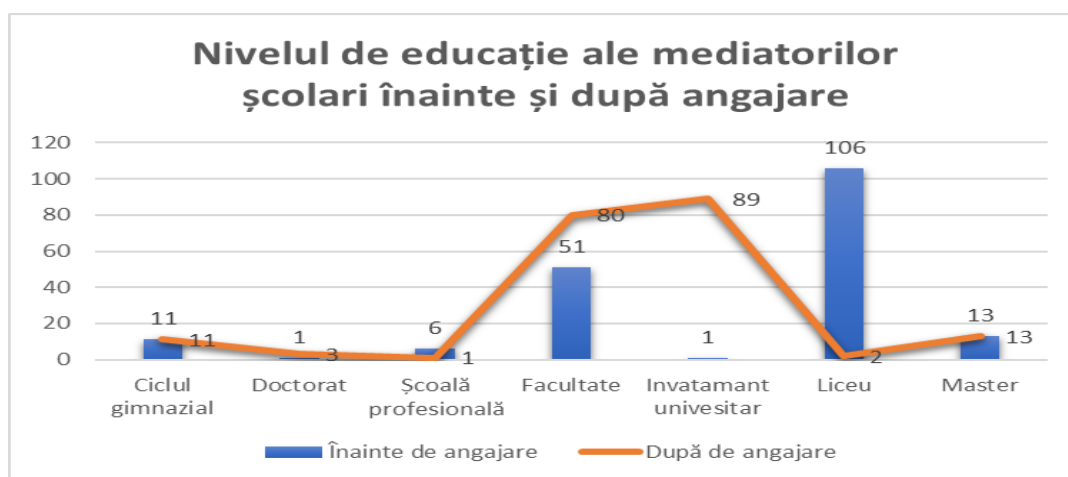
Regarding educational attainment, most female mediators hold either high school diplomas (68%) or university degrees (54%), while the corresponding figures for male mediators are 22% and 26%, respectively. Secondary vocational and lower-secondary education levels are marginal among mediators, and doctoral studies are rare, with only a few respondents reporting such qualifications. This suggests that while higher education is not a formal requirement, there is a clear trend toward increasing professionalization in the field.



The evolution of educational attainment before and after employment reveals a significant increase in the number of mediators holding university degrees, rising from 51 to 89 individuals (74.5%), as well as an increase in those with postgraduate education (a 26.5% growth), indicating a sustained commitment to professional development among mediators.

The number of those with only high school or vocational education has declined, while the number of doctoral degree holders has shown a slight increase (from 1 to 3 individuals), highlighting a trend toward academic advancement even within this professional field.

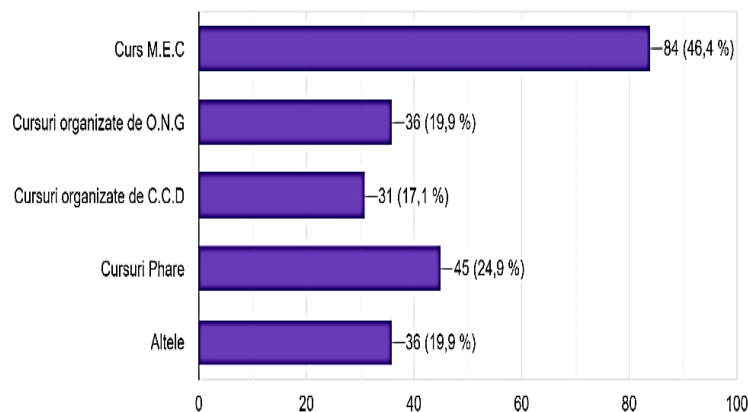
Regarding areas of specialization, the majority of mediators (approximately 35%) are directly trained in school mediation, followed by psychology (12%), social work (10%), and educational sciences (7%). Other qualifications include physical education, economics, engineering, nursing, and various other domains. This professional diversity reflects a multidisciplinary framework of competencies that contributes to supporting students in complex educational contexts.



The data confirm that the training of school mediators is predominantly provided through institutional programs: nearly half of respondents (46.4%) completed courses organized by the Ministry of Education, while one quarter (24.9%) participated in EU-funded PHARE programs. The non-governmental sector remains a secondary yet visible actor (19.9% attended NGO-led courses), as do training initiatives classified under “Other” (19.9%). The Teacher Training Houses (Casa Corpului Didactic) play a modest role, accounting for 17.1%. This structure suggests that certification through public institutions remains the primary pathway to professionalization, although international initiatives and civil society efforts complement the broader training landscape.

7. Ce cursuri de formare în mediere școlară ați absolvit?

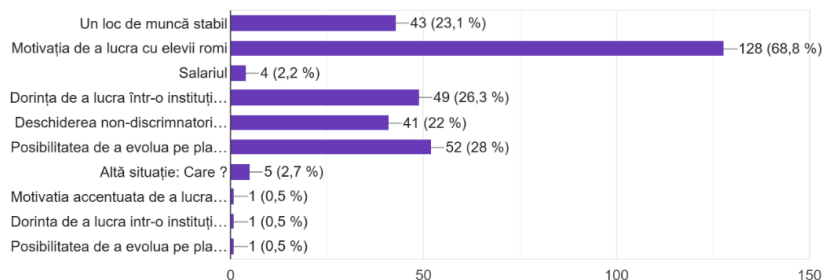
181 de răspunsuri



In terms of motivation, the choice of profession is clearly vocational: 68.8% of mediators cite the desire to work with Roma students as their primary reason. Approximately one-third mention professional development (28%) and affiliation with an institution (26.3%) as influential factors. The need for stable employment is important for 23.1%, while direct financial incentives are almost negligible (2.2%). Despite the absence of substantial material benefits, the role of the school mediator continues to attract individuals due to its strong social dimension and the opportunity for meaningful community engagement.

9. Ce v-a determinat să alegeți profesia de mediator școlar?

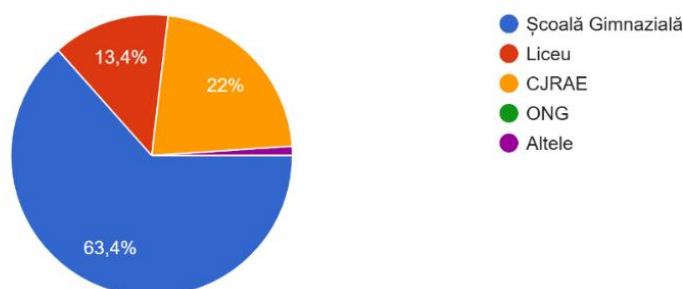
186 de răspunsuri



The typology of the employing institution reveals a strong concentration at the lower secondary level (63.4%), reflecting both the structural predominance of this stage within the Romanian educational system and the heightened pressure to prevent school dropout before the transition to upper secondary education. County Centers for Educational Resources and Assistance (CJRAE) employ 22% of mediators, indicating an expansion of psycho-pedagogical support services. In high schools, the number of mediators remains low, which partially explains the higher early school leaving rate after the eighth grade. NGOs and other institutions barely exceed the 2% threshold.

