



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS  
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

# **Attitudes Towards Intellectual Disabilities in Romania**

## **Looking at Linkages with Educational Policy and Integrated Youth Programming**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This study explores general attitudes about intellectual disabilities, inclusive educational practices and youth programming.

The main findings of this research suggest that attitudes about intellectual disabilities have greatly improved in the last 30 years. However, the educational system remains heavily segregated despite initiatives to include students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools. This can partly be explained by a lack of adapted services, teacher support and progress monitoring of individuals with special needs integrated into mainstream education.

Finally, this study explores *Special Olympics* and their ‘Unified Sport’ programming and philosophy, concluding with a ‘unified’ dance pilot program proposal in the Transylvanian city of Sibiu and potentially in partnership with the *Special School No.1*.

The information in this report can be useful for school administrators and teachers, policy-makers, nongovernmental organizations as well as employees of the *Ministry of Education*. Ultimately, the intended outcome of this report is to advocate for inclusive education and youth programming in Romania.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Glossary.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Methodology.....	7
Evolution of Legislation.....	8
The Communist Era.....	8
The Transitory Years .....	8
Romanian and the European Union.....	9
The Current Context.....	9
General Attitudes About Intellectual Disabilities.....	10
The Romanian Educational System.....	13
Mainstream Education.....	13
Special Schools.....	14
Challenges of Special Schools.....	14
Overrepresentation of Roma Students in Special Schools.....	15
Barriers to Inclusion.....	16
Lack of SEN Teacher Support and Adapted Services.....	17
Lack of Monitoring and Evaluation.....	18
Lack of Post-School Opportunities.....	19
Youth Programming.....	20
Special Olympics.....	20
Unified Sports.....	21
Current Challenges.....	22
Pilot Program Proposal.....	23
Why The City of Sibiu .....	23
The Example of the Special School No.1 .....	24

Benefits of Dance.....	25
How to Ensure its Success.....	26
Conclusion.....	26
Bibliography.....	28

## GLOSSARY

**Intellectual disability** is a term used when a person has certain limitations in intellectual functioning and everyday activities, including communication, social and self-care skills. These limitations can cause a child to develop and learn more slowly or differently than other children. Examples include conditions such as Down Syndrome and Fragile-X. Dyslexia and mental illnesses do not fall under the umbrella of intellectual disabilities.

**Special Education** is the practice of educating students with intellectual disabilities, through interventions that help these individuals achieve success not only in the school setting but in the community as well. In the case of Romania, most special education takes place in special schools, which are essentially learning centers with resources and staffed able to provide appropriate teaching methods for children with disabilities or other additional needs.

**Inclusive Education** follows the principle that all students, regardless of abilities, should have equal access to the educational system through individual accommodations (e.g. adapted curriculum, support teachers) in mainstream schools and the fostering of a tolerant and inclusive school culture in the classroom.

**Special Educational Needs (SEN) Teachers** work with students who need extra support in their learning process, for example students with intellectual disabilities. Their role includes preparing an individualized intervention program and continuously adapting it in

accordance with the SEN student's needs. They can work in mixed classes, special classes in mainstream schools or in special schools.<sup>1</sup>

**Youth Programs** in Romania seek to improve the lives of children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 25. They do so by meeting their basic physical, developmental, and social needs, helping them to build the competencies needed to become successful adults.<sup>2</sup>

**Special Olympics** is the world's largest sport organization for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. It was created in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver and now operates in all continents of the world, hosting more than 100,000 events a year.

**Unified Sports** is an initiative pioneered by Special Olympics, in which athletes with and without intellectual disabilities participate in a physical activity as teammates. As of today, there are about 1.2 million people worldwide who take part in Special Olympics Unified Sports.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Al Hout, R. (2017, June 26). How to Include Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Retrieved from <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/how-include-children-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities>

<sup>2</sup> Quinn, J. (1999) Where Need Meets Opportunity: Youth Development Programs for Early Teens. *The Future of Children*, Vol 9(2). [https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/09\\_02\\_08.pdf](https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/09_02_08.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Weir, C. (2016, June 8). Breaking Down Barriers: Special Olympics Reaches 1.2 Million Participants in Unified Sport. Retrieved from [https://www.specialolympics.org/Press/2016/Special\\_Olympics\\_Reaches\\_1\\_2\\_Million\\_Participants\\_in\\_Unified\\_Sports.aspx](https://www.specialolympics.org/Press/2016/Special_Olympics_Reaches_1_2_Million_Participants_in_Unified_Sports.aspx)

## INTRODUCTION

With education being not only a human right yet a prerequisite to the enjoyment of other rights – be they cultural, economic or political – most countries have tried to ensure its equal access for all citizens, regardless of race, gender or ability. This includes Romania, a Southeastern European country with a population of approximately 19.5 million inhabitants<sup>4</sup>, out of which over 200,000 live with some form of disability.<sup>5</sup> In theory, legislation exists to guarantee that they benefit from the same opportunities as the rest of the country. However, in practice, limited finances, untrained personnel, lack of infrastructure, and poor access to education in some areas has impeded the implementation of many inclusive laws and policies. <sup>6</sup>

The opportunities for people living with disabilities in Romania, especially intellectual, are almost non-existent in the private and public sector. Fortunately, nongovernmental organizations, especially those in the social field such as *Special*

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<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/romania-population/>

<sup>5</sup> Alexe, A. (2018, January 19). NGO: There Are Over 200,000 People With Disabilities in Romania; More Investment Needed in Social Services. *Business Review*. Retrieved from <http://www.business-review.eu/news/ngo-there-are-over-200000-people-with-disabilities-in-romania-more-investment-needed-in-social-services-156217>

<sup>6</sup> Ives, B., Runceanu, L., & Cheney, C. (2007). The History of Special education in Romania: Past, present, and future tensions. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 10, 5-12.

