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THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract

The rural education development is a strategic objective in Romania, especially due to the present challenges like: the drop in the number of students, poverty, lack of infrastructure, etc. The pressure to the sector was even higher during pandemic period when the rural educational infrastructure wasn't prepared for the infrastructural necessities. The present paper aimed to analyse the quality of education in rural areas from Arges county by a survey among 107 teachers from 7 middle schools and 1 high school, situated in five rural villages. The results revealed the needs of the teachers from rural areas to assure a good education, the needs of students to learn, the measures needed to be implemented regarding curricula, teaching methods and learning techniques.

Key words**:** *rural education, primary and secondary schools, quality of education*

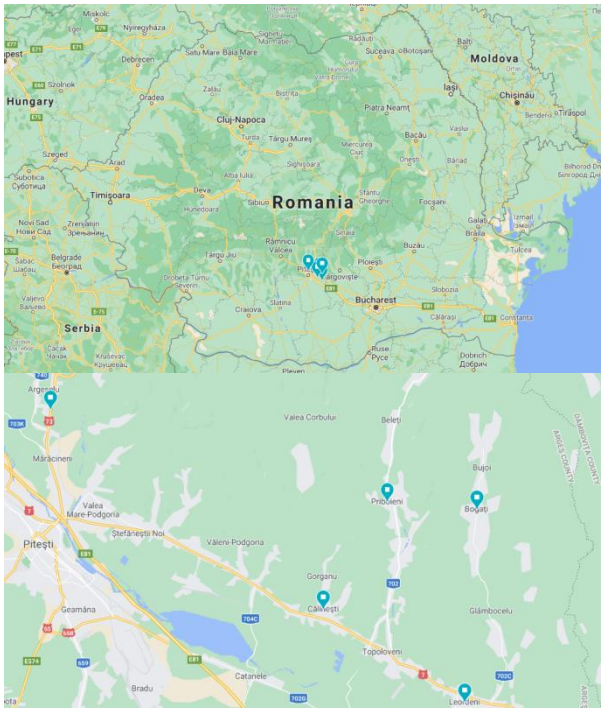
INTRODUCTION

In Romania, in 2019, were around 3.5 million persons included in the education system, from which 27.4% are in rural areas.
Education is the key of economic and social progress and the next generation has to be better trained to better pass over the challenges the rural areas are facing [1, 9, 11].
The main level of education which can be followed in rural schools are from early childhood education until primary and lower-secondary education (very rarely 2nd cycle secondary education because the high schools are usually in urban areas. According to [2, 5, 8], the Romanian education presents discrepancies between urban and rural areas regarding rural population training level, and especially of the new generation, infrastructure, teaching staff, teaching and assessment methods and didactical materials. Also, Romania is facing a drop in the number of pupils and specific challenges in rural areas (like poverty, ethnicity, etc.) which impede the access to education [6], [10]. Additionally to the insufficient resources, the rural schools were confronted in the last years with the difficulty to attract new qualified teachers or with the lack of ICT skills among teachers and students, especially in secondary level schools [4, 7].
Starting from all this situation our paper aims to create an overview over the quality of rural education by emphasizing the opinion of teachers from rural areas.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

From the almost 1 million children in kindergartens and students enrolled in the formal training and educational process from Romania during 2019 school year, around 3% are in Arges County. The particularity of this county is that it has more children and students in rural areas than national average: 44.1% in preprimary (preschool) education (compared with 41.6% at national level); 44.59% in primary and lower-secondary education (compared with 42.96% at national level. In this context, in 2020, we organized a questionnaire-based survey to analyse and assess the quality of rural education. Our survey was conducted in 7 middle schools and 1 high school, situated in five rural villages (Maracineni, Calinesti, Priboieni, Leordeni and Bogati) from Arges County, from south of Romania (Map 1). We used a questionnaire with 26 questions structured on the following

subjects: quantifying the teachers effort to ensure the quality of teaching activity; the quality of teaching style in relation with learning styles; the quality of school infrastructure; the quality of communication in school; the quality of school management.



Map 1. Area of research
Source: Google map [3].