10. Instituția angajatoare

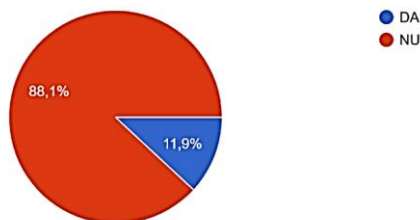
186 de răspunsuri



Professional recognition remains limited: only 11.9% of respondents have received merit-based bonuses, indicating an institutional undervaluation of inclusion-related work. In contrast, practical experience is robust: two major cohorts dominate the distribution of seniority—30.4% are relatively new mediators (1–3 years of experience), while 39.7% have between 11 and 20 years in the role, providing the system with a core of seasoned professionals alongside a new generation of entrants.

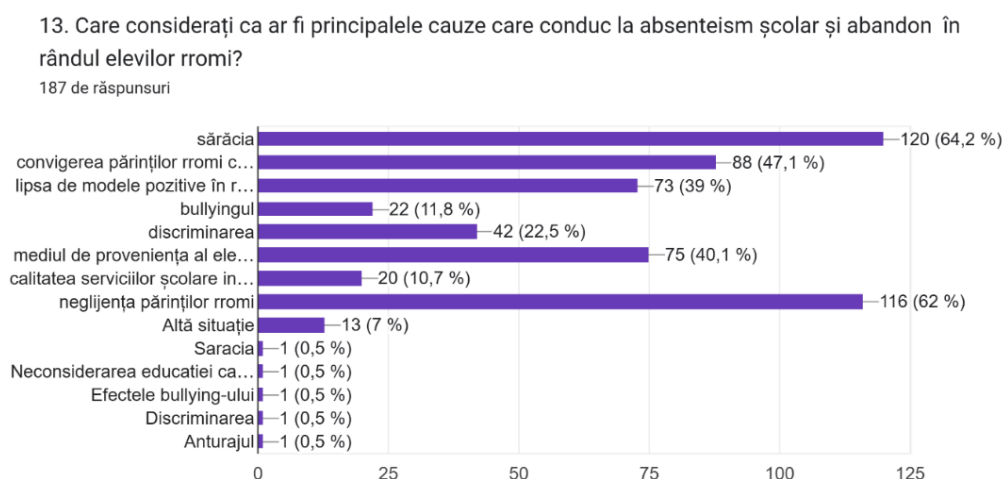
11. Ați beneficiat de gradație de merit ca și mediator școlar ?

185 de răspunsuri



Finally, the analysis of the causes of absenteeism and school dropout confirms the primacy of socio-economic and cultural factors. Poverty (64.2%) and parental neglect (62%) rank highest, followed by cultural traditions (47.1%) and precarious social environments (40.1%). The lack of positive role models (39%) and discrimination (22.5%) further complete the picture, while bullying and the low quality of educational services in rural areas are mentioned less frequently. The results indicate that, in order to be effective, mediation efforts must be supported by anti-poverty social policies, parental responsibility

programs, and consistent measures against discrimination and educational exclusion.



In the work of school mediators, preventing absenteeism and early school leaving represents a constant and complex concern that requires a multidimensional approach. The majority of respondents emphasized that these phenomena are particularly prevalent among children from impoverished backgrounds or those influenced by restrictive cultural norms. In response to these challenges, mediators frequently resort to individual counseling and home visits, fostering a relationship of trust between the school, the family, and the student. Open and sustained communication is viewed as an essential condition for the prevention and remediation of educational risk situations.

Significant support is also provided through concrete measures such as facilitating access to social scholarships, school meal programs, school transportation, and the distribution of school supplies—all aimed at removing the material obstacles that often hinder school attendance. Collaboration with local authorities, NGOs, and other institutions is essential in this endeavor, offering a supportive network for students and their families. At the same time, the implementation of supplementary educational programs—such as “School after School,” free tutoring, and extracurricular activities—contributes to student retention and fosters interest in learning.

Moreover, some mediators reported specific cases where they successfully assisted students from disadvantaged backgrounds by implementing personalized interventions that combined emotional support with social and educational measures. Beyond general solutions, these examples highlight the need for empathy, perseverance, and direct engagement within the school community.

Regarding the stakeholders involved in the mediation process, the survey results indicated that the school mediator occupies a central role and is perceived as the primary support in conflict resolution and in facilitating communication between students, teachers, and parents. Teachers and school principals also play essential roles, alongside students' families, community leaders, NGOs, and local authorities. Together, these actors form a collaborative network that supports the educational integration of students from vulnerable groups.

Nonetheless, the mediators' work is not without challenges. The most frequently reported difficulty is absenteeism caused by lack of motivation, but also by the allure of alternative activities outside of school. Difficult relationships with families, the multiple responsibilities of the mediator, and the lack of logistical resources—such as transportation or school supplies—are also common obstacles. Additionally, the absence of an adequate space for mediation activities negatively affects the quality of interventions. Only slightly more than half of the schools have a designated room for school mediation, significantly limiting the possibility of creating a safe, confidential, and effective environment for addressing students' issues.

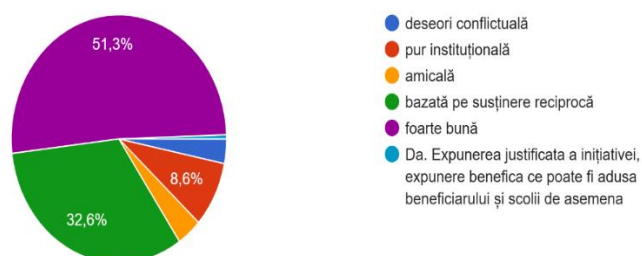
In conclusion, school mediators carry out their activities within a complex context in which the success of interventions depends on cooperation among the school, family, and community. Material support, authentic communication, respect for cultural specificity, and the involvement of all relevant stakeholders are key elements in the effort to combat absenteeism and early school leaving, and to promote inclusive and equitable education.

Over 95% of respondents believe that an educational environment based on mutual respect, emotional support, and effective collaboration between school and family significantly contributes to improved academic outcomes. Only a minor percentage (~5%) did not explicitly mention this relationship, without, however, denying its importance.

In terms of strategies used to build trust, the most frequently reported methods include open communication (80%), empathy and respect for students (75%), home visits (60%), parental involvement in the educational process (70%), and extracurricular activities (50%). These are complemented by the provision of constructive feedback (40%), tailored to students' individual needs. Obstacles encountered—such as parental reluctance toward schooling (30%)—are mitigated through proactive solutions, including empathetic dialogue and personalized interventions. The impact of a solid trust-based relationship is recognized by 90% of teachers, who observe decreased absenteeism, better integration of Roma students, and increased motivation for learning.

Regarding the relationship with school management, the majority of school mediators (51.3%) describe it as “very good,” indicating a healthy professional climate conducive to the implementation of educational activities. A significant proportion (32.6%) believe the relationship is based on mutual support, underscoring the existence of functional and ongoing collaboration. Conversely, 8.6% of respondents report a “strictly institutional” relationship, while a very small percentage (2%) indicate the presence of conflicts. Only 1% mention constructive initiatives originating from school leadership.