*Olympics Romania*, have been successful in reducing prejudice and empowering these individuals by focusing on what they can do instead of focusing on their limitations.

This report advocates for the inclusion of people living with intellectual disabilities in all spheres of society, with a special emphasis on the educational system. Based in Romania, it looks to examine legislation, public attitudes, youth programming and educational structures as to identify the long-standing barriers to inclusion.

### *Methodology*

This report is based on literature reviews, online surveying and interviews, either through the phone or in person, between the months of February and April, 2018.

Interviews were conducted with a total of 14 participants. Out of these, 2 were with coaches and 7 with participants (athletes and partners) of ‘Unified’ football programs in Galati (Moldavia) and Sibiu (Transylvania). The other 5 interviewees worked or were specialists in the fields of inclusive or mainstream education, inclusive youth programming or even policy-making. Interviews were voluntary and were conducted either in Romanian or in English, depending on the interviewee’s preference. Questions were tailored accordingly to interviewees’ positions and involvement in inclusive education or inclusive youth programming.

The online survey was designed to assess general attitudes on intellectual disabilities. The questions used were translated to Romanian from Special Olympics interview templates. The survey was curated with [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) and distributed on diverse social media platforms. Participation was both anonymous and voluntary.



In addition to the survey and the interviews, most of the data and background information was collected through extensive literature review of online sources such as academic reports, websites and articles.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF LEGISLATION**

### *The Communist Era*

In Romania, the first law in favour of inclusive education for people with disabilities was passed as early as 1924.<sup>7</sup> However, this official pledge for inclusion did not last long, as the communist era brought about many modifications to existing educational policies. Indeed, between 1948 and 1989, the prevailing ideology was marked by a desire to ‘equalize’ the educational system by ensuring that no child had special treatment, regardless of respective abilities. Moreover, the training for SEN support teachers was dissolved by 1977 and special schools were either closed or merged with orphanages.<sup>8</sup> The widespread institutionalization of children with disabilities, which

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<sup>7</sup> Ives, B., Runceanu, L., & Cheney, C. (2007). The history of special education in Romania: Past, present, and future tensions. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 10, 5-12.

<sup>8</sup> Philipps, J. (2010) *The Educational System in Romania: An Overview of How Communism Has Influenced Current Aspects and Programs* (Senior Thesis) Retrieved from Liberty University.

served to ‘hide away’ those who could not represent the ideal image of the Romanian citizen, was unfortunately a characteristic of this period and one that influenced public attitudes about disabilities in a negative way.

### *The Transitory Years*

After the 1989 Revolution, Romania had to work with a segregated system of services for people with intellectual disabilities, inherited from the former regime. Nonetheless, there was a great general desire for reform and for Romania to enter the new neoliberal era. The main role of education was slowly starting to focus on training for the market economy and its demands.<sup>9</sup> As a result, a new Constitution was adopted in 1991.

International agreements, such as the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990), the *Jomtien Statement on Education for All* (1990), the *Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for People with Disabilities* (1993) or the *Salamanca Convention* (1994) were ratified at a key moment of change as to mark the beginning of an era focused on tolerance and respect for diversity.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, they preceded one of the most important laws pertaining to education, which was created and implemented in 1995. Inclusive in its approach, it guaranteed equal rights to education for all, regardless of gender, race, religious or political affiliation but it also articulated three different educational structures: special schools, ordinary schools and special classes in ordinary schools. Unfortunately, the terminology pertaining to special education was not sufficiently clear and the real methodological application of this legislation was postponed to the year 2000.<sup>11</sup>

### *Romania and the European Union*

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<sup>9</sup> Calin, M. (2001). Moral Values, Moral Development and Education. *Values and Education in Romania Today* (pp. 97-120). San Antonio, CRVP.

<sup>10</sup> Ghergut, A. (2011) Education of Children with Special Needs in Romania; Attitudes and Experiences. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 12(2011) 595–599. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.02.073

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

When the prospect of joining the European Union (EU) appeared, inclusive education became a policy aim and priority. Educational reform accelerated and denying equal access to education was criminalized in 2002.<sup>12</sup> Seven years later, the *UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* was ratified. Unfortunately, the confusion related to terminology of inclusive education persisted, making collaboration between policymakers and government bodies onerous. Likewise, in spite of a real desire to meet EU standards, no secondary legislation was properly developed to integrate international principles in the national legal framework.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Current Context*

As of today, Romania remains one of the poorest countries per capita in the EU and spends among the least on social welfare. As a way to remedy the ongoing marginalization of the disabled population, the Romanian Government adopted a new *National Strategy* in 2016 called, *A Society without Barriers for People with Disabilities 2016-2020* and a corresponding *National Action Plan*<sup>14</sup>. This National Strategy focuses on various issues such as the increased school dropout rate or non-registration rate of children with disabilities. It also looks at long-term objectives, such as the goal to transform special schools in resource centres for integration.

According to Elena Tudose<sup>15</sup>, Policy Consultant at the *Institute of Public Policy (IPP)*, there are a few obstacles to the implementation of this National Strategy and action plan. The two main problems are first, the vagueness of the stated objectives and secondly, the conflicting data available, resulting in complications in analysing relevant trends. For instance, according to the data collected from the *County School Inspectorates*

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<sup>12</sup> Ives, B., Runceanu, L., & Cheney, C. (2007). The History of Special education in Romania: Past, present, and future tensions. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 10, 5-12.

