

Thematic Article

The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationship in Romanian SEN Schools Among Hungarian Minorities

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Recommended citation:

Dan, B. A. (2023). The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationship in Romanian SEN Schools Among Hungarian Minorities. *Central European Journal of Educational Research*, 5(2), 52–59. <https://doi.org/10.37441/cejer/2023/5/2/13280>

Abstract

The research aims to investigate the status of special schools in Romania, with a focus on student-teacher relationships, attachment-based education, and the Hungarian minority. After a brief historical overview of special schools, the study covers two main directions. We start by outlining how special schools view the value of attachment-based education and sheltered workshop conditions. Then we will use quantitative methods to analyze the research findings of a pilot study with a sample of a total of 60. Our focus will be on children with special educational needs. We will emphasize the impact of segregated education processes and examine current practices and rights. Based on the findings of the study, educators who work in SEN schools have better knowledge of their students' attachment patterns. These educators are responsible for teaching students with SEN and building safe attachments plays a crucial role in the educational process. Special education setting places great importance on fostering secure attachment in students.

Keywords: Romania; special educational needs; attachment; minorities

Introduction

The education system in Romania lacks a clear definition of the role of children with disabilities, often relegating them to specialized facilities. As a policy principle, the right to inclusive placement has little impact on enrolment trends. The international conversation on inclusion has been present in the field of public education (Great Britain & Warnock, 1978), with a heated argument erupting in 2005 condemning the effectiveness of the practice (Norwich, 2021; Petó & Endre, 2008). In the field of education policy, there is a high level of agreement on the principles of inclusive education (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Booth, 2004; Hrabéczy et al., 2023), and the unsettling facts of practice can be found in any European country studied. Addressing challenges such as inadequate human resources, lack of inclusive teacher training, institutional growth, environmental circumstances, and locating special assistance facilitators is necessary. As special education centres represent a pillar of exclusion in Romania, the journey from segregation to inclusive education is filled with “stones of sorrow” (Kálmán, 2004). The medical labeling paradigm still reinforces negative stereotypes inherited from the communist era. Special education programs² often segregate students with disabilities into separate institutions, further dividing typical and atypical learners. Levels of inclusion have trickled down to us, but mainstream institutions have not adapted their courses to create inclusive organizational frameworks (OECD, 2007). Co-education is becoming more common but often lacks a personalized curriculum due to a performance-oriented