26. Care este relația dumneavoastră cu conducerea unității de învățământ?
187 de răspunsuri

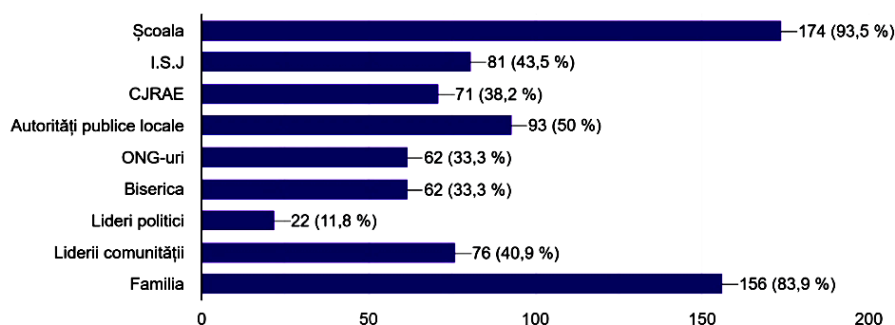


The data suggest that, although the working environment is generally positive, there are opportunities to strengthen the support provided to school mediators by fostering more personalized communication and promoting joint initiatives. The overall professional atmosphere is encouraging, but it could be enhanced through more active involvement from school leadership, offering both practical and emotional support to mediators.

Regarding the actors involved in the school integration of Roma students, respondents overwhelmingly identified the school as the central institution in this process, with 93.5% citing it as the most significant contributor. This perception underscores the essential role of the school not only in academic instruction but also in facilitating social inclusion. The family ranks second (83.9%), highlighting the importance of a close, collaborative relationship between the home environment and the educational system. Institutional actors such as local authorities (50%), School Inspectorates (43.5%), and County Resource and Educational Assistance Centers (CJRAE) (38.2%) are seen as important, though secondary, contributors. Similarly, NGOs (33.3%), community leaders (40.9%), and the church (33.3%) are perceived as relevant actors, albeit with more limited influence in the integration process.

27. Care considerați sunt actorii importanți implicați în integrarea școlară a elevilor romi?

186 de răspunsuri



With regard to the methods used to build trust, open communication is considered fundamental, being indicated by 80% of respondents. Regular meetings with parents, clear feedback, and empathetic dialogue with students are among the most frequently employed practices in educational work. Likewise, empathy and respect for the social and familial context of Roma students are emphasized in 75% of responses, indicating a child-centered approach focused on students' actual needs. Home visits, mentioned by 60% of participants, are valued as an effective method for fostering closeness and gaining a deeper understanding of students' situations. Parental involvement, highlighted in 70% of cases, is encouraged through joint educational activities and individualized support. Half of the respondents consider extracurricular activities to be an appropriate informal setting for strengthening the relationship between the school and the student. Lastly, 40% of teachers reported using constructive feedback to motivate students and help them overcome learning obstacles.

4.3. Limitations of the Quantitative Research

Although the structured questionnaire used in this study was designed to capture as accurately as possible the complexity of school mediators' activity and their impact on the educational inclusion of Roma students, the research process is not without methodological and contextual limitations that may affect the interpretation and validity of the results.

A primary limitation stems from the **nature of the data collection instrument**. As the questionnaire was self-administered, responses—especially to open-ended questions—were often brief, incomplete, or expressed in language requiring subjective interpretation by the researcher. This approach limits the depth of qualitative analysis and may reduce the ability to capture the nuanced realities of mediators' professional practices.

Secondly, the study is exposed to an inherent **risk of subjectivity and self-assessment bias**. Since respondents are asked to reflect on their own actions, perceptions, and challenges, some answers may be influenced by the desire to project a positive image of

their work. This conformity effect—aligned with institutional or social expectations—can lead to an idealized representation of reality, thereby diminishing the objectivity of the evaluation.

Another important limitation is the **representativeness of the sample**. Given that the selection of respondents was not random and the research did not evenly cover all regions of the country, the conclusions reflect primarily the experiences of mediators operating within specific geographic and institutional contexts. Consequently, generalizing the results to the entire professional body of school mediators in Romania should be done with caution.

Furthermore, the **subjective interpretation of terms used in the questionnaire** may generate ambiguity in response analysis. Concepts such as “educational progress,” “challenges,” or “discrimination” may be understood differently by each respondent, depending on their training level, professional experience, or the specific context of the community in which they work. This semantic variability affects the comparability and coherence of responses, requiring careful and context-aware interpretation of the data.

Finally, there is a **limitation regarding the lack of in-depth contextualization of the environments** in which school mediators operate. Although the questionnaire provided a general overview of their practices and perceptions, it did not sufficiently capture local complexities—such as cultural traditions, Roma community dynamics, the influence of informal leaders, or interethnic relations—which may significantly impact the school integration of Roma students.

In conclusion, while these limitations do not undermine the relevance of the findings, they highlight the importance of a critical approach and the need to complement the quantitative research with qualitative methods—such as semi-structured interviews or field observation—in order to achieve a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of on-the-ground realities.

CHAPTER V – The Qualitative Perspective: Mediators' Intervention Models in the Process of School Inclusion

5.1. Foundations of the Qualitative Research

In the effort to investigate the role of school mediators in the educational inclusion of Roma students, a qualitative research approach was adopted, one that privileges in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and meanings that participants attribute to their own actions. Unlike quantitative research, this approach does not seek to quantify phenomena, but rather to explore their subjective and contextual dimensions. Qualitative analysis aims to capture the complexity of social relationships and the dynamics of interactions among mediators, students, parents, and teachers, providing an interpretative framework for the educational reality within Roma communities.

Drawing on the academic literature, particularly the work of Sorin Băban (2008), who emphasizes the importance of understanding the meanings attributed to social behaviors, and Septimiu Chelcea (2007), who highlights the relevance of qualitative methods in analyzing social phenomena, this research was built around tools that allow for direct, flexible, and context-sensitive inquiry. In this respect, the semi-structured interview and

participant observation proved to be the most appropriate instruments for gathering relevant and authentic data regarding the way school mediators relate to their educational mission.

The research process was carried out in several stages: defining objectives and working hypotheses, formulating research questions, choosing qualitative methods, and developing an analytical framework to enable coherent and contextualized data interpretation. This methodological framework was tailored to the chosen topic—the role of the school mediator in facilitating educational inclusion—and was further reinforced by the researcher's professional experience in the field of Roma education.

5.2. Participant Observation

General Objective of Participant Observation

To analyze how school mediators, educational institutions, Roma students—through behavior, attitudes, motivation, and engagement—and the institutional measures implemented (such as procedures, initiatives, or policies) influence the educational process in Roma communities. Direct observation of school-based interactions and administrative practices was used to understand their role in promoting educational and social inclusion of Roma students.

Participant Observation Hypotheses

- *Obs. Hyp. 1:* The existence of the school mediator position in educational institutions indirectly contributes to increased school participation of Roma students, while also stimulating their motivation for learning.
- *Obs. Hyp. 2:* The active involvement of school mediators helps improve relationships among Roma students, their peers, parents, and teachers, as well as between the school and the wider community, thus reducing ethnic discrimination and promoting a more inclusive educational environment.
- *Obs. Hyp. 3:* Institutional measures implemented by schools, such as support programs for Roma students (e.g., “Second Chance,” “Milk and Bread,” “Fruits in Schools,” “Hot Meal,” scholarships, educational vouchers, and school supplies), have a positive impact on their educational outcomes by enhancing school participation and integration into mainstream education.
- *Obs. Hyp. 4:* The active involvement of the Roma community in the educational process contributes to increased trust among Roma parents in the education system and to improved relationships between schools and Roma communities.

- *Obs. Hyp. 5:* In Roma communities, schooling is often not perceived as a priority compared to other immediate needs, such as ensuring daily sustenance.
- *Obs. Hyp. 6:* Initiating school-based cultural projects aimed at promoting Roma culture and traditions contributes to their valorization among both Roma and non-Roma students, reducing stigma and promoting a more inclusive educational climate.