<sup>13</sup> European Parliament. (2013). *Country Report on Romania for the Study on Member States' Policies for Children with Disabilities*. Brussels: Policy Department C – Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs.

<sup>14</sup> Tudose, E. (2017). European Semester 2016/2017 Country Fiche On Disability. *Academic Network of European Disability Experts*. Retrieved from <http://www.disability-europe.net/country/romania>

<sup>15</sup> E. Tudose. Personal Communication. February 9, 2018.

in 2015, there were 13,844 children with disabilities attending mainstream schools (34.5% of the total number of disabled children) and 24,974 children with disabilities enrolled in special educational programming (62.3%). However, data provided by the *National Authority for Child Protection* points to a different situation for the same period of time, with the former being equal to 59.8% and the latter to 37.4%, indicating a discrepancy in data collected.<sup>16</sup>

At this time, we can appreciate the legislative efforts to frame and support people with disabilities in their quest for equal educational and employment opportunities. However, as mentioned above, there are still numerous challenges in the proper implementation of sustainable policies for inclusion. The terminology used in different pieces of legislation is confusing, contradictory and sometimes erroneous. The clear and detailed definition of the concept of ‘inclusive education’ seems to be an immediate priority.

## **GENERAL ATTITUDES ABOUT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

In terms of general attitudes about inclusive practices, Romania has come a long way given its history of people with disabilities being shunned away from public view.

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<sup>16</sup> Tudose, E. (2017). European Semester 2016/2017 Country Fiche On Disability. *Academic Network of European Disability Experts*. Retrieved from <http://www.disability-europe.net/country/romania>

The economic and social transition in Romania, following the 1989 Revolution, had mixed implications for the schooling of children with special needs but it did bring about more open attitudes around inclusive education.<sup>17</sup>

A study by Gliga and Popa (2010)<sup>18</sup> measured parental attitudes on intellectual disability by interviewing parents of children with and without disabilities from Bucharest as well as from three counties from the South of Romania – Constanta, Dambovita and Dolj. The study evaluated knowledge of terminology and legislation relevant to disability rights, attitudes towards people with disabilities and opinions about inclusive primary education. Participants could give the following answers to the topics mentioned above: attachment, acceptance, indifference or rejection. In terms of feelings towards people with disabilities, parents of disabled children chose attachment and acceptance whereas those of non-disabled children selected acceptance or indifference. In addition, the majority of participants were in favour of inclusive education and the integration of people with disabilities into society overall and specifically in the work place, although they agreed with the claim that intellectual and physical disabilities were limiting factors for integration.<sup>19</sup>

This study, based on questionnaires, is testament of a growing acceptance, and even of a desire for more inclusive practices, with the majority of participants believing that discrimination can and should be eliminated. While a very interesting overview, this study has, like most, some limitations. First of all, disabilities of all kinds were considered, without any differentiation. Because people don't necessarily feel the same way about visual impairment as they do about Down Syndrome, these results can be

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<sup>17</sup> Ghergut, A. (2011). Education of Children with Special Needs in Romania; Attitudes and Experiences. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 12(2011) pp. 595–599. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.02.073

<sup>18</sup> Gliga, F. & Popa, M. (2010). In Romania, parents of children with and without disabilities are in favor of inclusive education. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2(2) pp. 4468-4474. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.03.713>

<sup>19</sup> Gliga, F. & Popa, M. (2010). In Romania, parents of children with and without disabilities are in favor of inclusive education. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2(2) pp. 4468-4474. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.03.713>

misleading. Secondly, this study focused solely on primary school education. Finally, as mentioned, only a few counties were considered, excluding all of Western and Northern Romania.

To understand further this topic of attitudes and beliefs around individuals living with disabilities within Romania, I created an online survey to assess attitudes specifically about intellectual disabilities. I translated questions from *Special Olympics* templates and shared the survey on various social media platforms. Respondents to the survey came from all over Romania, totalling 100 in number, where 66% were female and 34% were male, with the majority belonging to the age group 18 – 34 years old (although 7% of respondents were minors and 2% were above 66 years of age).

Participants were asked to rank their level of agreement with different statements. The findings were as follow:

- **Statement 1:** Students with intellectual disabilities should be schooled in *special schools*, separated from students without disabilities.
  - 49% of respondents disagreed
  - 39% of respondents agreed
  - 12% were neutral to this statement
- **Statement 2:** Students with intellectual disabilities should be schooled in *special classrooms*, separated from students without disabilities.
  - 53% of respondents disagreed
  - 33% of respondents agreed
  - 14% were neutral to this statement
- **Statement 3:** Learning in an environment with students with and without intellectual disabilities will benefit students without disabilities.
  - 25% of respondents disagreed
  - 55% of respondents agreed
  - 20% were neutral to this statement
- **Statement 4:** People with intellectual disabilities are capable of doing sport in a team with people without disabilities.

