InclEdu 4AllNeeds

Study Visit Bucharest

6 February 2025

REPORT

EFEE

CSEE ETUCE

"European Sectoral Social Partners in Education promoting inclusion of persons with special needs in education"

(Project *InclEdu4AllNeeds*, number 101145637)

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Published by the European Trade Union Committee for Education - Brussels, 2025
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Introduction

The second of the two case study visits took place in Bucharest, Romania, on the 6th of February 2025, as part of the **social dialogue project *InclEdu4AllNeeds*** - "European Sectoral Social Partners in Education promoting inclusion of persons with special needs in education" (2024 - 2026).

The project led by ETUCE and EFEE with the co-funding of the European Commission, constitutes a key action for the implementation of the Work Programme 2024-2026 of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee in Education (ESSDE). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and linked to it the shift to online teaching, as well as the war in Ukraine and linked to it the migration and energy crisis in Europe, inflicted severe consequences especially for those students who are already disadvantaged. Following the commitment of European Social Partners in Education to enhancing the provision of the quality and inclusive education which realizes the full potential of every student and pays special attention to learners at risk of exclusion and underachievement, the project aims to identify and promote successful joint approaches of social partners in ensuring the full inclusion of persons with special needs in education systems and education policies, as well as to evaluate the current policies and practices, resulting in a concrete set of proposals and recommendations for national member organisations, employers in education, education authorities and governments.

Project objectives:

- To evaluate the existing legislation, special programmes and measures undertaken at national, regional, local or institutional level as regards to the inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies, as well as assess the impact of the EU policies on inclusion on the national educational and employment policies, identifying challenges (e.g. special needs teachers' shortage) and potential solutions;
- To identify and promote the joint approaches, practices and strategies of social partners in education to ensure the full inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education and employment policies,
- To address the relevant professional needs of school leaders, teachers and other education personnel, challenges linked to working and learning conditions (including digital and sustainable education), initial and continuous professional development, recruitment and retention, and other areas;
- To support education trade unions and education employer organisations across Europe to become more pro-active in addressing the issue of the inclusion of persons with special needs in education systems with an intersectional approach and against the backdrop of the consequences of COVID-19, in their national social dialogue structures and within the European Semester consultation practices at national level;
- To update knowledge and peer learning on this topic in the ESSDE Committee;
- To draft concrete guidelines on how to promote effective inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies through joint social partner initiatives at national, regional and local level.

Project activities include:

- An **online survey** among ETUCE and EFEE national member organisations;
- **Focus groups and school visits** organised in Solingen (Germany) and Bucharest (Romania) with the participation of local social partners in education. The visits consist of school visits, interview and filming in order to look at best joint practices of social partners in the inclusion of persons with special needs in education, which are currently being implemented;
- **Two training seminars:** in Paris (France) and Lisbon (Portugal) with participants from other ETUCE and EFEE member organisations. The sessions will be used to present and discuss the research and country visits outcomes, build the knowledge and capacity of social partners on the topic, exchange good practices, and discuss the draft guidelines on how to promote effective inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies through joint social partner initiatives at national, regional and local level.
- **Final conference** in Chisinau, Moldova, where practical guidelines on how to promote effective inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies through joint social partner initiatives at national, regional and local level, will be drafted;
- **Filming a series of short videos** on the current situation persons with special needs in education systems in several European countries, as well as on the role of education social partners in addressing the issue.

Study visit to Bucharest

The second case study visit in Bucharest included a school visit, interviews, and filming to explore best practices in collaboration between social partners for the inclusion of students with special needs in education. More concretely, the aims of the study visit were:

- To complement the desk research and online survey with a more **in-depth knowledge and qualitative data on the existing legislation, special programmes and measures undertaken at national, regional, local or institutional level** as regards the inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies, with an intersectional approach and against the backdrop of the consequences of the COVID-19;
- To collect the **views of education personnel and institutional leadership, as well as social partners in education** on the state-of-art of inclusion of persons with special needs in the German education systems;
- To address the **relevant professional needs of school leaders, teachers and other education personnel, challenges linked to working and learning conditions** (including digital and sustainable education), **initial and continuous professional development, recruitment and retention, and other areas**, and
- To identify the **joint approaches, practices and strategies of social partners in education** to ensuring the full inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education and employment policies.

This project activity included the participation of:

- Project coordinators from ETUCE and EFEE secretariats;
- The subcontracted research experts from the Aalborg University;
- The subcontracted video-makers from Les Films de l'Europe;
- Romanian Social Partners in Education, including:

  - representatives of the Federatia Sindicatelor Libere Din Invatamant (FSLI), Federația Națională Sindicală ALMA MATER (higher education and research), Fédération des Syndicats de l'Education SPIRU-HARET and for the trade union side;

  - representatives of Asociația Școlilor Particulare, ASP, for education employers side;

  - Representatives of General School Inspectorate of Bucharest;

  - Representative of Bucharest Municipal Center for Educational Resources and Assistance'

  - Special needs teachers from various schools in Bucharest and management of the Special Secondary School St. Nicholas.