5.2.1. Data Collection Strategy

The application of the participant observation method in this research is grounded in a professional trajectory that began during the researcher’s university years, starting in 2003, through active involvement in Roma-led NGOs focused on education. A pivotal period occurred between 2006 and 2008, during which the researcher simultaneously served as both a school mediator and a Romani language teacher at “Ana Aslan” Technical College in Cluj-Napoca. This experience allowed for the development of a direct and profound relationship with the school environment and the Roma community, offering an integrated perspective on educational, cultural, and socioeconomic realities.

Between 2010 and 2023, the researcher continued to work as a school mediator at “Iulian Pop” Economic High School in Cluj-Napoca and currently holds the position of School Inspector for Roma Issues at the Cluj County School Inspectorate. In addition to direct experiences, the research was strengthened by extensive collaborations with relevant actors—NGOs, both formal and informal Roma community leaders, public institutions—as well as through the coordination of school mediators in Cluj County and other localities.

Data collection through participant observation constituted a central component in analyzing how inclusion is implemented in the observed schools. A complex and multidimensional methodological approach was adopted, integrating complementary techniques drawn from varied professional perspectives, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

As a school mediator, the researcher conducted direct observation during classes, counseling sessions, and interactions between students, teachers, and parents. The focus was on how special educational needs were addressed, the types of pedagogical adaptations implemented, and the overall atmosphere within schools. These observations were complemented by semi-structured interviews with teaching staff, parents, and other educational stakeholders, which helped capture institutional perceptions, inclusion strategies, and challenges encountered in practice.

In the role of school inspector, observation was deepened through the coordination of school mediators and monitoring visits to educational institutions. The researcher annually analyzed mediators' activity reports and participated in institutional meetings aimed at fostering collaboration between schools and communities. Simultaneously, relevant educational documents (action plans, reports, monitoring forms) were examined, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of inclusion practices.

The indirect sample of the participant observation covered interactions with:

- 200 school mediators
- 500 Roma students from primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary education
- 50 school principals
- 2,000 teaching staff
- 123 informal Roma leaders
- 50 formal Roma leaders
- 12 Roma non-governmental organizations
- Approximately 7,000 members of Roma communities

This robust empirical base enabled the formulation of well-founded conclusions concerning the current state of educational inclusion in Roma communities.

5.2.2. Research Instrument – Observation Sheet

The main instrument used for the systematic recording of observations was the observation sheet, designed as a structured document aimed at capturing multiple dimensions of the educational and socio-economic realities within Roma communities. This tool enabled not only the quantification of Roma students' presence in schools but also a qualitative analysis of behaviors, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships within the school community.

One of the first domains investigated was the participation of Roma parents in counseling meetings, with a focus on their level of interest, involvement in decision-making processes, and receptiveness to educational themes. The aim was to assess whether there was genuine openness to dialogue or, conversely, signs of reluctance and passivity.

The sheet also monitored school attendance among Roma students and their degree of integration into student groups. While in some schools participation was balanced, in others absenteeism remained a significant issue, reflecting socio-economic barriers and negative community perceptions of education.

Another essential aspect documented was the attitude of teaching staff toward Roma students. The study evaluated the extent to which inclusive teaching methods were applied,

students' engagement in school activities, and the adaptation of instruction to their individual needs. Manifestations of empathy were identified, as well as potential stereotypes or biases that could impact the educational process.

The standard of living within the community was another important dimension, assessed through housing conditions, access to educational and technological resources, and families' capacity to support their children's educational journeys. A lack of minimum conditions was consistently associated with difficulties in school participation.

The observation sheet also included an analysis of bullying, highlighting the types of aggression (verbal, physical, emotional) and the dynamics between Roma and majority students, aiming to identify any forms of social exclusion.

A dedicated section addressed the visibility of the Romani language and culture in the educational environment. This involved assessing the presence of optional courses, extracurricular activities, and initiatives promoting Roma cultural identity, with the aim of reducing stigmatization and fostering an inclusive educational climate.

Another parameter analyzed was the involvement of Roma parents in their children's education, measured through attendance at parent-teacher meetings and the support provided for learning.

The sheet also tracked the effectiveness of support programs (scholarships, school meals, remedial interventions), evaluating their impact on school attendance and academic outcomes.

Finally, a central element of the investigation was the analysis of the school mediator's activity, with an emphasis on their role as a liaison between school, family, and community. Their involvement in conflict resolution, promotion of inclusion, and maintaining dialogue among stakeholders in the educational process was assessed.

Overall, the observation sheet functioned as a rigorous and comprehensive instrument, contributing to a realistic portrayal of the educational inclusion process of Roma students and providing essential data for the development of educational policies tailored to the community context.

5.2.3. Research Stages: Pre-test – Intervention – Post-test

Pre-test – Initial Context of the Participating Schools

Prior to the actual implementation of the intervention, a detailed analysis was conducted of the educational context in 30 schools in Cluj County, where school mediators

were later employed. This stage, conceived as a pre-test, involved qualitative methods—mainly participant observation and the examination of current school documentation—to accurately capture the realities on the ground.

The initial findings revealed a series of dysfunctions and systemic deficiencies, particularly regarding the participation and integration of Roma students. School dropout rates were alarmingly high, and parental involvement in their children's education was virtually nonexistent. A significant number of Roma children were not enrolled in the education system, and Roma preschoolers were almost entirely absent from kindergartens, creating major obstacles to entering primary school.

In addition to educational difficulties, interethnic relations were marked by heightened tension and discrimination, manifesting both among students and between Roma parents and teachers. Frequent confrontations—whether among students or between parents and staff—severely impacted the school climate. Absenteeism rates were high, and very few Roma students completed lower secondary education, let alone pursued further studies. This exploratory stage was essential for identifying the real needs of school communities and justifying the necessity for a coherent and targeted intervention.

Implementation of the Educational Intervention

In my role as school inspector for the Roma minority, I designed and implemented a strategic program aimed at reducing school dropout rates and increasing access to education for Roma students. The intervention began with supporting the employment of school mediators in the 30 previously analyzed schools. After their integration, I coordinated professional development sessions for mediators, school principals, and teaching staff. These trainings focused on fundamental themes such as educational romanipen, equity, inclusion, and intercultural education.

To foster motivation and facilitate attitude change, the sessions included success stories of Roma youth who, despite facing difficulties, achieved exceptional educational outcomes. Concurrently, meetings were organized between Roma students in high school and those in primary or lower secondary education, as well as educational camps addressing themes such as ethnic identity, discrimination, abuse, addiction, sexuality, early marriages, and forgiveness—contributing to the personal and educational development of the participants.

These activities had a visible impact on students' attitudes and engagement. Mediators continuously supported students in their academic and vocational orientation, encouraging them to remain in school and overcome socio-educational barriers.

Post-test – Evaluation of Results and Impact

The final stage of the research process consisted of evaluating the outcomes through a comparative analysis between the initial and post-intervention situations. This post-test revealed significant progress across all 30 schools where mediators were employed.

There was a considerable increase in the promotion rate for lower secondary education and in the continuation of studies, with more Roma students opting for vocational or high school education, including through special admission quotas. Manifestations of discrimination within schools visibly decreased, the educational climate became more open and inclusive, and absenteeism significantly declined. Interethnic and parent-teacher conflicts were managed more effectively due to the mediators' involvement.

