DEVELOPING EMPATHY IN RELATION TO DISABILITY THROUGH EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS: THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM IN SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Promoting empathy towards individuals with disabilities is a key objective of inclusive education, with direct effects on reducing stigmatization and fostering positive social relationships within the school environment. This paper examines the impact of two applied educational projects: "Disabilities Explained to Children" and "Disabilities Explained to Teenagers" implemented in Arad County between 2021 and 2025. These projects were developed through the effective collaboration of a multidisciplinary team (including support teachers, school counselors, speech therapists, and classroom teachers) and were based on experiential learning activities, thematic short films, and disability-simulation activities or games. The data analysis indicates a significant increase in student and teacher participation, reflecting enhanced receptiveness to the topic of disability and a strengthened culture of inclusion within the participating schools. The results confirm the potential of these projects to generate genuine attitudinal change and support the need for their adaptation and expansion in other educational communities, through locally sustained initiatives and coherent institutional support.*

Keywords: *inclusive education; empathy; disability; educational projects; multidisciplinary team; awareness; educational simulation; children with special educational needs (SEN).*

Introduction

Inclusive education represents one of the fundamental priorities of contemporary educational policies, supported by international organizations such as UNESCO and the United Nations. According to UNESCO, inclusive education involves "removing barriers to learning and participation so that all students, regardless of their particularities can benefit from a fair and non-discriminatory learning environment"

(UNESCO, 2020). It does not refer solely to the integration of students with special educational needs, but aims to transform school culture into one grounded in equity, cooperation, and respect for diversity.

Globally, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reaffirms the commitment of all states to ensure quality, inclusive, and equitable education for all (United Nations, 2015). Education is regarded as an essential pillar of social cohesion and sustainable development, while empathy and cooperation are increasingly recognized as core competencies for fostering responsible citizenship.

In this regard, educational initiatives such as Activating Social Empathy (ASE), implemented under the auspices of the UNESCO Chair on Children, Youth and Civic Engagement (University of Galway, 2023), demonstrate the potential of experiential activities to enhance empathy and civic engagement.

In Romania, inclusive education is regulated by clear public policies, yet continues to face challenges in implementation. Recent data indicate that approximately 900,000 individuals, including nearly 77,000 children, are classified as having a degree of disability and benefit from support measures under national legislation (World Bank, 2023; ANPDPD, 2022). Although the National Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2022–2027 outlines concrete measures to increase school and social participation, their implementation often remains uneven, depending on local resources and the professional preparedness of teaching staff (Stan, 2014; European Agency, 2018).

Educational support for learners with disabilities is often based on individualized interventions focused on adaptation and compensation. However, the literature highlights the need for an integrated approach in which a multidisciplinary team, comprising teachers, school counselors, educational psychologists, psychologists, and other professionals from the fields of education and health collaborates in an integrated manner to foster empathy, cooperation, and an inclusive culture within the school community (Savulescu, 2018; Stan, 2014).

In this context, educational projects with an experiential component can serve as effective means of fostering empathy and reducing stigma associated with disability. Such activities based on role-playing, simulations, thematic film screenings, and collective reflection contribute to understanding difference, valuing diversity, and strengthening positive peer relationships.

This paper presents two educational initiatives implemented in Arad County between 2021 and 2025"Disabilities Explained to Children" and "Disabilities Explained to Teenagers" and highlights the role of

multidisciplinary collaboration in developing empathy and promoting an inclusive school culture.

Inclusive Education as a Paradigm of Diversity

Inclusive education represents one of the most significant conceptual transformations in contemporary education. It moves beyond the traditional approach of integrating students with special educational needs and proposes a systemic reconfiguration of education so that it can respond to the needs of all children, regardless of their individual characteristics (UNESCO, 2020). From this perspective, diversity is not seen as an obstacle, but as a resource for learning and development. The model formulated by Booth and Ainscow (2011) in the *Index for Inclusion* provides a practical foundation for understanding inclusion as a process of building collaborative cultures within schools. The authors emphasize that an educational institution becomes truly inclusive when it creates conditions that allow all learners to participate, contribute, and feel valued. From this perspective, the focus shifts from adapting the learner to the system toward adapting the system to the diversity of learners.

