

The theses of the university dissertation (PhD)

**The Relationship Between Minority Hungarian
Families Raising Children with Disabilities and
Organisational Cultures in Educational Settings**

(Teacher Attitudes and the Impact of the Educational
Environment in Bihar County)

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Research Aims and Scope of the Study

In recent decades, perceptions of disability in Romania, as well as the functioning of educational and support systems, have undergone significant transformation (Berszán, 2017; Neagu, 2021). Following the political transition, despite the increasing emphasis on the principles of inclusive education, segregated special education institutions continue to dominate in practice. Similar to models developed in other European Union countries, these institutions fulfil a wide range of complex functions, including special education, habilitation and rehabilitation, skills development, and talent support. The burdens of this historical legacy are particularly evident in the long-term effects of earlier authoritarian and discipline-centred educational approaches (Alexiu et al., 2016; Neagu, 2021). The theoretical framework of the research is grounded in the international and national historical contexts of interpreting inclusion, with particular attention to the contrasting approaches of the medical and social models of disability (Albrecht, 2003; Baciu & Lazăr, 2017; Baldwin et al., 1994). The dissertation aims to explore the policy and pedagogical paradigms that have shaped the educational

situation of the Hungarian minority in Romania. Within these minority communities, the development of special education structures holds particular significance: for a long period, there were no special education centres providing instruction in Hungarian, and as a result, the majority of children with disabilities from Hungarian backgrounds were educated in Romanian-language settings (Alexiu et al., 2016; OECD, 2007).

The central question of the dissertation is to what extent special education centres operating within the Hungarian minority in Romania are able to ensure the conditions for inclusive education, how family–school relationships are formed, and what pedagogical cultures emerge in this specific organisational context. The analysis focuses on societal perceptions of disability and the evolving conceptual frameworks, primarily centred around the dual paradigms of interpretation: the medical and the social models. Academic discourse (Barnes et al., 2003; Kálmán & Könczei, 2002; Kálmán, 2004; Neufeld & Maté, 2014) is increasingly shifting away from the medical model’s deficit-oriented approach towards a perspective that centres

on the abilities of the individual, focusing on the social situation and needs of persons with disabilities.

In the context of the Hungarian minority in Romania, the issue of inclusion is further complicated by linguistic and cultural dimensions. Although the increase in the number of Hungarian-language special education institutions represents a significant advancement, it remains essential to examine the extent to which these institutions are able to provide an inclusive environment, particularly in terms of family involvement and community support (Berszán, 2009; Dan, 2023; Dan et al., 2023).

The theoretical foundation of the research is supported, among others, by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which provides a framework for interpreting the educational environment as a multi-level system (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). This approach aids in understanding that a child's development and participation in education are influenced not only by internal school dynamics but also by the functioning of familial and societal networks. Therefore, the role of special education institutions cannot be limited to the professional delivery of education; they must also

actively engage the relational networks surrounding the child—particularly the family and the wider community (Hastings & Taunt, 2002).

In this research, the approach to inclusive education extends beyond the pedagogical to encompass a social dimension, examining the extent to which institutional and community practices can promote equity-based participation. Both national and international literature highlight a strong correlation between academic achievement, emotional security, and social integration. This is particularly true for learners with disabilities, for whom attachment to educators, a supportive learning environment, and active family involvement are essential prerequisites for educational success (Cozolino, 2014; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

The scientific relevance of this research is justified not only by the multidimensional nature of its theoretical framework but also by the research gap resulting from the uniqueness of the target group. Learners with disabilities belonging to the Hungarian minority in Romania—along with their teachers and parents—are scarcely represented in Romanian scholarly literature, and the lack of empirical

data further complicates policy planning and the formulation of development strategies. All of this underlines the need for research grounded in practical pedagogical work, aiming to contribute to the advancement of inclusive approaches and the collective rethinking of family–school relationships (Epstein, 2010).

The relationship between families and organisational cultures in education is widely explored in the international literature (Blackman & Mahon, 2016; de Apodaca et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2021; Ravet & Mtika, 2021; Smith & Prelock, 2002; Power et al., 2009), yet this topic remains under-researched in the Romanian context. This research is therefore of particular relevance, especially in addressing the underexplored relationship between special education teachers and families. The primary aim of the study is to examine how raising a child with a disability affects families' psychosocial wellbeing, financial security, and social participation. Furthermore, the study investigates the availability of formal and informal support systems for families raising children with disabilities in Romania, and the extent to which these systems contribute to the development of parental coping strategies. Furthermore,

our research aims to identify the factors that influence the effectiveness of collaboration between families and schools in the integration of learners with disabilities, as well as the barriers perceived by educators throughout this process. A key issue explored in this study is the attitudes and expectations that families raising children with disabilities hold towards the education system concerning inclusion. The research also seeks to uncover to what extent educators consider active parental involvement feasible, and what challenges they identify in this regard. Additionally, the study pays particular attention to the institutional and community-level role of schools in the social integration of learners with disabilities, with a specific focus on the context of the Hungarian minority in Romania. Finally, the research addresses the experiences and difficulties encountered by parents of children with disabilities from the Hungarian minority in accessing and engaging with the education system.