The presence of mediators also attracted educational projects that improved overall school conditions. The number of students declaring their Roma ethnicity in the SIIR database increased, supported by mediators who encouraged identity ownership. Their assistance extended beyond compulsory education, supporting transitions to high school, university, master's programs, and even doctoral studies.

In addition to improving access to education, the intervention fostered a trust-based relationship between schools and the Roma community. As inspector, I supported the inclusion of the Romani language in the curriculum and advocated for the appointment of two deputy headteachers of Roma ethnicity, contributing to the professionalization of education for this minority.

5.2.4. Data Analysis and Interpretation of Results

To assess the real impact of the intervention, qualitative field data were correlated with quantitative indicators such as school attendance, promotion rates, parental involvement, and the number of reported conflicts. A comparison between schools with and without mediators revealed significant differences:

- Roma student **attendance increased** by over 30% in schools with mediators compared to the previous period.

- **The percentage of students continuing their education** rose from approximately 10% to over 60% among Roma students.
- **Discrimination and conflict** levels decreased considerably, according to the majority of educational stakeholders involved.

For a structured and objective evaluation of mediator activity, I coordinated a thematic inspection in all 30 schools. A standardized inspection sheet, aligned with quality criteria for the school mediator role, was used. Its application involved direct visits, interviews with principals, teachers, parents, and students, as well as analysis of relevant documents.

The synthesized results of the report highlighted the following:

- While **school dropout** persists, there are concrete reintegration initiatives, including programs like "Second Chance" and part-time education.
- Mediators' activities are well documented, and they actively collaborate with institutions such as DGASPC, local municipalities, and the police.
- In most cases, mediators participate in teacher councils and are well-informed about students' situations. Only two schools lacked this integration.
- Many mediators have **dedicated workspaces**, though two schools lacked such facilities due to objective constraints.

The report also noted an imbalance between time spent in schools and time allocated to community activities—a core component of the mediator's responsibilities. In some cases, mediators worked only 4–6 hours per week, with schedules fragmented by unrelated administrative tasks. Standardization of schedules and prioritization of core mediation activities were thus recommended.

Mediators proved essential in conflict resolution and maintaining a balanced school climate. Their deep knowledge of Roma communities allowed them to build genuine bridges between school and family. Their involvement extended into national and European projects (PNRAS, PNRR, Erasmus+, POCU), as well as partnerships with local NGOs (e.g., the Pro-Europe Roma Party Association, the Resource Center for Roma Communities).

In some cases, mediators contributed to community infrastructure development—as exemplified by the Vocational School in Poiana Turda—indicating an expanded role beyond education and into broader community engagement. Additionally, mediators actively participated in public consultations, training programs, international exchanges, and monthly methodological activities, maintaining a continuous presence in both educational and community dynamics.

5.2.5. Conclusions of the Thematic Inspection Report Conducted in Cluj County Schools

- School mediators are key actors in the educational inclusion process, contributing significantly to the prevention of absenteeism and school dropout, particularly among vulnerable students such as those from Roma communities. Their work extends beyond educational responsibilities, encompassing multisectoral projects and interinstitutional collaborations, including partnerships with NGOs and local authorities—demonstrating their institutional recognition and strategic relevance.
- The mediators’ role is manifested not only in the educational domain but also in social and community contexts, through parental counseling, interventions in risk situations, and community projects. They act as vital connectors between school, family, and external institutions, and are increasingly perceived as essential resources for fostering an inclusive educational climate.
- Nonetheless, the report highlights the need for continuous training and professional development of mediators, as well as a clearer delineation of their responsibilities to avoid overlaps with teaching staff. Additionally, the use of digital platforms has been shown to enhance the monitoring of school attendance.
- Ultimately, school mediators are active partners in combating educational inequities, promoting equal access and embracing diversity in education.
- Regarding the use of participant observation as a research method, certain limitations are acknowledged—such as the subjectivity of perceptions, restricted access to some communities, and the limited generalizability of conclusions. For a more comprehensive understanding, it is recommended to employ complementary methods and to extend the study to other regions.
- The researcher’s direct experience, serving as both a school mediator and teacher, provided an authentic and in-depth perspective on school dynamics, confirming the relevance of participant observation in analyzing educational inclusion.

5.2.6. Research Limitations in the Context of Participant Observation

The use of participant observation in this research presents several noteworthy limitations. First, the data may be influenced by the researcher’s subjective perceptions, which can affect the objectivity and comprehensiveness of the findings. Limited access to

certain schools or communities also reduces the validity and generalizability of the results, which should therefore be interpreted as context-specific.

Moreover, the observation sheet alone does not fully explain the underlying causes of phenomena such as absenteeism or discrimination. Additional methods—such as interviews or document analysis—are required for a more nuanced understanding.

External factors, including the organization of educational activities and the interactions between mediators, students, and parents, may also influence the observed behaviors. This limits the applicability of findings to other educational settings.

To gain a more complete picture of Roma access to education, further research should be conducted with a broader sample and in diverse geographic regions, employing mixed methodologies.

Conversely, the researcher's direct involvement in the community—as mediator, teacher, and inspector—enabled a deeper and contextually grounded understanding of the phenomena under study, thereby reaffirming the value of participant observation in research on educational inclusion.

5.3. The Semi-Structured Interview

Interviews represent an effective research tool, as they facilitate an in-depth understanding of the interviewee—not only in terms of decision-making but also regarding the cognitive structures underlying their responses. However, interview responses may be influenced by emotional factors or cognitive limitations, requiring the researcher to approach the data with caution, recognizing that not all responses necessarily reflect objective reality (Simon, 1977).

According to Vasile Miftode, the interview is a scientific tool designed to explore specific social phenomena and should be distinguished from other dialogic forms, such as journalistic or informal conversations (Miftode, 1995). Unlike questionnaires, interviews allow for direct interaction and flexibility in question formulation, thereby facilitating the collection of detailed and authentic information (Chelcea, 2001).

For the present study on the role of school mediators in Roma communities, a semi-structured interview guide was developed covering critical areas such as: the professional profile of mediators; their responsibilities (including bridging school and community and preventing dropout); causes of absenteeism (e.g., poverty, migration, discrimination); intervention strategies; collaboration with educational stakeholders; challenges encountered; efforts to combat discrimination; perceived impact; legislative deficiencies; and suggestions

for improving their status (e.g., clearer role definition, training, and professional recognition).

Thus, the interview provided a flexible and in-depth framework for understanding the complexity of school mediators' work within the context of Roma education.

General Objective of the Interview

The aim of the interview is to assess the role and effectiveness of school mediators in the process of integration and inclusion of Roma students, through an analysis of their responsibilities, roles, and the challenges encountered in working with students, teachers, parents, and educational authorities. The focus will be on evaluating the impact of the strategies employed by school mediators on the educational performance of Roma students, including aspects related to their school attendance, social integration, the protection of their rights, and the collaboration between educational institutions and the Roma community.

Specific Objectives

- To identify and describe the responsibilities of school mediators in the process of integrating Roma students, with an emphasis on the methods and strategies used to facilitate their inclusion in school life.
- To analyze how school mediators collaborate with teachers, parents, and students to support the education of Roma students, with a focus on effective communication and the resolution of potential conflicts or barriers.
- To measure the impact of mediators' activities on the level of school participation and educational performance of Roma students, particularly in relation to school attendance, involvement in extracurricular activities, and academic achievement.
- To explore the challenges faced by school mediators in their work (e.g., lack of resources, prejudice, cultural barriers) and to propose recommendations for improving the process of Roma student integration within the educational system.