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) reinforce this view, arguing that inclusive pedagogy requires a professional paradigm shift: teachers are no longer mere transmitters of content but designers of learning environments that enable participation for all. Instead of a remedial logic, inclusion promotes a participatory one, in which individual differences are treated as opportunities for mutual growth.

The ethical dimension of inclusion is highlighted in the *Key Principles for Inclusive Education* (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022), which places equity, participation, and personalized support at the heart of educational quality. Inclusive education thus becomes a criterion of social justice, reflecting a system's capacity to ensure equal opportunities for learning and development for every learner.

The OECD report *Strength through Diversity* (2021) confirms that inclusive policies contribute not only to academic achievement but also to social cohesion and emotional well-being, demonstrating that inclusive schools cultivate civic values and socio-emotional competencies essential for democratic life. UNICEF (2020) complements this perspective, showing that inclusive education is both a fundamental right and an investment in social capital, as it strengthens empathy and collective responsibility.

Recent studies (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Zhou, 2022) show that inclusive educational environments foster prosocial behaviors, tolerance, and cooperation among students, while for teachers, the

experience of working in diverse classrooms enhances pedagogical flexibility and relational competence.

Therefore, inclusive education can be defined as a paradigm of diversity that transcends the boundaries of mere integration and proposes a reconstruction of school culture based on empathy, cooperation, and participation. As Booth and Ainscow (2011) observe, an inclusive school "is not a perfect institution, but one that continually learns how to become better for everyone." In this sense, inclusion is a living, reflective, and adaptable process, an expression of a society's educational and moral maturity.

Empathy, an essential dimension of educational inclusion
Empathy is the relational dimension that gives coherence and depth to the process of educational inclusion. It transforms the principles of equity and diversity from mere educational policy guidelines into lived learning experiences capable of supporting collaboration and belonging within the school.

Psychologically, empathy reflects the ability to understand and respond appropriately to the emotions of others, articulating a cognitive dimension the recognition of the other's perspectives and an affective dimension emotional resonance (Davis, 1983). Through this balance, empathy becomes the foundation of positive relationships and prosocial behaviors, which are indispensable to an inclusive culture.

From a pedagogical perspective, empathy transcends its status as a personal trait and asserts itself as an educational tool. Empathetic teachers create safe learning environments, value differences, and cultivate a sense of belonging. This approach is part of the inclusive pedagogy paradigm, which involves replacing compensatory logic with participatory logic (Florian & Spratt, 2013).

At the institutional level, empathy takes on the significance of an organizational value, becoming part of the school culture. Institutions that encourage collaboration, active listening, and shared reflection develop a climate conducive to learning and emotional well-being (OECD, 2021).

The development of empathy requires direct experience and reflection, elements that Kolb (1984) places at the center of the learning process. Experiential activities such as simulations, role-playing, or perspective-taking exercises contribute to awareness of one's own attitudes and the development of sensitivity to the needs of others.

Thus, empathy can be considered the inner mechanism of inclusive education, through which knowledge is transformed into attitude and action. It links reason to emotion, theory to practice, and the individual to the community, giving inclusion human meaning and sustainability.

Multidisciplinary Collaboration: The Functional Core of Inclusive Education in Romania

Inclusive education becomes truly effective only when supported by a multidisciplinary team capable of providing integrated educational, psychological, and social interventions. Without cooperation among teachers, school counselors, psychologists, speech therapists, and support teachers, inclusion risks remaining a declarative goal with limited impact on school life (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018).