Research Design and Methods

The research is based on an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach, which enables the systematic integration of quantitative and qualitative data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Sántha, 2015). In the first phase of the research, quantitative methods were used to examine parental stress, social acceptance, and the characteristics of family–school relationships. This was followed by qualitative data collection, allowing for a deeper interpretation of the phenomena identified. These two distinct methodological phases are closely interconnected, as the findings from the questionnaire analysis informed the second stage of the study. Specifically, insights from the quantitative data were used to guide the development of the interview framework and played a key role in shaping the sampling strategy (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

Following the core principles of the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 2010) we aimed to approach the phenomena emerging during the interviews with a researcher’s perspective, consciously setting aside our prior knowledge of the topic. Although the research is

also informed by practical experience in special education, maintaining objectivity throughout the analytical process was considered essential. This ensured that theoretical insights could be grounded in the data, progressing through successive levels of abstraction.

In the qualitative phase, we employed category-driven text interpretation, with particular attention to feedback loops and possibilities for intersubjective validation. Data analysis was conducted using the ATLAS.ti software. In addition, the fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) method was integrated into the study, enabling us to identify the conditions that facilitate parental involvement and contribute to the development of a partnership between families and schools.

In the first phase of the research, we conducted an online questionnaire survey (N=60) aimed at mapping the nature of family–school relationships, with particular focus on teachers’ attachment patterns and their views on social acceptance. The questionnaire was completed by special and mainstream education teachers, including special educational needs and development specialists, from various localities across Bihor County.

Following the quantitative phase, we conducted semi-structured interviews with special education teachers (N=12). All participants held qualifications in psychopedagogy or special education (as defined by the Romanian educational system) and had varying levels of professional experience. Three teachers had 3–5 years, five had 10–15 years, and four had 20–25 years of practice. The interviews were conducted during the 2021 and 2022 academic years and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All participants were women, with four aged between 24-29, six between 30 -39, and three between 40-55. The interview guide was structured around 11 thematic units covering the main dimensions of the research.

As a second qualitative data source, we conducted semi-structured interviews with parents of children with disabilities (N=11). The purposively selected participants were all from urban areas, and their children attended special education institutions within Bihor County. The families were raising children with severe disabilities, with diagnoses including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), intellectual disabilities, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

The third qualitative data source consisted of reflective journals completed by special education teachers (N=22). The invitation to participate was extended to special education teachers working in a Hungarian-language institution operating across three locations—Oradea, Valea lui Mihai, and Salonta. Participants were selected through expert sampling, and the journals were completed anonymously. The journaling process began in May 2023 and continued until the end of December. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary in all cases.

Based on the aims of the research, four main hypotheses were formulated, covering the following thematic areas: (1) *family coping and support*, (2) *supportive environment and inclusion*, (3) *social acceptance and attitudinal change*, and (4) *family–school relations in a minority context*. These hypotheses focus on the situation of families raising children with disabilities within the Hungarian minority in Romania.

Summary of Key Findings

The first aim of the research was *to examine how raising a child with disabilities affects families' psychosocial well-being, financial security, and social participation (H1)*. The findings confirm the first main hypothesis, namely that raising children with disabilities entails significant psychological and financial burdens, resulting in elevated levels of parental stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced social participation (Baldwin et al., 1994; Dan et al., 2023; Gardiner & Iarocci, 2012). Responding parents frequently reported that living with their child entails continuous strain due to caregiving responsibilities and navigating the educational system.

The qualitative research findings also revealed that most families raising children with disabilities initially struggle with a lack of information. They often lack adequate knowledge about available rehabilitation, educational, or social services, and are unclear about the expectations placed upon them at various levels of the system (Bass, 2004; Kálmán, 2004; Lickliter & Honeycutt, 2013). As a result, parents often experience uncertainty in decision-making and a sense of unpreparedness, which may lead to

periods of depression. The research also confirmed the assumption that state and civil support systems do not provide adequate financial and emotional assistance to help families cope in the long term. The qualitative data further revealed that raising a child with disabilities significantly affects the division of roles within the family. Mothers tend to live in symbiosis with the child, closely involved in caregiving and daily routines, while fathers typically struggle with societal expectations and the lack of broader social acceptance.

According to the responses, a supportive school environment and the emotional and professional support provided by teachers are essential for parents. Throughout the research, special educators repeatedly emphasised their responsibility to support, encourage, and guide parents. Despite efforts toward inclusive education, the Romanian education system continues to apply segregative practices, which disproportionately affect families belonging to the Hungarian minority community (Dan et al., 2023; OECD, 2007; Vasilescu, 2001).