- 10% of respondents disagreed
- 82% of respondents agreed
- 8% were neutral to this statement

Finally, to the question “Would you agree to have a person with an intellectual disability as a teammate in a sports team?”, 81% of the respondents said ‘yes’, 6% responded with ‘no’ and 13% stated that they were ‘not sure’. However, it is important to note that out of the 100 responses, 70% had had previous contact with a person with an intellectual disability, confirming perhaps Tak-fai Lau & Cheung’s hypothesis (1999) that attitude change may be influenced by contact with people with intellectual disabilities.<sup>20</sup>

Realizing the shortcomings of my own study (there were, after all, only 100 responses), I decided to seek the opinions of expert in fields relevant to inclusive education and youth programming. Emilia Ispas, Program Director at *Special Olympics Romania*, believes that general attitudes have improved for the better and this can partially be explained by a greater representation on media outlets as well as an increased diversity of campaigns for disability rights on social media.<sup>21</sup> Gabriela Dima, a passionate teacher for the *Teach for Romania* program, who has also had experience working for the *National Authority for People with Disabilities*, wasn’t as optimistic and held a differing perspective. While she believes the new generation will bring about positive change, especially in regards to education and parenting styles, the generalized elitist mind-set and belief that these students ‘cannot be helped’ must be overcome for attitudes about intellectual disability to truly improve.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tak-Fai Lau, J. & Cheung, C.K. (1999) Discriminatory attitudes to people with intellectual disability or mental health difficulty. *International Social Work*, 2(4), pp. 431-444. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002087289904200405>

<sup>21</sup> E. Ispas, Personal Communication, April 18, 2018

<sup>22</sup> G. Dima, Personal Communication, March 23, 2018.

## THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Although public attitudes have improved, very few students with intellectual disabilities have been successfully integrated into mainstream schools, out of which, virtually none are living with severe disabilities. In addition, documents from governmental and nongovernmental sources tend to not make the distinction between the physical integration of students with disabilities into the mainstream educational system and their actual inclusion in activities.<sup>23</sup> Generally speaking, the educational system remains heavily segregated, with mainstream schools on one side and special schools on the other.

### *Mainstream Education*

When it comes to mainstream education, the Romanian system is somewhat characterized by a great respect for high achievement and individual success. The relatively inflexible educational structure is a product of the communist period, as are the performance-based admissions tests and the families' deep involvement in the child's education. This model is based on selection and separation and follows the principle that the child should adapt to the school instead of the other way around. However, this elitist mindset, coupled with a tradition of rigid curricula and pedagogy, does not bode well in the favour of fostering inclusion.<sup>24</sup> Schools may be reluctant to welcome students with special needs, believing that inclusion can only be reached at the expense of academic

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<sup>23</sup> Ives, B., Runceanu, L., & Cheney, C. (2007). The history of special education in Romania: Past, present, and future tensions. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 10, 5-12.

<sup>24</sup> Ghergut, A. (2011). Education of Children with Special Needs in Romania; Attitudes and Experiences. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 12(2011) pp. 595–599. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.02.073



performance. Therefore, accepting students with a weaker academic potential will taint the reputation of their institution.

### *Special Schools*

In special schools, almost all conditions are different, despite it being an integral part of the national education system, coordinated by the *Ministry of Education*. The curricula is adapted, the class size and teaching time is reduced and in general, the staff is paid about 15% higher than in mainstream schools.<sup>25</sup> As of today, the legislative framework put in place for the education of pupils with special needs follows two main directions. First most, it focuses on the constant evaluation and re-organization of special schools' goals and objectives, seeking to make it as efficient as possible. Secondly, in some cases, it pushes for inclusive education through the implementation of education support services and the slow transformation of special schools into open schools for all children in the community.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Challenges of Special Schools*

Rodica Fagetan, director of the *Special School No. 1* of Sibiu has shared with me some of the challenges special schools may face.<sup>27</sup> Beyond the lack of adapted infrastructure, special schools usually take on many roles at the same time, as students tend to have different types of disabilities, or in some cases, no disability but severe behavioural problems or learning difficulties. Adapting to a diversity of needs can indeed be challenging for professionals working in the special educational system.

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<sup>25</sup> Alexiu, T. M., Baci, E. L., Sandvin, J.T. & Birceanu, A. G. (2016) SPECIAL OR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ROMANIA? *European Review of Applied Sociology*, 9(13). DOI:10.1515/ERAS-2016-0007

<sup>26</sup> OECD. (2006) Education Policies for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia. Paris: OECD Publishing.

<sup>27</sup> R. Fagetan, Personal Communication, April 12, 2018.

Finally, cooperating with parents is not always easy. Ultimately, parents have the legal right to choose in what system their child will be enrolled, even if professionals of the educational system do not agree with that decision. According to Rodica Fagetan<sup>28</sup>, there have been a number of cases in which parents have decided to enrol their child in mainstream schools, despite being advised otherwise by representatives of the *County Commission for Child Protection*. In many cases, discouraged by the lack of progress of their child, they return to the special educational system in hope for improvement. This ‘ping-pong’ effect of changing institutions can be accompanied by emotional problems for students with intellectual disabilities, along with an accumulated academic delay that teachers in special schools have to accommodate.

In fact, out of the 105 employees of the *Special School No. 1*, 15 work in mainstream schools. As such, Rodica Fagetan has been able to make a comparison between the special educational system and the mainstream one in terms of the progress and wellbeing of student with disabilities. As it turns out, she states that students integrated in the mainstream system do not improve as much as is expected. According to her, special schools are often the best alternative in the current Romanian context as they provide a safe environment for children with disabilities, where educational services actually correspond to development needs.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Overrepresentation of Roma Students in Romania*

Generally speaking, in Romania, students from the Roma ethnicity are characterized by poor school enrolment, high dropout rates, and limited participation in higher education. More specifically, they are disproportionately overrepresented in the special school system, with estimates suggesting that they account for 70% of the pupils. This number is astounding considering they represent well under 10% of the total

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> R. Fagetan, Personal Communication, April 12, 2018.

population of the country.<sup>30</sup> The causes for this overrepresentation are multiple, complex and sometimes, intertwined.