5.3.1. Data Collection Strategy

Prior to conducting the interviews, the research sample was clearly defined in order to collect relevant data concerning the role of the school mediator from multiple perspectives: the educational process, the school-student-mediator relationship, and interactions with the community and parents. The semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 35–40 minutes, comprised 20 open-ended questions that allowed for detailed responses and follow-up clarification questions.

The interview guide included 20 questions designed to explore in depth the experiences, roles, and challenges faced by school mediators working in Roma communities. These questions addressed both personal and professional aspects, such as the mediator's background, specific responsibilities, motivations for choosing the profession, and their assessment of the causes of absenteeism and school dropout.

The interviews further investigated the methods and strategies employed to support students from vulnerable backgrounds, collaboration with educational and community stakeholders, as well as logistical and administrative challenges encountered in their practice. Additional focus was placed on issues related to discrimination and racism, mediator competencies and training, and difficult situations managed in relation to students and the broader community.

Moreover, the interview explored the resources needed to improve mediators' work, the impact of their actions on student behavior and performance, the methods used for evaluating student progress, and the importance of building trust with students and parents. Challenges in collaboration with teaching staff and school leadership were also examined, alongside discussions on the current legislative framework and suggestions for the future of the profession. The final questions addressed how students are informed about available educational support measures and the prospective development of the school mediator role in the coming years.

The sample consisted of 15 school mediators from Cluj County, selected based on professional experience and availability to participate, within the framework of responsibilities associated with the position of Roma school inspector.

Data collection was conducted using three methods: 8 in-person interviews, 5 via WhatsApp, and 2 by telephone. Each method was selected according to the participants' preferences and logistical conditions. This mixed-method approach enabled maximum participation and accurate data collection, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the school mediator's role in Roma communities.

All interviews were recorded with participants' informed consent to ensure the accuracy of transcription and data analysis. The recordings were fully transcribed, and the data were thematically coded using an inductive approach to identify recurring patterns and relevant trends.

Before each interview, participants were informed that the collected data would be used exclusively for research on the role of school mediators in the integration of Roma students and would be treated with confidentiality, adhering to ethical standards and personal

data protection regulations. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could refuse to answer or withdraw at any time without consequence. The continuation of the interview was therefore conditional on the participant's explicit consent, with gratitude expressed in advance for their cooperation.

5.3.2. Conclusions and Findings Generated by the Qualitative Approach through the Semi-Structured Interview

The Role and Status of the School Mediator

Analysis of the interviews conducted with several school mediators highlighted the complexity and significance of their role within educational communities, particularly in supporting the educational inclusion of Roma children.

School mediators are perceived as key actors in preventing school dropout, promoting early education, and facilitating dialogue among schools, families, and communities. They build trust-based relationships, monitor at-risk students, support kindergarten enrollment or reintegration through alternative education programs ("Second Chance," "School After School"), and help retain students in school.

Several interviewees emphasized mediators' involvement in conflict prevention and resolution, overcoming cultural and social barriers, and promoting multiculturalism in the school environment. Mediators are also engaged in school desegregation plans and in safeguarding children's rights.

However, their activity is often directed by school leadership and teaching staff, limiting their autonomy and strategic decision-making capacity. In addition, they frequently face significant material shortages—such as the lack of transportation or a multifunction printer—that hinder their work efficiency.

In conclusion, the school mediator plays a crucial role in facilitating equitable access to education, but their effectiveness largely depends on the recognition of their professional status, decision-making autonomy, and availability of resources.

"To improve school mediation activities, I would need some resources that would make my work easier. First of all, better transportation would be very useful, to reach families living farther away or in hard-to-access locations. Fuel reimbursement would be necessary; currently, I cover all travel costs myself. I would also need a multifunction printer. I have the other necessary tools, such as a laptop and an office, and I bought a tablet with a signature function using the teaching career card, which is very helpful during home visits." (B.A., 46 years old, male)

Professional Training and Inter-Institutional Collaboration

The interviews revealed a constant need for skills development, especially in addressing recurring challenges in vulnerable school environments (e.g., bullying, drug use). Participants emphasized that training courses should provide practical solutions to unexpected problems.

"My suggestion would be to organize ongoing training courses for school mediators, as unforeseen situations constantly arise, and we need tangible solutions to address bullying and drug use." (A.M., 28 years old, female)

Collaboration between mediators, teaching staff, and school leadership is another decisive factor. Case studies described by mediators (such as interventions in abuse incidents or support for dropout students) underscore the importance of effective communication among all educational actors and coordinated intervention to support students from vulnerable families.

Special emphasis is placed on parental involvement in children's school life, which interviewees consider a key factor in reducing absenteeism and improving academic performance. Mediators highlight the importance of building trust with families, continuous parental engagement, and avoiding unrealistic promises. These factors contribute to dropout prevention and the creation of an inclusive educational climate.

"The relationship with parents is very important. Continuous communication about the student's academic situation, and involving parents in school activities—once the importance of education is understood—leads to increased school attendance and improved academic outcomes." (A.L., 40 years old, female)

The interview with P.A., a novice school mediator, underscores the importance of sustained and functional collaboration among mediators, teachers, and school leadership to ensure the effective integration of Roma students. P.A. highlights the difficulties encountered when communication among these parties is lacking, especially for students from vulnerable families facing material deprivation, instability, and social exclusion. These students require a coordinated and persistent effort from all actors involved in education.

A significant example reported by P.A. involves a preschool child who, after a minor injury, was ignored by school staff, resulting in anxiety and emotional distress. The mediator reported the incident to school leadership, which triggered the disciplinary committee's intervention. This case highlights not only the lack of empathy among school staff but also the consequences of poor collaboration between mediators and school personnel.

In another case, P.A. described a student who had been absent from school for over a year due to extreme poverty. Home visits revealed a harsh reality—no electricity, potable water, or stable income. In response, P.A. facilitated a partnership between teachers, school leadership, and social services, which led to a social scholarship and gradual reintegration of the student into the education system. This case demonstrates that the mediator's role extends beyond communication to include concrete, often social, interventions aimed at eliminating barriers to school participation.

Overall, P.A.'s experience illustrates that the effectiveness of educational inclusion depends largely on the level of cooperation among stakeholders. The school mediator serves as a vital link between school, family, and community, a role that is especially relevant for Roma students at risk of dropout. Through active involvement, regular meetings, and continuous monitoring of student situations, the mediator helps create a more equitable and responsive educational environment for disadvantaged students.

"Yes, a lack of close collaboration between school mediators, teachers, and school leadership can hinder the mediation process, especially for students from vulnerable families. These students often have special needs, and to support them effectively, all stakeholders must work together. For instance, I had a preschooler who suffered a fractured arm after an incident with another child. The student was left crying without being asked what had happened, and the parents were not informed. When I received no response from the teacher, I contacted the principal, who responded inappropriately and aggressively. With no other recourse, I turned to the disciplinary committee, which helped me investigate and mediate the issue. Another example involved a girl who had not attended school for over a year. I took on the case early in my career. After several home visits, I discovered her absences were due to financial hardship—no electricity, potable water, or income. Her father had passed away eight months earlier, and her mother was ill. After discussing with the family, teachers, and school leadership, we prepared her scholarship file. Initially, she agreed to attend school a few hours a day, on the condition that she inform me before leaving. Over time, her attendance improved, and I was proud of her. Sometimes, teachers lacked the time to assist such students, and solutions were difficult to implement. In these cases, I organized meetings with teachers, parents, and school leadership to understand the situation and find practical solutions, such as applying for scholarships or aid. This helped students attend school more regularly and improve their performance. Constant communication and mutual support between school and family are essential to addressing these students' needs." (P.A., 23 years old, female)

Access to Education and the Integration of Roma Students: The Role of School Mediators and the Community

The interviews conducted with several school mediators reveal a series of significant barriers to equitable access to education for Roma students, as well as effective strategies to support their educational journey. One major issue highlighted by V.C. is the lack of access to essential information about school scholarships and other support programs.