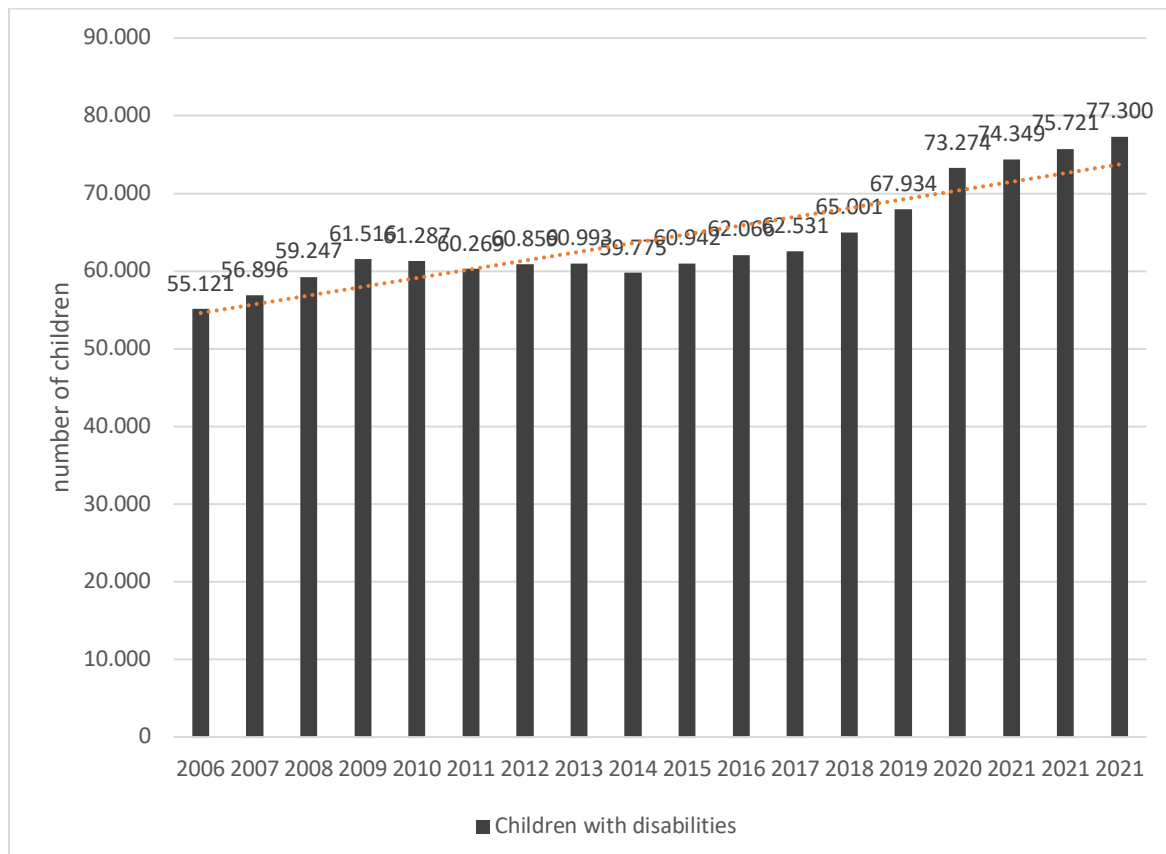
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² In Romania, special education is provided for mentally, physically, sensory, linguistic, socioemotional, and behaviorally impaired children. Children with disabilities receive special education based on their level of handicap/deficiency. In addition to being a subsystem of the Romanian educational system, the Special Education System is organized as follows: a different kind of student (children with special educational needs) and an alternate method of integrating, rehabilitating, and socializing children with special education needs. In addition to being a subsystem of the Romanian educational system, the Special Education System is organized as follows: a different group of students (children with special educational needs) and an alternate method of integrating, rehabilitating, and socializing children with special education needs.

educational approach. The debate about policies brings up a complex issue. Throughout history, special education institutions have developed parallel with mainstream school systems, but they have few similarities. Inclusive education proposes a new approach and organization that combines the two systems (OECD, 1999; 2018). Introducing the concept of special educational needs has brought significant changes to pedagogy. It implies comprehensive and continual assistance and growth, reforming education's function. Romania follows policies that are similar to those of OECD members. The goals of general education policies aim to promote equitable education and diversity among students. However, the implementation of the inclusivity goal may vary. This is because the child's primary caregiver and the educational professionals involved can decide whether the student should be enrolled in segregated or inclusive education.

By altering the learning environment, students with special needs have access to the educational opportunities provided by the public school system while considering their individual needs. In Romania, there is also a growing tendency towards the practical implementation of inclusive education, although financial challenges and the equitable distribution of public resources have not altered significantly due to centralised policy expectations. The proportion of students enrolled in special education is increasing, as is the number of children with special educational needs enrolled in inclusive education. From 55,121 children with disabilities in 2006, the number of children with disabilities in Romania will increase to 77,300 by 2021 (see Figure 1). The number of children with an official statement of disability or eligible for an individualised educational plan is increasing in all OECD countries (C. Cobb, 2014; D. Cobb & Couch, 2022; Thomas & Loxley, 2007).

Figure 1. Children with Disabilities in Romania



(Source: Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities, Romania; Ministerul Familiei, Tineretului si Egalitatii de Sanse, România. <http://andpdca.gov.ro/w/date-statistice-persoane-cu-dizabilitati/> Own ed.)