1. Visit to Special Secondary School St. Nicholas

During the study visit, ETUCE and EFEE coordinators, along with project researchers, visited Special Secondary School St. Nicholas, the largest special needs school in Bucharest, serving around 200 students from kindergarten to VET. The visit included classroom observations and discussions with school staff.

They observed two interactive sessions:

- "Robots Tell Stories" – A collaborative exercise with students with moderate intellectual disabilities.
- "Sensory Stories" – A session designed for students with severe and associated intellectual disabilities.

Following the classroom visits, discussions with school leaders and teachers highlighted key challenges, including:

- **Planning and access to therapies** – The school faces difficulties in implementing special therapy programs due to resource constraints.
- **Limited specialised equipment** – Bringing necessary assistive tools and technology remains a challenge.
- **Lack of specialised staff** – There is a shortage of support teachers because many are assigned by the state to mainstream schools and assessment commissions, reducing availability. There is also a lack of assistant teachers, necessary to ensure effective learning and care.

The school is partially state subsidised with additional EU funding following the school management's own initiatives of applying for grants and organising visits to other countries for professional development, but resource gaps persist. Despite these challenges, the school remains committed to enhancing special education through innovative teaching methods and external partnerships.

2. Focus group discussion

As a principal part of the study visit, a focus group discussion was held with Romanian education stakeholders, including trade union representatives, education employers, school leaders and teachers. The discussion aimed to assess the current state of inclusion for students with special educational needs in Romania and the challenges faced by education personnel.

Moderated by project researchers, the conversation covered key issues such as the integration of students, teacher training, legal frameworks, and the practical realities of implementing inclusive education.

Integration of special needs students:

The integration of students with special needs in Romania remains inconsistent. While Romania has both special needs schools and mainstream schools that integrate students with special needs, transitions between these systems are often unstructured. Recently, there has been an increase in students transferring from mainstream education to special needs schools and even private schools due to a lack of adequate support. In severe cases, homeschooling remains an alternative, though full integration remains a challenge in that case. Like in Germany, one of the serious challenges is the refusal of families to recognise that their children have special needs and to test them, leading to superficiality in handling the cases.

Inclusion policies and legal frameworks:

The Romanian education system has undergone numerous reforms since 1989, leading to inconsistencies in policy implementation, lack of stability and lack of long-term and coherent vision for education and inclusion of special needs in particular. A new education law, enacted in 2023, stipulates that class sizes must be reduced by three students for each student with special needs included in mainstream education. However, challenges remain, particularly when students' special needs go unrecognised, limiting their access to support and increasing the teacher's workload. Furthermore, the law requires one counsellor for every 300 students; in practice, one counsellor frequently oversees 700 to 800 students.

Resource allocation and funding:

Resource allocation is another major issue. Despite legal provisions for education funding to be 6% of GDP, actual funding has remained between 2-3%, leading to schools applying for EU funds in order to sustain the inclusion of persons with special needs. That also creates a sharp inequality between big cities like Bucharest and rural areas. Social partners have called for increased investment in infrastructure, vocational education workshops, and support for special needs students. Schools also lack multidisciplinary teams comprising supporting teachers, educators, psychologists, and medical professionals. Private schools tend to have more resources and flexibility, making them an increasingly attractive option for families seeking better support for their children.

Teacher training and support:

Teacher training remains inadequate. Although special education is now part of initial teacher training, practical exposure of students is limited. Teachers are facing an increasing workload, which includes administrative tasks and restricts their ability to concentrate on inclusive education. Furthermore, there is no specific legislation governing special needs teachers, resulting in many positions being unfilled. Long-term strategic planning remains inadequate, resulting in deficiencies in teacher training and resource allocation.

Inclusion of education personnel with special needs:

Besides the basic legislation, in collective agreements, there are specific health and safety regulations which cover among other things adapting the working conditions to persons with special needs. However, the social dialogue for education personnel with special needs remains very narrow in terms of the spectrum of such teachers covered. Some data that is essential (for example, on number of education personnel with special needs) but is not collected by the Ministry of Education.

Conclusions

The case study visit in Bucharest revealed the need for stability, long-term and coherent vision in the education system and improvement of the teacher training on special needs. While efforts are being made to strengthen the system, such as the introduction of a new education law in 2023, challenges remain in funding, awareness, teacher training, and policy implementation.

The case study visit highlighted the importance of effective social dialogue between trade unions and education employers that would bring concrete results in addressing gaps and ensuring that policies translate into practical solutions. Furthermore, participants highlighted the need for better clarification of the social dialogue at the level of the local community: financing the education comes from the Ministry of Education, with one part going to salaries and another part being directed to city halls. Such systems makes the social dialogue more complex and sometimes confusing.

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