This information gap, frequently encountered in Roma families, substantially diminishes students' chances of continuing their studies. The difficulty in understanding and accessing these opportunities is further exacerbated by parents' low educational levels and unfamiliarity with bureaucratic procedures.

In this context, the role of the school mediator becomes essential—not only as a liaison between family and school but also as an active advisor and supporter. V.C. emphasizes the importance of building trust with parents to help them understand the value of education and encourage their involvement in their children's academic path. Organizing counseling sessions, regular communication with families, and assistance in completing scholarship applications are practices that increase school participation. Regular home visits allow mediators to provide feedback on students' academic progress and promote family engagement in preventing absenteeism and dropout.

Beyond the individual actions of mediators, the educational integration of Roma students is strongly influenced by community dynamics and the involvement of multiple local actors. The interview with V.F. highlights the key role that Roma community leaders can play in supporting education. Due to the legitimacy and trust they command, these leaders can serve as bridges between schools and families, facilitating dialogue and reducing communication barriers. Furthermore, the involvement of local authorities, Roma experts, and churches contributes to developing a community support network essential for genuine educational inclusion.

V.F. underscores that the educational success of Roma students cannot be achieved solely through school efforts; it requires collaboration among all stakeholders: parents, teachers, mediators, community leaders, and institutions. Each plays a defined role: parents must support their children's education, teachers must adopt inclusive methods, and mediators must ensure constant and effective communication among all parties involved.

"In the mediation process, several actors are involved at both the school and community levels. These include parents, students, teachers, school principals, and, of course, the school mediator. Additionally, the involvement of local authorities and Roma experts is

essential in providing extra support, while the church also plays a key role in communities where it holds moral authority. Roma community leaders have a significant impact as well, helping facilitate integration and supporting education. Collaboration among these actors is crucial for the success of the mediation process, with each playing a distinct role: parents supporting education, teachers adapting their approaches, and the school mediator ensuring communication and coordination among all participants, so that students can benefit from all available resources for complete educational integration." (V.F., 49 years old, female)

J.S.'s contribution offers a complementary perspective, emphasizing the complexity of school dropout. According to her, lack of financial resources is a major barrier to school attendance, especially for vulnerable families that cannot afford school supplies, clothing, or transportation. At the same time, discrimination and social exclusion profoundly affect Roma students' motivation and reinforce their sense of marginalization within the school environment.

"Frequent causes include lack of financial resources, discrimination, and parents' inability to support their children due to social or economic challenges. In our school, these issues are evident among students from socially vulnerable families, who sometimes cannot attend due to these hardships. Regretfully, I often find that these children are absent because their parents are either disinterested or unable to engage with their children's education." (J.S., 59 years old, female)

Another contributing factor is parents' limited capacity to support their children's education, stemming not only from poverty but also from low educational attainment, lack of interest in schooling, or emotional and social issues. Often, education is not perceived as a value or priority, perpetuating a vicious cycle of intergenerational exclusion. J.S. offers a critical but realistic observation about parents' disinterest or incapacity, illustrating the cultural and social barriers that hinder the real inclusion of Roma students.

Overall, the interview analysis reveals that access to education for Roma children is not merely a matter of educational policy but also one of community intervention, institutional trust, and emotional support. Thus, the school mediator emerges as a central figure in this ecosystem—facilitating not only access to information and resources but also building a support network that combats exclusion and promotes educational equity.

5.3.3. Research Limitations from the Perspective of the Interview Method

One of the major limitations identified during the course of this research was related to the inherently subjective nature of the semi-structured interview. While this method allows for an in-depth exploration of the personal experiences of school mediators, it also carries the risk that responses may be influenced by the individual perceptions of participants. At the same time, the researcher's own interpretation may introduce a degree of subjectivity, potentially affecting the neutrality of the conclusions drawn.

Another significant limitation stems from the relatively small sample size—only 15 school mediators from Cluj County were included in the study. This limited selection makes it difficult to generalize the conclusions at a national level, as social, economic, and cultural differences across various regions of the country may lead to diverse practices and perceptions regarding school mediation. Thus, the results cannot be considered fully representative of the broader educational reality in Romania.

Moreover, the research focused exclusively on the voices of school mediators, without incorporating the perspectives of other key stakeholders in the educational process, such as students, parents, or teachers. While this focus offers valuable insights into the mediator's activities, it does not directly capture how their intervention is perceived by the broader educational community. For future studies, a mixed-methods approach—combining interviews with other techniques such as direct observation or document analysis—could offer a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the mediator's role and real impact on educational inclusion.

CHAPTER VI – CONCLUSIONS

Reflecting on my own trajectory, both professionally and personally, I now understand with much greater clarity the essential role of the school mediator in supporting Roma children. I have lived in communities where education often seemed like a fragile promise, overshadowed by material deprivation, discrimination, and deeply rooted mistrust between families and educational institutions. From this direct experience, I have learned that the school mediator is not merely an administrative link, but a vital element of cohesion between two worlds that often struggle to communicate effectively: the world of school and that of the Roma community.

As someone who grew up in a modest environment, as a native Romani speaker, teacher, and school inspector for the Roma minority, I have always believed that authentic change comes from genuine involvement, empathy, and the courage to consistently stand beside the vulnerable. I have met many Roma children silently fighting against enormous obstacles to continue their education, and school mediators were often their only visible allies along this difficult path.

Through this research, I aimed to foreground the voices of these professionals who not only facilitate communication and school participation but also build bridges of trust where relationships are damaged or non-existent. I believe that the school mediator is an indispensable component in the architecture of an inclusive educational system, and their role must be strengthened in all schools across Romania. I have seen firsthand how their support can change lives—students who would otherwise be excluded have managed to stay in school, integrate, and grow into active members of society.

My research also reflects a broader historical and social context in which the Roma community has continually faced marginalization, poverty, and systemic discrimination. Public policies, no matter how well-intentioned, cannot have real impact unless they are accompanied by the direct involvement of local actors who understand the community's culture, language, and needs. In this regard, school mediators are not just tools of educational policy but genuine agents of change.

This work includes an analysis of how the migration of Roma from India to Europe has been historically and linguistically interpreted—by scholars such as Mihail Kogălniceanu, Franz Miklosich, and Nicolae Iorga—clearly demonstrating Indian origins and countering erroneous theories like Egyptian descent. These perspectives are not mere historical details but key elements in understanding Roma identity and how it shapes present-day educational and social integration.

I also aimed to provide a strong theoretical foundation using concepts such as cultural and social capital, educational stratification, and intersectionality to understand how educational inequalities persist. These analytical tools helped explain why Roma children, particularly those from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds, face systemic obstacles in accessing quality education.