The 2018 PISA test introduced the concept of global competencies (OECD, 2018), which measure skills and competencies that illuminate a shift towards an attitude (see: perspective and worldview; sustainable development; collective well-being; understanding and acceptance; effective communication; local, global, and intercultural issues). The OECD education policy experts aim to create a “just, peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable world moving towards green development” (OECD, 2018, p. 11). The principles articulated above are viewed critically by many social researchers (D. Cobb & Couch, 2022; *The Social and Economic Rationale*

of *Inclusive Education*, 2022) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, as the inclusive approach, used in a globalised sense, is narrowly interpreted in the OECD's economic yardstick of the concept's changing meanings. The 2018 PISA tolerance assessment emphatically advocates a co-dynamic order of inclusion, and the title of the document (Preparing our youth for an inclusive and sustainable world: The OECD Global Competence Framework) makes it clear that the OECD is encouraging young people to be globally inclusive.

Psychological research values school attachment (Geddes, 2006; Neufeld & Maté, 2014; Richards & Bergin, 2005), while pedagogy strives for openness despite ethical concerns and doubts. Currently, there is a lack of research on attachment-based education in the field of special education. Special education is often considered supplementary to public education. While the pedagogical investigation of attachment theories is still neglected in domestic educational research, international findings highlight a significant relationship between the teacher-student relationship and students' attitudes towards school (Krstic, 2015; Richards & Bergin, 2005). Previous research has revealed that one of the most important prerequisites for positive school attendance is the establishment and maintenance of a trusting network of relationships between teacher and student (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Hungarian studies have also drawn the same conclusion (Szabó, 2013; Zsolnai, 2001, 2018), that one of the causes of school dysfunction is the breakdown of the teacher-student relationship and the increasingly widespread influence of attachment disorders. Pupils with special educational needs require personalized learning plans that take their needs into account for effective teaching based on their acquired knowledge (Gyarmathy, 2010; Kovács et al., 2022). The psychological dimension of attachment theories and the importance of their knowledge have also been transferred to pedagogy (Cozolino, 2014), and pupils with special needs require a safe school environment and protected workshop conditions for an optimal developmental path. Following the example of developing countries, a paradigm shift has taken place in the educational field in Romania, where teacher-centered education has been replaced by a learner-centred approach, with the transition to individual development plans taking place in 2009, as noted in the National Curriculum, but it should be noted that curricula and syllabuses are a field of constant change and debate. Educational reforms are enacted along political lines, but putting them into practice remains a problematic issue (Nicu, 2016). Since 1989, Romania's special education system has undergone significant changes due to the communist regime's policies that made it impossible to educate persons with disabilities on all levels.

As attachment patterns at home and at school play a significant role in the development of personality, we consider it important to compare them. While appropriate attachment patterns provide optimal environmental conditions, problematic, unstable attachment models can lead to anxiety disorders or deviant personalities. The traditional model of the family has a protective function, while today's network of relationships within the family is subject to different organizational conditions (Csák, 2023; Pusztai et al., 2021, 2023; Pusztai & Fényes, 2022). In single-parent families, parenting roles constantly shift and restructure, making it difficult to develop protective family attitudes (Ceglédi & Dabney-Fekete, 2023; Csók & Pusztai, 2022, 2023; Kovács et al., 2022). The study aims to explore how educators' attachment and security patterns influence the psychosocial development of children with disabilities (Powell, 2016).

Hypotheses

H1: Given that attachment-based education is fundamental in this field, we assume that experienced professionals have encountered it frequently. Due to the fact that these professionals also work as educators, it is assumed that many special education teachers, development teachers, nursery school teachers, and primary school teachers are more familiar with attachment-based education than special education teachers.

H2: We expect that a higher proportion of special institution staff are familiar with attachment-based education than those in mainstream institutions because sheltered workshops play such a significant role in working with children with special educational needs.

H3: A higher proportion of SEN pupils will be found in the class of students who are familiar with attachment-based education, as professionals working with children must understand this concept. Professionals who work with them must be familiar with this concept as well. We assume that special needs teachers have the highest proportion of pupils with special educational needs in their classes, and we expect a similar proportion in pre-primary and developmental classes, while special needs teachers have fewer SEN pupils in their classes.