The current legislative framework, particularly the *Law on Pre-university Education no. 198/2023* and the *Framework Regulation for the County Centers for Educational Resources and Assistance (CJRAE/CMBRAE)*, approved by Order no. 5701/2024 explicitly defines the coordinating role of these centers in organizing and supervising support services. According to this legislation, school counselors, speech therapists, and itinerant or support teachers form the core network of professionals directly involved in promoting inclusion and assisting students with special educational needs (ANPDPD, 2022).

In theory, this institutional architecture is coherent and aligned with European standards. In practice, however, the Romanian system faces significant structural limitations. National and international reports (UNICEF Romania, 2023; OECD, 2021) highlight the overload of support specialists and the shortage of qualified staff. In many counties, a single support teacher serves between 20 and 40 students often across distant schools while counselors and speech therapists regularly exceed the recommended workload. Under these conditions, multidisciplinary collaboration often becomes formal rather than functional, leaving little time for reflection or preventive action.

Another challenge lies in institutional fragmentation. Although the law promotes cooperation between schools, CJRAE/CMBRAE, social services, and healthcare providers, coordination mechanisms are often weak or absent, resulting in fragmented interventions for students with complex needs.

From a pedagogical perspective, effective teamwork requires empathic communication and shared reflection. As explored in the previous chapter, empathy (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Goleman, 1995) acts as a professional connector that enables specialists to understand different perspectives and transform diverse expertise into a shared resource for the school community.

To enhance the effectiveness of multidisciplinary teams, systemic measures are needed such as revising workload standards, ensuring

joint professional training, allocating institutional time for integrated planning, and strengthening partnerships between schools, families, and communities (Ainscow, 2020). Through such mechanisms, the team becomes a space for professional learning and innovation, where expertise and empathy converge to generate sustainable inclusion practices.

Therefore, multidisciplinary collaboration should be viewed not as an administrative formality but as the functional core of inclusive education. It provides the structure through which the principles of equity and diversity become operational, transforming the school into a space of cooperation, solidarity, and authentic participation.

The Impact of the Educational Projects "Disabilities Explained to Children" and "Disabilities Explained to Teenagers" on the Development of Empathy and School Inclusion

Within the evolving framework of inclusive education in Romania, a number of systemic challenges persist: a shortage of specialists, excessive workloads, and limited inter-institutional cooperation. These obstacles continue to hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education principles, despite the existence of a supportive legal framework.

As a response to these needs, Arad County Center for Educational Resources and Assistance (CJRAE Arad**)** launched, between 2021 and 2025, two innovative educational projects *"Disabilities Explained to Children"* and *"Disabilities Explained to Teenagers."*

These initiatives specifically aim to develop empathy toward people with disabilities through an experiential and collaborative educational approach involving multidisciplinary teams (speech therapist, school counselor, itinerant/support teacher, and classroom teachers).

Through interactive activities, such as disability simulations, thematic film screenings, role-playing exercises, and guided reflection, preschoolers and students are encouraged to understand and emotionally experience difference. In this way, theoretical knowledge is transformed into a deep empathic understanding of disability, contributing to the reduction of stigmatization and the creation of a school climate based on acceptance, cooperation, and respect.

Purpose and Objectives

The general purpose of this study was to analyze how the educational projects implemented in Arad County have contributed to the development of empathy and the strengthening of school inclusion.

Based on this aim, the following specific objectives were established:
- To promote a positive attitude toward people with disabilities and to reduce stigmatizing behaviors;

- To develop students' socio-emotional competencies through experiential learning activities;
- To create a collaborative framework between CJRAE specialists and mainstream school teachers;
- To assess the emotional and attitudinal impact of the projects on both students and teachers;
- To formulate good practice guidelines for the regional expansion and adaptation of these projects.

Methodological Design and Implementation Team

The research was based on a case study design with a qualitative–evaluative character, focused on analyzing the educational process and the perceptions of the participants involved. The approach was participatory, engaging both CJRAE specialists and teachers, students, and the broader school community.