A first explanation is the prevailing negative and discriminatory attitudes that have slowly engendered a process of self-isolation of the Roma community, who may feel that the mainstream educational system does not correspond to their needs and way of life. As a result, parents may be unsupportive of their children's search for education, making it a struggle for both students and teachers. On the other hand, Romanian teachers' lack of understanding of Roma culture and lifestyle contributes to placing children's school failure on the families. Because of this, some of these children do not succeed in the traditional system and thus, special schools appear as a worthwhile alternative.<sup>31</sup>

Misdiagnosis is also common. Sometimes, it is due to cultural differences that may invalidate assessment of abilities. Other times, these pupils are considered to have an intellectual disability because of potential behavioural problems or learning difficulties. This is notably due to the lack of standardized definition of 'intellectual disability' but can also be explained by the fact that these students often come from larger families where everyday hardships may prevent them from getting the intellectual stimulation they may need. As a result, they do not thrive in the elitist mainstream system and their only option is to enrol in special schools.<sup>32</sup>

However, poverty remains the strongest factor leading to marginalization in education and statistically speaking, Roma families tend to be more vulnerable to it. Special schools offer free services that mainstream schools do not, such as hot meals and

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<sup>30</sup> Ives, B., Runceanu, L., & Obenchain, K. M. (2012). Ethnic Attitudes of Hungarian Students in Romania. *Journal of the American Educational Studies Association*, 48, 331-346. DOI: 10.1080/00131946.2012.694826

<sup>31</sup> Butuca, A. (2001). Minorities, Culture and Education. *Values and Education in Romania Today* (pp. 97-120). San Antonio, CRVP.

<sup>32</sup> Walker, G. (2008). Overrepresented Minorities in Special Education in the United States and Romania: comparison between African-American and Roma populations in disability studies. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 3(4). DOI: 10.2304/rcie.2008.3.4.394

accommodation, which can make a real difference in times of profound financial distress.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the numbers, to this day, no national institution has made the statistical connection between special education system and the high rate of enrolled students from the Roma ethnicity.<sup>34</sup> While the government has made the explicit commitment to improve the socio-economic status of this community, negative attitudes are still strong and the Roma remain marginalized with respect to educational, political and economic opportunities.

## **BARRIERS TO INCLUSION**

There have indeed been many efforts to integrate students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools but due to a lack of adapted services and preparation, these have not always been successful. In 2001, approximately 18,000 children with disabilities from special schools were transferred into mainstream schools.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, parents and teachers heavily criticized this decision because the conditions for proper inclusion were not met (adapted curriculum, training of teachers and a supportive attitude in schools). Reduced national incomes have also hindered moves

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<sup>33</sup> Walker, G. (2008). Overrepresented Minorities in Special Education in the United States and Romania: comparison between African-American and Roma populations in disability studies. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 3(4). DOI: 10.2304/rcie.2008.3.4.394

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ghergut, A. (2011). Education of Children with Special Needs in Romania; Attitudes and Experiences. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 12(2011) pp. 595–599. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.02.073

towards inclusion, given the high costs of teacher training, support staff and of adapted buildings.<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that no school has managed to implement inclusive approaches. *Schools No. 18* and *No. 22* of Timisoara are just some examples of successful inclusive practices<sup>37</sup>, with many other institutions working towards creating a more tolerant and welcoming environment where students with all abilities can thrive. However, for this to become the norm, some remaining obstacles need to be overcome at the macro level.

#### *Lack of Support for Special Educational Needs (SEN) Teachers and Adapted Services*

The lack of support for teachers, whether in mainstream schools or of SEN teachers accompanying students with special needs, does not facilitate and foster inclusion. SEN teachers are absolutely crucial in empowering and supporting students with intellectual disabilities but in many cases, they operate in a structure that does not allow them to spend more than two hours a week with each student.<sup>38</sup> This is a very short amount of time, considering the many tasks they have, which range from identifying the needs for support in the classroom to designing a personalized intervention program for the student and re-adapting it when needed.<sup>39</sup> In fact, they tend to undertake an overwhelming array of responsibilities that could be delegated to other specialists in special education. SEN teachers often have formal training in psychology, pedagogy, special psycho-pedagogy, children's psychology or developmental psychology<sup>40</sup> but there

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<sup>36</sup> Ghergut, A. (2011). Education of Children with Special Needs in Romania; Attitudes and Experiences. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 12(2011) pp. 595–599. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.02.073

<sup>37</sup> UNESCO. (2007) Regional Preparatory Workshop on Inclusive Education Eastern and South Eastern Europe. Geneva: International Bureau of Education

<sup>38</sup> R. Fagetan. Personal Communication, April 12, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> OECD. (2006) Education Policies for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia. Paris: OECD Publishing.

<sup>40</sup> OECD. (2006) Education Policies for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia. Paris: OECD Publishing.

is a notable lack of competition in the field, which does not provide the incentive for improvement. The pre-service training is quite out-dated and does not sufficiently include modern teaching procedures, class management methods or conflict resolution techniques.<sup>41</sup>

Teachers of integrated classes in mainstream schools also face diverse challenges. While they may often oppose inclusion of the classroom, the causes are not always discriminatory. Instead, they can be explained by a lack of adapted support services, making inclusion difficult. For instance, in a class of 30 pupils, a teacher does not necessarily have the time to adapt learning methods for a single pupil without slowing down the general learning process of all students. Most teachers are overworked and underpaid and as a result, they may resort to simply keeping the student with special needs occupied and comfortable instead of intellectually stimulated. The *Ministry of Education and Research* has been implementing training for teachers from mainstream schools that have integrated pupils with disabilities, yet resources and time remain scarce for these teachers to really become facilitators of inclusion.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Lack of Monitoring and Evaluation*