Research Design and Methods

Conducting a study on special education involving Hungarian minority educators in Romania poses a challenge in determining the sample size. To address this, we utilized purposive sampling, a technique that selects participants with specific criteria for the study. As Cohen et al. (2007) suggest, typical individuals are chosen for this method. This method is particularly useful in special education research that involves pupils with disabilities and when the sample is easily accessible. Researchers who use quantitative methods aim to generalize their findings to a larger population. As a result, a sufficient sample size is important. Cohen et al. (2007) suggest that a sample size of around 30 respondents can allow for generalization of results in correlational studies. Our research was a pilot study with a sample of 60 educators using quantitative methods.

We used IBM SPSS 22.0 for statistical analysis. The variables used to run the statistical tests included knowledge of attachment-based parenting (0 - no, 1 - yes). We also used longevity in the profession (participants indicated on a scale of 1 to 7 how many years they had been in the profession, where 1 = 0-5 years, 2 = 6-10 years, 3 = 11-15 years, 4 = 16-20 years, 5 = 21-25 years, 6 = 26-30 years, and 7 = more than 30 years). For the variable 'specialisation', participants could choose their specialisation from the options: subject teacher, SEN teacher, primary school teacher, developmental teacher, and nursery teacher. For the type of institution, a distinction was made between mainstream and special educational institutions. We also used the percentage of participants with special educational needs in the class.

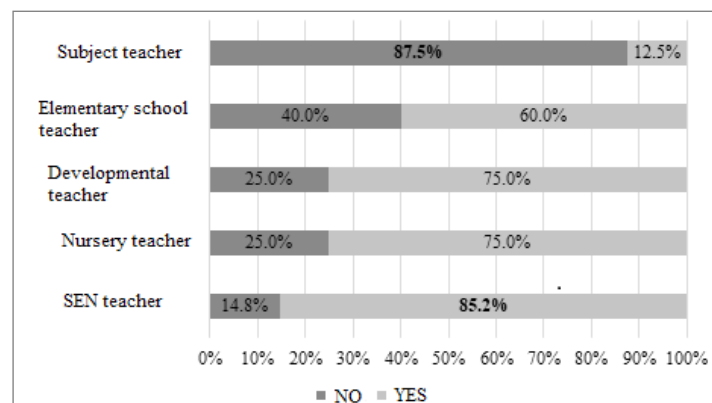
We surveyed 60 people, 57 of whom were women (95%) and 3 men (5%). The mean age of the total sample was 39.52 years (SD = 9.09). The distribution of participants by highest educational level was as follows: 5.1% with a high school diploma, 3.4% with a non-university-level tertiary diploma or university degree, 39% with a BA degree, 50.8% with an MA degree, and 1.7% with a PhD degree. The distribution by field of specialisation was as follows: 12 (20%) nursery teachers, 5 (8.3%) primary school teachers, 8 (13.3%) subject teachers, 27 (45%) special education teachers, and 8 (13.3%) developmental teachers. The majority of the sample (70%) had heard of attachment-based education, while 30% had not. Regarding the type of workplace, 70% work in special schools and 30% in mainstream schools. The average percentage of pupils with special educational needs per class was 67.35% (SD = 42.04).

Results

To test whether the number of years in the profession is associated with knowledge of attachment-based education, a Chi-square test was conducted. According to the results ($\chi^2(6) = 5.58, p = 0.47$), no significant correlation was found between years in the profession and knowledge of attachment-based education.

In the following, we investigated whether there is an association between field of study and knowledge of attachment-based education. According to the results ($\chi^2(4) = 16.04, p = 0.003$), we found a significant relationship. As shown in Figure 2, the vast majority of subject teachers (87.5%) are not familiar with attachment-based education. The proportion of teachers who had not heard of it was significantly lower among elementary school teachers (40%), and lowest among developmental and nursery teachers (25%) and special education teachers (14.8%). Based on the values of the adjoint standard residuals, those who were not familiar with attachment-based education were overrepresented among subject teachers, while the group familiar with this concept was overrepresented among special education teachers.