In summary of the findings related to H1, the research confirms that families raising children with disabilities are

under significant strain, and that current support systems are insufficient to alleviate these burdens. The results also highlight that social acceptance, access to information, and the development of community connections are key factors in facilitating long-term coping strategies.

The second hypothesis examines *the conditions necessary for the success of inclusive education, with particular emphasis on family–school collaboration and community support* (H2). Our research focused on identifying the factors that influence the school integration of students with disabilities and the challenges experienced by teachers. We hypothesised that the success of inclusive education is closely linked to the strength of the partnership between schools and families, as well as the supportive nature of the community environment.

Based on our analysis, we found that active parental involvement and the establishment of a trust-based relationship with teachers facilitate the integration of students. Community support — including civil organisations and parent groups — also plays a key role in supporting teachers' efforts. Special educators, as key actors, contribute to children's development at the micro

level through daily interactions, and influence the implementation of educational policy objectives at the meso level through collaboration with parents and professional partners (Berszán, 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1977, 1999; Dan et al., 2023).

The results from the interviews and reflective journals also revealed that teachers often lack adequate professional support, while community networks may serve as significant resources for families. Particular emphasis was placed on the integration of financial, social, and psychological support, which can lead to more effective engagement. Examining the relationship between parental caregiving attitudes and the use of resources, it can be concluded that relational networks extending beyond the immediate family can strengthen social integration, particularly within Hungarian minority communities.

The third main hypothesis (*H3*) investigated *how moving beyond the medical model within the Romanian disability system contributes to increased social acceptance and more active school involvement of families raising children with disabilities*. It was posited that the strengthening of the

inclusive approach would foster school and community integration and positively influence social acceptance.

The empirical investigations – particularly the analysis of interviews and reflective journals – highlighted that teachers’ inclusive attitudes, the practice-oriented nature of teacher training programmes, and the active participation of parental communities are key factors in the success of inclusion programmes. According to the findings, the extent of parental involvement in school life is shaped by parental attitudes, parenting styles, and the support provided by the school (including human, financial, and counselling resources). A positive parental attitude, especially a warm and consistent parenting style, facilitates collaboration with the school, whereas parental stress, mistrust, and ineffective communication patterns serve as barriers to cooperation.

Contextual systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Tudge & Rosa, 2020) – based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model — provides a structured framework for interpreting the various levels of social acceptance. The dynamic interaction between family, school, and the broader sociocultural context shapes social acceptance, particularly

in relation to the enforcement of minority rights and linguistic-cultural expectations. Special educators play a significant role in supporting families, while also critically perceiving the shortcomings in community support and collaboration. Based on the research findings, the establishment of effective two-way communication and a trust-based family–school relationship is of paramount importance.

In summary, the third hypothesis (H3) and its sub-hypothesis (H3/a) were empirically supported. Moving beyond the medical model and reinforcing an inclusive approach enhances social acceptance and contributes to the integration of pupils with disabilities. The school, as a mediating space, plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes, particularly when professionally prepared educators and active parental communities collaborate to achieve inclusive goals.

In the fourth phase of the research, we explored the relationship between family–school interactions and inclusive educational practices within the context of the Hungarian minority community in Romania, with particular attention to the social inclusion of children with disabilities

and special educational needs. The main hypothesis (*H4*) posits that *within educational institutions of the Hungarian minority communities, families that are actively involved in school programmes tend to establish stronger partnerships with these institutions, and such partnerships contribute to a higher level of social acceptance for their children.* Our sub-hypothesis (*H4/a*) assumed that the active presence of families in school life fosters inclusion and reduces experiences of exclusion.

The analyses indicate that structural barriers arising from minority status — including linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic factors — significantly influence the development of family–school relationships. Parents participating in the research frequently reported experiencing dual exclusion: disadvantages stemming both from disability and minority status impeded their children's integration into educational institutions. Distrust towards formal institutional systems was particularly pronounced among Hungarian families living in deep poverty, who often classified special education institutions as part of the official structures of the social welfare sector.

The qualitative data collection (semi-structured interviews and reflective journals) revealed that the role of special educators extends beyond professional pedagogical duties: they often provide emotional and social support to families. However, this relational dynamic can be ambivalent, as frustrations stemming from feelings of helplessness on the part of parents may hinder balanced cooperation.

Active parental involvement is associated with demonstrable positive outcomes: according to parents, participation in inclusive programmes not only improved their children's academic progress but also enhanced their social acceptance. School partnerships provided families with opportunities to contribute directly to educational objectives, thereby strengthening their own roles within the community. The findings support the view that support mechanisms — whether advisory, professional, or financial — are most effective when they are personalised and aligned with everyday educational practices.