Furthermore, the data collection of students with special needs in different types of education remains problematic. There is insufficient information on how well these students adapt and whether their needs are met in mainstream education. Overall, the voices of disabled students are still not sufficiently heard and taken into account.<sup>43</sup> The official sources of information at the national level are the *National Authority for Persons with Disabilities*, *National Authority for Child Protection*, *National Institute of Statistics*, *Ministry of Education and Research*. All of these government bodies collect information

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Ghergut, A. (2011). Education of Children with Special Needs in Romania; Attitudes and Experiences. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 12(2011) pp. 595–599. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.02.073

at different times of the year and use different criteria, thus resulting in significant variance and inconsistencies.<sup>44</sup>

A partnership between ministries and institutions is necessary to ensure a correct and up-to-date assessment of the academic situation of people with intellectual disabilities, which should incorporate detailed analysis on subgroups such as ethnic minorities. In addition, evaluation and monitoring tools should be standardized for better consistency. This is crucial in the design and implementation of inclusive interventions in schools both at the regional and country level as to avoid exclusion and foster learning for all.<sup>45</sup>

### *Lack of Post-School Opportunities*

An inclusive educational system works well for an inclusive society but does it have the same effect on a segregated one? No matter how many students with intellectual disabilities are successfully integrated into the mainstream system, if they do not have equal access to employment or housing opportunities after graduation, inclusive initiatives will have been implemented in vain.

For students graduating from special schools, the prospect of marginalization is even more omnipresent because diplomas from special schools are not considered as valuable as those from mainstream schools.<sup>46</sup> In the case of severe disabilities, post-school occupation is especially problematic. Rodica Fagetan has told me that there have been instances when parents have asked her if their child could repeat a grade instead of

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<sup>44</sup> Tudose, E. (2017). European Semester 2016/2017 Country Fiche On Disability. *Academic Network of European Disability Experts*. Retrieved from <http://www.disability-europe.net/country/romania>

<sup>45</sup> United Nations Development Programs. (2017). BUILDING MORE INCLUSIVE, SUSTAINABLE AND PROSPEROUS SOCIETIES IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA. UNDP: Regional Advocacy Paper.

<sup>46</sup> Alexiu, T. M., Baci, E. L., Sandvin, J.T. & Birneanu, A. G. (2016) SPECIAL OR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ROMANIA? *European Review of Applied Sociology*, 9(13). DOI:10.1515/ERAS-2016-0007

graduate, due to fear and uncertainty about what the future held for them.<sup>47</sup> For these people to become as autonomous as possible, socio-professional centers should be created, and opportunities for life-long learning at different levels of education should be ensured.

## **YOUTH PROGRAMMING**

Beyond the educational system, solutions for inclusion can also be created from an extracurricular perspective. Nongovernmental organizations tend to take on this role, as their flexible structure and smaller size can favour interaction and a democratic functioning.

### *Special Olympics*

*Special Olympics Romania* has been particularly active in combatting ongoing prejudice through inclusive initiatives. Regular trainings and events are organized all over the country and national competitions take place annually, where athletes can participate in a wide array of different sports. Of course, the Romanian delegation also participates in the World Games, hosted every other year. What sets this organization apart is that it is not focused on performance but rather on participation and on having fun. Since its creation in 2003, *Special Olympics Romania* has served over 16,000 people with intellectual disabilities – most of them coming from Bucharest, Prahova, Constanta, Galati and Cluj county.<sup>48</sup>

The use of sport as an instrument of change also serves to promote a healthy way of living. Over 40% of Romanian children don't engage in any sports, and only 14% participate in sports in addition to the physical education classes held at school.<sup>49</sup> Beyond

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<sup>47</sup> R. Fagetan. Personal Communication. April 12, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Brecklinghaus, S. (2006). Evaluation of the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot-Project: Findings from Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. *Special Olympics International*. Retrieved from <https://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/healthy-athletes/Research-Studies/EvalOfUnifiedSportsFootballPilotProject.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Marica, I. (2015, June 17). Over 40% of Romanian children don't do any sports. *Romania Insider*. Retrieved from <https://www.romania-insider.com/over-40-of-romanian-children-dont-do-any-sports/>



the physiological benefits (improved cardiovascular endurance, coordination and strength), there are major psychological gains that come with practicing a physical activity. These include a greater self-esteem, reduced stress and increased concentration.

When it comes to children with intellectual disabilities, the positive effects of sport are the same, if not greater. For example, Autism Spectrum Disorder can affect motor skills in important ways, significantly reducing agility, balance, strength and dexterity.<sup>50</sup> Exercise, on the other hand, can help reverse this while simultaneously improve mood and wellbeing. Providing children with disability the opportunity to participate in sports, even if these are modified and adapted, can still bring about many benefits.

Yet, it seems that children with intellectual disabilities partake less in sport than their able bodied counterparts. In fact, children with disabilities are more likely than other children to be sedentary, placing them at higher risk of obesity and associated health conditions. This inactivity can imply different repercussions, both physical (osteoporosis, impaired circulation) and psychosocial (low self-esteem and greater dependence on others for everyday tasks).<sup>51</sup> The most frequently identified barriers to the active participation of children with disabilities in physical recreation are the child's functional limitations, fear of rejection, high costs of specialized equipment, and lack of nearby facilities or programs.<sup>52</sup> *Special Olympics Romania* has sought to remedy this by making athletic activities adaptable and accessible, through strategic partnerships with local schools. Simultaneously they are empowering athletes as potential agents of change by supporting them to become leaders in their communities.