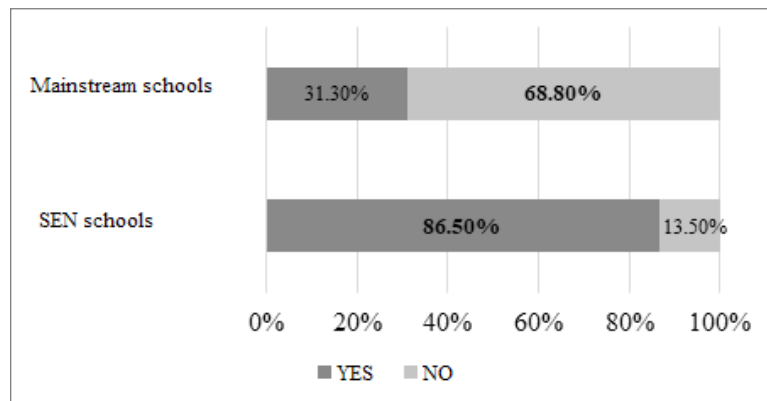
Figure 2. Correlation of Knowledge of Attachment-based Education with Teaching Degree Specializations (n = 60)



(Source: Own ed., values in bold have adjusted standard residuals greater than 2)

Chi-square statistics and cross-tabulation analysis were used to determine whether attachment-based education knowledge varies between professionals working in different types of institutions (special or majority). The findings revealed a significant relationship between the type of institution and knowledge of attachment-based education ($\chi^2(1) = 16.17, p 0.001$). 86.5% of employees in specialised institutions and 31.3% of employees in conventional institutions knew of attachment-based education. Figure 3 illustrates the results.

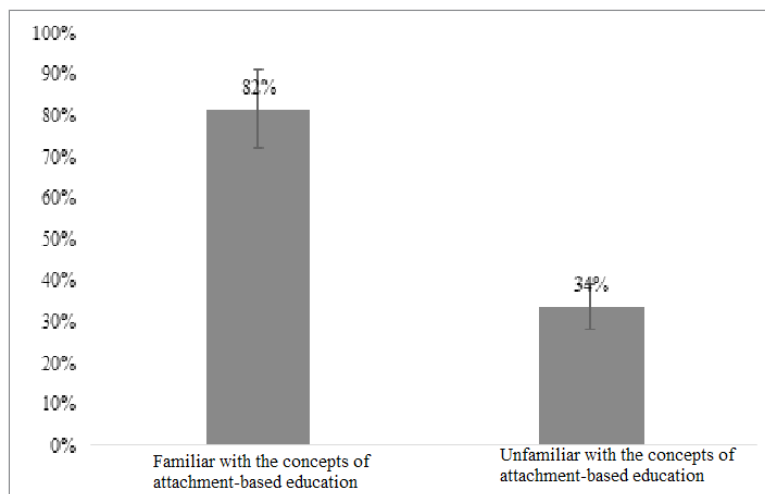
Figure 3. Being Familiar with Attachment-based Education Associated with the Type of School (n = 60)



(Source: Own ed., values in bold have adjusted standard residuals greater than 2)

To examine whether there is a difference in the proportion of pupils with special educational needs in the class of professionals who are familiar with attachment-based education and those who are not, an independent sample t-test was conducted. For the groups according to the knowledge of attachment-based education (knowing or not knowing), we compared the percentage of students with SNI in the class. The results showed that ($t(55) = -4.60, p < 0.001$), professionals who were familiar with the concept of attachment-based education had a significantly higher percentage of students with special educational needs in their class. The means and standard deviations obtained are shown in Figure 4. As can be seen, the average percentage of SEN pupils in the classes of those who are familiar with the concept of attachment-based education is 82%, compared to 34% in the classes of those who are not.

Figure 4. Percentage of Pupils with Special Educational Needs Pupils in classes of Educators who are Familiar and Unfamiliar with the Concepts of Attachment-based Education

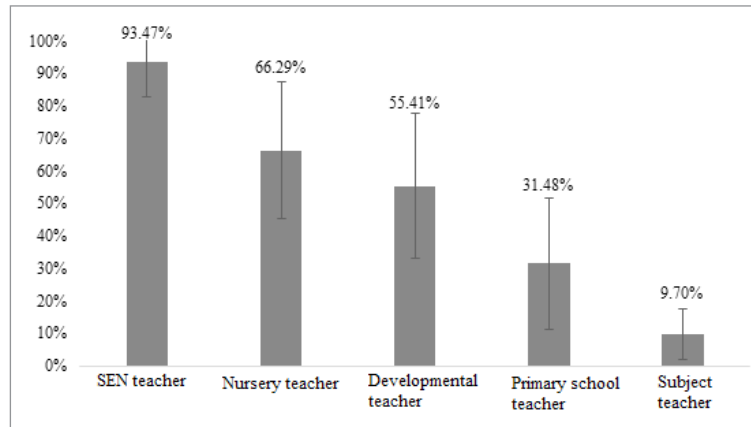


(Source: Own ed.)