We had 107 teachers which were willing to respond to our survey and the main characteristics of our database are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.The main characteristics of the respondents

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Total	107	100.0
Seniority in education under 10 years	25	23.4
Seniority in education over 10 years	82	76.6
Seniority in school under 10 years	44	41.1
Seniority in school over 10 years	63	58.9
Status - tenure teacher	84	78.5
Status - qualified substitute teacher	16	15.0
Status - unqualified substitute teacher	1	0.9
Status - detached teacher	6	5.6
Level - preschool	11	10.3
Level - primary school	30	28.0
Level - middle school (secondary school)	56	52.3
Level - high school	10	9.3

Source: Own calculation in SPSS based on data survey.

The data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics by using descriptive statistics (frequencies).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The assessment of teachers' involvement

The process to implement quality in rural education is a continuously effort for Romanian teachers.

Table 2.The distribution of teaching effort in rural areas

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Teaching hours in the department		
Between 16-18 ore at school	96	89.7
25 ore	11	10.3
Total	107	100.0
Internal commissions responsible		
Under 2 hours per week	8	7.5
Over 2 hours per week	43	40.2
NR	56	52.3
Total	107	100.0
School service		
Under 6 hours per month	38	35.5
Over 6 hours per month	68	63.6
NR	1	0.9
Total	107	100.0
Additional training for improvement		
Under 3 hours per week	20	18.7
Over 3 hours per week	45	42.1
NR	42	39.3
Total	107	100.0
Involvement in remedial programs		
Under 3 hours per week	43	40.2
Over 3 hours per week	20	18.7
NR	44	41.1
Total	107	100.0
Participation in school competitions		
Under 5 hours per month	43	40.2
Over 5 hours per month	20	18.7
NR	44	41.1
Total	107	100.0
Other activities		
Under 5 hours	20	18.7
Over 5 hours	73	68.2
NR	14	13.1
Total	107	100.0

Source: Own calculation in SPSS based on data survey.

This effort implies:
- participation to professional training - in the last three year, 42.1% of the respondents followed more than two training courses, 20.6% participated in 2 courses and 24.3% in just one.
- the teachers expenditure for this courses - 27.1% of the teachers spent over 220 euro, 31.8% spent between 110-220 euro and 23.4%

under 110 euro (the minim net wage in Romania is around 308 euro per month). What is important is that 38.3% of the teachers paid this classes with their own money. Only 17.8% were 100% sustained by the school.

- every teacher have to work 40 hours per month in school (Table 2).
- additionally the teachers have extracurricular activities (under 10 hours per week - 88.8%; over 10 hours per week - 11.2%), preparation of teaching activities (under 15 hours per month - 46.7%; over 15 hours per month - 53.3%) and commissions/conference activities (under 10 hours per month - 90.7%; over 10 hours per week - 9.3%).

According to 79.4% of the questioned teachers, the degree of time occupancy per month exceeds 90% and many of them are forwards a lot of their free time to work activities.

The assessment of organization (school) internal procedures, processes and infrastructure

Table 3. The assessment of attitude of teachers towards school management and environment

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
The behavior of the school administration towards staff is supportive and encouraging	65.4	5.6
You are satisfied with the salary received	37.4	37.4
Teachers participate in making important educational decisions in this school	57.9	16.9
The necessary materials are available as needed	53.2	6.5
The principal is concerned with obtaining resources for this school	68.2	4.7
Routine tasks and documents are involved in teaching	70.1	-
Your principal applies the school's rules of student conduct and supports you when needed	76.7	1.9
The rules of this school are constantly applied by teachers, even for students who are not in their classrooms.	74.8	4.7
The principal talks to you frequently about personal training practices	60.8	10.3
Most of your colleagues share with you the beliefs and values that should be the mission of the school.	65.5	6.5
Staff members make efforts to cooperate	66.3	6.5
The principal knows what kind of school he wants and communicates this to the staff	71.0	3.7
The teachers in this school are recognized for a job well done	65.4	5.6
The goals and priorities for the school are clear	71.0	1.9

Source: Own calculation in SPSS based on data survey.

The schools to which the interviewed teachers belong to offer good conditions for the participants to teaching processes and activities (76.6% of the teachers have access to computers, phones, printers, etc. during working hours).

Also, regarding the management of these schools we may say that almost 70% of the teachers are pleased with the internal process of activity assessment and the communication with the manager.

The relation teacher - school can be summarize as presented in Table 3.