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<sup>50</sup> Castaneda, R. (2017, May 1). How Playing Sports Can Help Special Needs Kids On and Off the Field. *US News & World Reports*. Retrieved from <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/family/articles/2017-05-01/how-playing-sports-can-help-special-needs-kids-on-and-off-the-field>

<sup>51</sup> Murphy, N. A. & Carbone, P. S. (2008). Promoting the Participation of Children With Disabilities in Sports, Recreation, and Physical Activities. *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 121(5). doi:10.1542/peds.2008-0566

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

### *Unified Sports*

Unified Sports is an initiative pioneered by *Special Olympics*, in which athletes with and without intellectual disabilities participate in a physical activity as teammates. This program seeks to promote the development of sport skills, teamwork and sportsmanship for all players, in addition to fostering social acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities among their able bodied peers by allowing them to witness first-hand their similarities on and off the playing field.<sup>53</sup> Creating opportunities for players with and without intellectual disabilities (called athletes and partners, respectively) to train regularly, compete alongside one another and contribute to shared team goals, is seen as a way to break down the existing barriers for inclusion.

### *Current Challenges*

According to Emilia Ispas, the challenges this organization faces are mostly financial. Indeed, the modifications of the *Fiscal Code* have made sponsors and donations to NGOs harder to come by. That being said, Romanian citizens have the opportunity to redirect 2% of their taxes to an organization of their choice (3.5% if the said-organization provides social services, which isn't the case for *Special Olympics Romania*).<sup>54</sup> This, along with sponsorship, has been an important source of funding although both have been quite sporadic in the last year. When it comes to national competitions, however, the *County Commission* and *Town Halls* of the city where the event takes place ensure the costs of local transport, meals and accommodations of those who have travelled.<sup>55</sup>

When it comes to the 'Unified Sport' program, Emilia Ispas says that in the early days of the program, convincing coaches to come to Bucharest for training and

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<sup>53</sup> Harada, C. M., Siperstein, G. N., Parker, R. C. & Lenox, D. (2011). Promoting social inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities through sport: Special Olympics International, global sport initiatives and strategies. *Sport in Society*, 14(9). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2011.614770>

<sup>54</sup> Mihai, V. (2018, February 2). Un copil puțin mai trist iarna asta. Statul veghează, stați fără nicio bază! *Republica*. Retrieved from <https://republica.ro/un-copil-putin-mai-trist-iarna-asta-statul-vegheaza-stati-fara-nicio-baza>

<sup>55</sup> E. Ispas. Personal Communication. April 14, 2018.

encouraging them to find local partners with whom they could implement the program with, were the main challenges. In addition to this, there was a need to explain that the emphasis was on participating and not necessarily winning.<sup>56</sup>

The participants of the unified programs that I interviewed mostly related their experience in positive terms. However, the identified areas of improvement were the irregularity of trainings and the need for more players. As for the coaches (Cornel Sava from Galati and Mihai Ionut Mihaita from Sibiu), challenges identified included: funding (especially for travelling to competitions), available infrastructure (i.e. football fields) and accommodating conflicting schedules of students from different schools.<sup>57</sup> Overall, the challenges seem to be outweighed by the successes, proving once more that *Special Olympics Romania's* initiatives are pivotal in empowering athletes and reducing prejudice.

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<sup>56</sup> E. Ispas. Personal Communication. April 14, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> C. Sava. & Mihaita, I. M. Personal Communication. March & April 2018.

## **‘UNIFIED SPORTS’ PILOT PROGRAM PROPOSAL**

After extensive research on the state of inclusive education in Romania, as well as the ‘Unified Sports’ initiatives implemented by *Special Olympics Romania*, this report seeks to propose another unified initiative, this time dance-based and potentially in partnership with the *Special School No. 1* of Sibiu.

### *Why the city of Sibiu*

Using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory, in comparison with the rest of Romania, Transylvania scores lower on ‘power distance’, ‘masculinity’ and ‘uncertainty avoidance’ and higher in ‘indulgence’.<sup>58</sup> In other words, hierarchy is not considered as important in Transylvania, which could hypothetically facilitate the implementation of a program based on participation and feedback. In addition, the low score on ‘masculinity’ indicates an increasing interest for civic actions for social justice and general quality of

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<sup>58</sup> Neculaesei, A. & Tatarusana, M. (2008). ROMANIA – CULTURAL AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES. Iasi: Alexandru Ioan Cuza University.

life. However, while the score is lower than the national average, it remains quite high, indicating a maintained valorization of traditionally ‘male’ elements, such as challenges and achievements. In terms of low levels of ‘uncertainty avoidance’, this essentially suggests that risk-taking and ‘thinking out the box’ are praised slightly more in Transylvania than in the rest of Romania where the emphasis remains on respect for tradition and rules. Finally, with Transylvania being one of the wealthier regions of Romania, it has a higher ‘Indulgence’ score, as people have more resources to dedicate to leisure.

Although Hofstede’s theory is imperfect in the sense that it bases itself on broad general trends, it does give a good indication of the values and characteristics considered important in different localities. Through its praise of equality, civism, creativity and leisure, the Transylvanian context seems ideal to implement a new ‘unified’ initiative.<sup>59</sup>Beyond this model, Transylvania – especially the city of Sibiu – is characterized by a high GDP per capita, economic growth and a relatively low unemployment rate. All of this contributes in making Sibiu a targeted destination. As a result, it has the resources – economic but also human (which includes the total number of teachers from all educational system, nongovernmental organizations and representatives of institutions responsible for education, health and protection of children) for the successful implementation of new inclusive programming.<sup>60</sup>

### *The Example of the Special School No.1*

The *Special School No. 1* could be an example of an ideal partner in this dance-based unified imitative for multiple reasons. First of all, the environment of the school demonstrates and expresses a desire for further collaboration in implementing inclusive programs that empower students with disabilities.<sup>61</sup> Created as early as 1969, this school

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Neculaesei, A. & Tatarusana, M. (2008). ROMANIA – CULTURAL AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES. Iasi: Alexandru Ioan Cuza University.