Finally, we looked at whether there was a difference in the percentage of pupils with special educational needs in each teaching specialization area. To do this, we carried out a one-point analysis of variance. The results ($F(4) = 12.47, p < 0.001$) showed a significant difference. The results of the posthoc test showed significant differences between nursery teachers and special education teachers ($p = 0.003$), elementary school teachers and special education teachers ($p = 0.001$), subject teachers and special education teachers ($p < 0.001$),

and special education teachers and developmental teachers ($p = 0.05$). A trend level difference was found between special education teachers and developmental teachers ($p = 0.06$). See Figure 5 (mean and standard deviation). The proportion of students with special educational needs is highest in the classes of SEN teachers and lowest in those of subject teachers.

Figure 5. Percentage of Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Different Teaching Specialization Areas



(Source: Own ed.)

Discussion

After analyzing the responses from our pilot research, we found that teachers in helping professions (such as speech therapists, special education teachers, and development teachers) are familiar with attachment-based education. They consider it important to create conditions for sheltered workshops. The study results indicate that individuals working in specialized institutions, which are segregated structures, have a greater understanding of their students' attachment patterns. These educators take on the responsibility of instructing children with special educational needs. Building safe attachment is a crucial part of the educational process, and special education pays close attention to this (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Zsolnai, 2001). Classical theories and newer pedagogical methods and therapies are expanding the pedagogical approaches with an attachment focus (Cozolino, 2014). This study aims to emphasize the significance of the topic and encourage the integration of attachment theories into pedagogical practice. Improving interactions between students and educators positively impacts academic and social development. SEN schools are committed to providing a learning environment that promotes optimal development and positive learning support for all students, regardless of their performance, language, learning abilities, behavioral disposition, or disabilities (Baker, 2006; Gyarmathy, 2010). One of the most important components of SEN schools is the teacher's ability to provide individual support to each student. This individual support is based on a thorough understanding of each student's unique learning needs, and emotional and motivational states, as well as recognizing their own potential.

While the sample size of $N=60$ was relatively small, the analysis of the data is valuable since it provides insight into the educational/developmental processes. The studied data provide an accurate portrayal of the current situation in Romania, both in terms of the difficulties and challenges they confront and the challenges they are attempting to address (Dan et al., 2023). The problems are numerous, but teachers could be more effective in promoting the interests of parents and students in a more accepting society through acceptance and support.

Conclusions

In this study, we aim to highlight two distinct features of teacher-student relationship quality that define its emotional aspects. These features are attachment-based education and sheltered workshops, both based on established ideas in interpersonal psychology. These ideas emphasize the importance of mutually influencing behavior mechanisms, such as emotional safety and joint attention, in facilitating learning processes. By focusing on these two dimensions, we hope to provide a clear and simple understanding of the attachment

theory driven aspects of teacher-student relationships. Attachment-based education, as defined in this study, involves teachers who show empathy towards their students, are involved in each student's individual needs, and develop a close relationship with them. It also means that teachers are able to understand their students' current emotional state and respond appropriately. This approach emphasizes the teacher's ability to comprehend the students' intentions during interactions and their readiness to encourage and share emotions with students in order to help them achieve their developmental goals. In inclusive environments, where students have diverse needs and school dynamics are challenging, it is crucial to underline the role of emotional support that teachers provide to their students. By doing so, schools can create opportunities for true inclusion. Teachers should be aware of how their emotional support affects each student's life and make efforts to provide insider information to students accordingly.

Acknowledgments: We thank Johnathan Dabney for the English language editing.

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