Our research took in consideration also their opinion regarding the strong points of their school. On the first places stand the communications skills of the staff, the studying environment and the connection of teachers with students (Table 4).

Table 4. The strong points of the school

	Percent (%)
Communication skills	21.5
A favorable environment for studying	15.0
Teacher - student relation	14.0
Empathy	10.3
Captivated students	10.3
Interactive methods	9.3
Pedagogical tact	9.3
Uniformization of knowledge	7.5
Qualified teaching staff	2.8
Total	100.0

Source: Own calculation in SPSS based on data survey.

Regarding the week points of their schools, the teachers indicated first of all the lack of technology (29.0%), lack of respect from students (14.0%) and the lack of parents involvement (11.2%) (Table 5).

Table 5. The week points of the school

Items	Percent (%)
Lack of technology	29.0
Lack of respect	14.0
Lack of parent involvement	11.2
Loaded curricula	9.3
Disinterest students	9.3
Too many changes in the educational system	9.3
Students with special educational requirements	8.4
Lack of teacher collaboration	7.5
Professional training	.9
Large number of children	.9
Total	100.0

Source: Own calculation in SPSS based on data survey.

To improve the quality of education in their schools, the teachers indicated especially to change the methods of teaching: 37.4% to

implement modern methods, 27.1% to implement interactive methods and 14.0% to implement Montessori methods (Table 6).

Table 6. New teaching methods that can be implemented in school

Items	Percent (%)
Modern methods	37.4
Interactive methods	27.1
Montessori education	14.0
Computer assisted training	5.6
Partnerships with other institutions	4.7
Traditional methods	3.7
Scheduled training	3.7
Team work	3.7
Total	100.0

Source: Own calculation in SPSS based on data survey.

The assessment of teaching activities and processes

The quality of the teaching style is also very important for the educational system. 42.1% from the teachers indicated as a basic pillar of the teaching style the dialogue with the students, 19.6% the knowledge developed on the subject, 19.6% the modern learning methods and 18.7% the introduction of modern technology in lessons.

To perform their duties in the classroom, the interviewed teachers mentioned that the following elements are important: didactic materials (books, maps, interactive games, etc.) (45.8%); the devotion of the teacher (19.6%); video projectors and TV (15%); modern technology and software (14.9%); training (4.7%).

On the other hand the teachers were ask to point out what they think can motivate a student to learn. 29.9% of the teachers point out the student engagement in the educational process; 18.7% the creation of a positive environment; 17.8% the need for clear instructions; 14% the use of modern technologies; 9.3% the equal opportunities for success and 9.3% the freedom of speech and 1% didn't mention anything.

In the teaching process the teachers ensure a continuous flow of communication: 58.9% discuss with parents during scheduled meetings and 35.5% by phone; 72.0% prefer to discuss directly with the students during classes and 23.4% during advisory hours; the feedback is usually given verbally (64.5%) or in the personal notebook (30.8%); the progress of the students are communicated tot the parents in writing (59.8%), individual discussions (21.5%) and during parents meetings (17.8%); over 80% of the teachers utilize the feedback from students to improve their work.

The assessment of the main challenges in assuring quality and proposals for improving

Teachers were asked to indicate at least three challenges facing rural education. Their agregate responses permitted us to identify the following: lack of involvement of students and parents (72%); lack of modern educational means (90.7%); overloaded curriculum (51.4%).

To overcome the challenges in rural education, we identified the following main proposals: changing the school program (27.1%); investing in modern technology (18.7%); changing the educational system (15%); decreasing the number of students in the classroom (12.1%) and others (like training, increasing parents involvement; attracting funds. removal of formalism, etc.).

CONCLUSIONS

The analyzed rural schools create a work environment which is evidently appreciated by the majority of interviewed teachers. With a good collaboration between staff and managers, these schools offer a favorable environment for studying and for communication. However, many challenges have to be faced (especially in 2020), like the lack of technology, of respect from students and of parents involvement. But the teacher are committed to quality and despite the hard effort involved (summarized by the long hours needed to assure a quality teaching level) they are very implicated. Based on their responses we were capable to indicate: the needs of a teacher from rural areas to assure a good education; the needs of students; the measures needed to be implemented regarding curricula, teaching methods and learning techniques.

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