Multidisciplinary Team

The implementation was carried out by a mixed multidisciplinary team, consisting of:

- Speech therapist – coordinator of activities related to communication, nonverbal language, and awareness of expressive barriers;
- School counselor – facilitator of emotional reflection and self-awareness activities;
- Itinerant/support teacher – responsible for adapting educational content to the needs of students with special educational requirements (SEN) and coordinating collaboration with classroom teachers;
- Class teachers and homeroom teachers – direct partners in planning and integrating the activities into both the formal and non-formal curriculum.

Participants

The projects involved preschool children and students from primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education levels from both Arad County and Arad Municipality. The activities were implemented in collaboration with teachers and support specialists from participating schools, while parents were indirectly involved through information and awareness initiatives designed to strengthen understanding and acceptance of disability within the wider school community.

Between 2021 and 2025, thousands of students and hundreds of teachers participated in these projects. The data presented below illustrate the evolution of teacher participation and school involvement throughout the implementation period.

Figure 1. Evolution of teacher participation and school involvement in the educational projects "Disabilities Explained to Children" and "Disabilities Explained to Teenagers" (2021–2025)

School Year	Number of participating teachers	Number of participating schools	Number of participating kindergartens
2021-2022	145	9	12
2022-2023	303	18	16
2023-2024	459	33	18
2024-2025	489	33	19

Methods and Instruments

The projects were grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and relied on interactive and reflective methodologies, designed to connect emotion, cognition, and action. The main types of activities included:

- Screening of thematic short films depicting the lives and challenges of persons with disabilities;
- Sensory simulations such as *"A Day Without Sight"*, *"Communication Without Words"*, and *"Hands That See"*;
- Role-playing games and exercises designed to recreate experiences of dependency, difficulty, and cooperation;
- Workshops for reflection and debate, encouraging critical discussion and emotional awareness;

These methods allowed participants to engage both intellectually and emotionally, facilitating a deeper understanding of disability and promoting empathic, prosocial attitudes within the school community.

Results and Discussion

Feedback collected through post-activity discussions and visual documentation (photographs taken during project activities**)** suggests that students developed greater openness, understanding, and sensitivity toward the challenges faced by people with disabilities. The images captured throughout the sessions illustrate genuine emotional involvement and cooperation among participants, highlighting the power of shared experience in building empathy.

The interactive nature of the activities**,** particularly the games, sensory simulations, and animated films was highly appreciated by the children, who participated with enthusiasm and curiosity. These

experiential elements proved especially effective in fostering engagement and emotional connection, transforming abstract ideas about disability into concrete, relatable experiences.

Moreover, students with disabilities from the participating schools expressed visible joy and pride in taking part in the activities, sharing their own perspectives and interacting with peers in supportive, inclusive environments. Their active involvement not only enhanced mutual understanding but also strengthened a sense of belonging and validation within the school community.

Many students described the activities as opportunities to "feel what others feel", emphasizing empathy not as a theoretical construct but as a lived, emotional experience a testament to the transformative potential of experiential learning.

Conclusions

The study confirms that empathy toward people with disabilities represents a fundamental mechanism of inclusive education, transforming abstract principles into lived experiences and authentic relationships within the school environment.

The two educational projects *"Disabilities Explained to Children"* and *"Disabilities Explained to Teenagers"* have demonstrated that experiential learning, based on games, simulations, and guided reflection, effectively fosters prosocial behaviors, acceptance, and emotional understanding among students, while enhancing the visibility and participation of children with disabilities.

At the same time, the initiatives highlighted the essential role of the multidisciplinary team composed of the speech therapist, school counselor, itinerant/support teacher, and classroom teachersin ensuring the coherence and emotional safety of the learning process. Through collaboration, this team succeeded in connecting information with experience, individual needs with collective culture, and policy principles with concrete practice.

These findings underline that the success of inclusive education depends not only on legislative frameworks but on the capacity of professionals to work together and to integrate empathy into daily educational practice. Strengthening multidisciplinary collaboration and promoting experiential, empathy-based activities can contribute to the gradual consolidation of a more inclusive and supportive school culture.

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