The research confirmed both the main hypothesis (H4) and its sub-hypothesis (H4/a). A partnership between families and schools, alongside community support and an inclusive educational ethos, plays a crucial role in the successful

social integration of children with special educational needs living within minority communities. This study aimed to empirically explore the parental roles in the education of pupils with disabilities within the Hungarian minority in Romania, as well as the contribution of family–school partnerships to social acceptance. The investigation is novel both in practical and theoretical terms, as it focuses on a minority community for which limited data have previously been available.

The significance of the research is evident on multiple levels. Firstly, it contributes to the expansion of scholarly discourse on parental support and school integration of pupils with disabilities. Secondly, it provides new empirical data on an underrepresented population — children with special educational needs and their families within the Hungarian minority in Romania. The findings highlight that strengthening parental involvement and community engagement is essential for achieving inclusive educational goals. The interdisciplinary approach of the research — situated at the intersection of special education, family sociology, and education policy — enabled a comprehensive examination of school inclusion.

The study also aligns with Miles' (2017) taxonomy of research gaps, identifying and addressing several areas of deficiency. In terms of *the evidence gap*, the thesis provides new empirical data on the implementation of inclusive educational practices within a minority context. Regarding *the knowledge gap*, it offers insights into the functioning of Hungarian-language educational institutions in Romania, which have been largely absent from the international literature. Additionally, the practical–knowledge conflict gap is evident, as discrepancies frequently emerge between teachers' theoretical understanding of inclusion and their actual practices.

From a methodological perspective, the novelty of the research lies in its combination of quantitative (questionnaire survey) and qualitative (interviews, reflective journals) data collection, as well as in the application of the fsQCA (fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis) technique, which enabled the interpretation of complex social configurations. In doing so, the thesis also addresses *the methodological gap* by offering a research approach capable of capturing multidimensional social realities.

Our findings indicate that active parental involvement has a positive impact not only on pupils' academic progress but also on parents' social integration and self-esteem. The study revealed that the dominance of the medical model in disability services constitutes a significant barrier to the implementation of an inclusive approach. The thesis also addresses *the theoretical gap* by promoting a social interpretation of disability, thereby contributing to the redefinition of inclusion within a minority context.

The findings of this research also fill *an empirical gap* by focusing on a community for which limited scientific and statistical data are available. Thus, the thesis simultaneously addresses both *the population gap and the data gap*. It highlights that while legislation formally guarantees the rights of pupils with special educational needs (SEN), the support mechanisms available are often opaque and insufficient.

The practical relevance of the study lies in its potential to inform teacher training, social policy, and educational planning. The research emphasises that inclusive education is not solely the responsibility of institutions but also depends on the active involvement of families and

communities. Based on the findings, it is recommended to develop practical strategies that promote parental engagement, community participation, and institutional openness alike.

The study, however, also presents certain methodological limitations. The sampling was not representative, and thus the findings cannot be generalised to the entire Hungarian community in Romania. The qualitative data primarily reflect subjective experiences rather than objective measurements. Furthermore, the research was spatially and temporally limited, focusing mainly on Bihor County and a specific time period. These factors must be considered when assessing the validity and applicability of the results. Nevertheless, the study offers a valuable theoretical and practical contribution to the fields of inclusive education and minority education policy.

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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (3)

- Dan, B. A., Kovács, K. E.:** Az inkluzív nevelés felerősítése önkéntességen keresztül.
In: Az oktatás időszzerű narratívumai. Szerk.: Hanák Zsuzsanna, Lengyelné Molnár Tünde, Révész-Kiszela Kinga, Simándi Szilvia, Szűts Zoltán, Szűts-Novák Rita, Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, Eger Debrecen, 114-126, 2025, (HERA évkönyvek, ISSN 2064-6755 ; 12.) ISBN: 9786155657160
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- Dan, B. A.:** Enhancing inclusive education by volunteering.
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In: Community Building and Social Innovation. Eds.: Julianna Boros, Tamás Kozma, Edina Márkus, CHERD : Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 12-25, 2021, (Régió és oktatás, ISSN 2060-2596 ; 13) ISBN: 9789633189436





Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

7. **Dan, B. A.:** The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationship in Romanian SEN Schools Among Hungarian Minorities.
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8. **Dan, B. A., Szűcs, T., Sávai-Átyin, R., Hrabéczy, A., Kovács, K. E., Ridzig, G., Kis, D., Bacskai, K., Pusztai, G.:** Narrowing the inclusion gap: teachers and parents around SEN students.
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12. **Dan, B. A., Puscas, C., Demény-Gavallér, C., Wagner, A., Oláh, A., Árkosi, J.:** A szenzorális színház szerepe a speciális nevelési területek színterén: egy szisztematikus szakirodalom-elemzés eredményei.
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18. **Dan, B. A.**: Progress and dropout risk in higher education.
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