<sup>61</sup> R. Fagetan. Personal Communication. April 12, 2018.

has managed to build a strong reputation, in addition to key partnerships with strategic actors such as the *Turnu Rosu Center for Inclusive Education*, which could be helpful in finding students willing to participate in the program, along with the potential for exchanging expertise on best inclusive practices.<sup>62</sup> In addition, as mentioned previously, some of its personnel have had experience working in inclusive settings in mainstream schools and thus, their input and potential help could truly be beneficial for the success of this program.<sup>63</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the *Special School No.1* has experience collaborating with *Special Olympics Romania* (notably through ‘Unified Football’). As a result, it is familiar with the ‘unified’ philosophy and has experienced both its successes and challenges. This knowledge is crucial and should be incorporated at the basis of this dance-based initiative to ensure its success.

### *The Benefits of Dance*

In Romania, the targeted sports for ‘Unified’ initiatives have often been football, gymnastics or basketball. Very few use dance as their core activity. Nonetheless, there are many physical benefits associated with dancing – improvement of cardiovascular endurance, flexibility, balance and agility are just some examples. In addition, it has a relatively low risk of injury (especially if proper warm-up techniques are practiced). Furthermore, it is a sport that can be both individual and interactive. Because of these characteristics, it gives students the chance to focus on their own performance and progress while breaking down social barriers (which is, of course, at the heart of the ‘unified’ concept). The musical component of dance also makes it an interesting mix of artistic and athletic elements.

For greater autonomy of the participant, as well as an overall better experience, participants should be provided with the choice between various dance styles. That being said, incorporating traditional Transylvanian dance to help students connect with their roots or local community can be an interesting option to explore.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Finally, a dance-based program is relatively easy to implement, as it does not require any additional costs nor specialized equipment. Overall, dance differentiates itself from other sports as it is less strict in terms of rules and students of all abilities can reach the same level. This is important to consider as social inclusion is best met when athletes and partners are of similar ability. Generally, the ‘Competitive Model’ (although harder to implement) is best in reducing prejudice, as it requires all participants to have the same level of skills. This initiative, however, would follow the ‘Recreational Model’<sup>64</sup>, where the focus is on having fun instead of performance, making it easier to implement.

#### *How to Ensure its Success*

The emphasis on enjoyment and the positive reinforcement through documented progress toward short-term goals (such as preparing for a show) can sustain the motivation for participation of all parties involved. For this program to be sustainable, it is important to build alliances with strategic partners such as mainstream, special and inclusive educational centers, dance clubs, local universities and other nongovernmental organizations. Examples of partners could include the *School of Arts and Crafts ‘Ilie Micu’*, *RENINCO Association*, *Sibiu Dance Studio* or the *Lucian Blaga University*.

Furthermore, the coach or instructor should be a positive role model of acceptance yet should also create a fun and safe space where everyone can interact and express themselves freely. Overall, for involvement to be meaningful, the emphasis should be on talents and skills as well as on the personal development of each participant.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, while students from mainstream and special schools tend to have conflicting schedules, it is crucial for participation to be regularly scheduled, perhaps on a bi-monthly basis. If possible, social activities beyond the program should be organized to further encourage interactions between the students.

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<sup>64</sup> Special Olympics. (2012). Unified Sports Model. Retrieved from <https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/community-building/youth-and-school/PUToolkit/Unified-Sports-Models.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> Special Olympics Research Overview. Retrieved from [https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/research/Special-Olympics-Research-Overview.pdf?\\_ga=2.143524732.83201637.1517221902-1256186008.1512529882#nameddest=Creating%20Inclusive%20Communities](https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/research/Special-Olympics-Research-Overview.pdf?_ga=2.143524732.83201637.1517221902-1256186008.1512529882#nameddest=Creating%20Inclusive%20Communities)

Finally, the program should be frequently evaluated through the recruitment of research partners (from local universities, for instance), who can collect data and subsequently analyze it to determine effective ways of improving the program.

## **CONCLUSION**

The key findings of this research pertain to general attitudes about intellectual disabilities, the educational system and youth programs. Indeed, while the former have remarkably improved since the 1990s, the education system is still characterized by a strong divide between mainstream schools and special schools. Youth programs, implemented by nongovernmental organizations such as *Special Olympics*, have often



been effective in empowering and including individuals with intellectual disabilities in diverse spheres of society.

As mentioned, many barriers to inclusion still remain, most of which are related to funds, terminology and bureaucracy. More research in the area of inclusive education is necessary to counter remaining misinformation and clarify ways in which structural obstacles can be overcome. School mimics society, and thus, if we want to create a more tolerant generation, we must encourage and normalize inclusion in our classrooms and youth programs. The media also has an incredible power in sensitizing the general public by shedding light on the struggles people with intellectual disabilities may face on a daily basis.

In the current context of change in Romania, many people working in education, policy-making or in nongovernmental organizations, can thrive with a profound feeling of responsibility and opportunity. There has never been a better time to participate in the creation of a more tolerant and inclusive society in Romania than now.

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