I found that school segregation remains a reality in many parts of the country despite the existing legal framework. Anti-Roma sentiment influences perceptions and behaviors in schools, limiting Roma students' real chances for integration. In this context, school mediators play a particularly important role: combating stereotypes, encouraging school participation, and mediating conflicts and misunderstandings.

I firmly believe that a fair educational system cannot function without the real integration of school mediators, the recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity, and a coherent strategy that considers the actual realities of Roma communities. Through the active involvement of these professionals, we can build an education system in which all children—regardless of ethnicity, gender, or social status—feel valued and supported.

Ultimately, this research represents, for me, an act of awareness and recognition. I hope it contributes not only to the academic literature but also to changing mindsets and shaping educational policies that genuinely include—not just formally—Roma children in school and society. I believe that every child deserves a success story, and we, as education professionals, have the duty to be part of that journey—not through judgment, but through authentic support.

This study has confirmed that the role of the school mediator is essential in building trust between school and family and in facilitating equitable access to education for Roma students. It is not just an intermediary function but a continuous process of negotiation between institutional norms and community needs. As a researcher directly involved in school realities and Roma communities, I have witnessed the complexity of this role, which requires both a deep understanding of the education system and of the cultural and social context of Roma children.

My fieldwork underscored the importance of trust-based relationships and open communication for the success of any educational intervention. In many observed cases, success did not stem from mechanically applied public policies but from the mediators' personal involvement, adaptability, and empathy. It also became evident that real inclusion means more than physical presence in school—it requires active participation, affirmation of cultural identity, and continuous support for development.

This research confirmed my belief that educational policies must be participatory, including the voices of those directly affected—students, parents, and mediators. No matter how well-intentioned central directives are, they become ineffective if they fail to adapt to local realities. I encountered cases where the same national program was applied radically differently from one school to another, precisely due to the lack of a coherent support infrastructure and real engagement from all educational actors.

From this perspective, I assert that sustainable solutions for the educational inclusion of Roma students can only arise through genuine partnerships between the state, schools, families, and civil society. School mediators, along with supporting NGOs, have proven that change is possible, but they need recognition, continuous training, and adequate resources to fulfill their mission effectively. Their work cannot be reduced to a mere liaison function—it is a true endeavor of social and educational transformation.

Reflecting on the entire research process, I realize that the true value of this work lies in its capacity to give visibility to often-marginalized actors and to contribute, even modestly, to the development of a fairer and more inclusive education system. I hope this contribution encourages not only policy changes but also a shift in perspective—one that sees diversity as a resource, not a problem, and that seriously invests in support mechanisms for all students, regardless of ethnicity.

The qualitative methods applied in this research—participant observation and semi-structured interviews—played a fundamental role in shaping a deep and nuanced understanding of the realities school mediators face in the process of Roma student inclusion.

These methods enabled the collection of valuable data and the exploration of less visible dimensions of the interactions between school, family, and community.

Participant observation proved essential for contextually understanding the phenomenon under study. Active integration into the educational environment allowed me to directly and unfilteredly observe the dynamics between school mediators, Roma students, teachers, and parents. Through this involvement, I tracked in real time the processes of communication, intervention, and educational support, identifying elements often overlooked by quantitative analyses: attitudinal subtleties, interpersonal tensions, symbolic exclusion mechanisms, or, conversely, spontaneous inclusion and adaptation strategies. This approach granted access to the motivations, emotions, and perceptions of the involved actors, decisively contributing to an accurate reconstruction of the educational reality in schools with Roma students.

Thus, through direct observation and active participation, I documented how school mediators concretely facilitate Roma student integration: through individualized support, by mediating relationships between teachers and families, and through targeted interventions in conflict or cultural misunderstanding situations. From this perspective, it became evident that the mediator's role is not merely bureaucratic or technical but entails a profound commitment to the social mission of education, especially in vulnerable communities.

Observation also highlighted the need for complementary systemic measures—such as resource allocation, program flexibility, and continuous professional development support for mediators—to enable them to fulfill their duties effectively.

Semi-structured interviews, complementing participant observation, offered introspective and reflective perspectives from school mediators. This method provided an open and flexible space for expressing opinions, personal experiences, and the challenges encountered in their daily work. Interviews were essential in understanding mediators' decision-making processes, the way they develop intervention strategies, and their perceptions of the relationship between the Roma community and educational institutions.

Through contextually tailored questions, I explored key themes such as: the educational and social barriers faced by Roma students, solutions implemented to combat discrimination, the degree of collaboration with public institutions, and the level of support felt from local authorities and teaching staff. The results revealed a complex picture in which mediators often find themselves in an ambiguous position—torn between the responsibility to meet the needs of the Roma community and the lack of adequate institutional support for their efforts.

This research clearly demonstrated that the effectiveness of school mediators' interventions depends not only on personal competencies but also on the structural context in which they operate. Unclear responsibilities, the absence of a coherent framework for continuous training, limited access to educational resources, and inconsistent bureaucratic support reduce mediators' capacity to enact lasting change. Simultaneously, where collaboration among school, family, and mediator exists, significant progress was observed in the integration of Roma students, reduction of absenteeism, and improvement of academic performance.

Another central finding of the study is the necessity of actively involving Roma parents and community leaders as partners in the educational process. Their reluctance toward school, often stemming from negative past experiences, can be overcome through consistent and empathetic communication facilitated by community insiders—mediators. Through their efforts, schools can become open and inclusive spaces, and the educational process can become a shared responsibility among all stakeholders.

In conclusion, the data obtained through the applied qualitative methods confirm the working hypothesis that the integration of Roma students into the education system fundamentally depends on the quality of collaboration among mediators, teachers, parents, and authorities.

The role of the school mediator is essential, but their effectiveness is conditioned by a range of structural and institutional factors. Reforming the support framework for this profession is necessary, through clarifying professional status, providing specialized training, and including mediators as legitimate partners in educational teams.

This thesis contributes to the academic literature on the educational inclusion of Roma students by offering an in-depth empirical analysis of the mediator's role in building a functional bridge between school and community. The proposal to establish a university department dedicated to mediator training—within Faculties of Psychology and Education Sciences—addresses an urgent need for the professionalization and standardization of this role, thus contributing to the consolidation of a fair and inclusive education system.

In an educational context marked by multiple challenges—from segregation and discrimination to lack of resources and parental disengagement—the school mediator emerges as a social change agent capable of transforming relationships between institutions and marginalized communities. Their efforts not only support inclusion but also generate lasting changes in perceptions, mindsets, and institutional functioning.

Overall, this work provides a relevant and original contribution to the field of Roma student inclusion by thoroughly exploring the role of the school mediator as a central actor in facilitating communication among school, family, and community. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods enabled not only the validation of research hypotheses but also the construction of a complex picture of the challenges and resources present in the field.

The novelty of the research lies in the integration of an internal perspective, through participant observation, with data obtained from interviews and questionnaires administered to school mediators, resulting in a deep, contextualized, and realistic understanding of the inclusion process. The conclusions highlight the necessity of institutional recognition for school mediators, continuous professional development, clarification of responsibilities, and the creation of coherent, intersectoral public policies adapted to the cultural and socio-economic realities of Roma communities. The effectiveness of mediators' interventions is closely tied to the education system's ability to respond to diversity and to build authentic partnerships with community actors.

Looking ahead, recommended action directions include professionalizing the field, developing resources, and promoting replicable best-practice models at the national level. Thus, this research contributes not only to academic knowledge but also provides a practical framework for equitable, sustainable, and transformative educational interventions.

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