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## Perceptions of Educational Managers and Teachers on the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Romanian Schools

### Abstract

Inclusive Education (IE), thirty years after the Salamanca Declaration (1994), is still a challenge that requires evidence-based solutions. In Romania, Inclusive Education focuses mainly on integrating students with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream schools. However, full inclusion has not yet been achieved. Teachers and educational managers are essential in successfully implementing IE in schools. The present study aims to investigate the factors that significantly predict differences between the perceptions of teachers and academic managers regarding IE implementation in Romanian schools. A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional, comparative, and correlational design was used for research. One thousand thirty-five participants, includ-

ing 123 educational managers (inspectors and principals), responded to the Romanian culturally adapted 4th edition of the Index for Inclusion. The results showed that principals perceive schools as more inclusive than teachers. The factors that predict these differences are those related to policies, cultures and practices rather than age, seniority, gender, and environment. A distinct age-related factor concerning inclusive school policies was identified only in the case of younger principals.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, inclusive school, index for inclusion.

## Introduction

Inclusive Education (IE) is an increasingly widespread process that is continuously reconceptualized. It promotes respect for each person's right to education, regardless of individual characteristics (Hornandez-Torrano et al., 2020; Mendenhall et al., 2021). Therefore, even 30 years after the Salamanca Declaration (1994) was adopted, scientifically validated solutions are still to be explored. As a policy, IE represents a challenge to achieve in specific educational situations because solutions that fit all learners, regardless of their extraordinary support needs, are complicated and almost impossible to accommodate. It is necessary to consider the context and individual particularities, as the implementation of IE differs from one situation to another (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008).

In Booth and Ainscow's (2016) and the present study, IE understanding is holistic, emphasizing equality, increased participation, and reduced exclusion in educational settings for all students. At the school level, EI is perceived as the implementation of inclusive values, which propose an evaluation of school inclusion on three dimensions: cultures, policies, and practices. Inclusive culture refers to a school that nurtures belonging, diversity, and mutual respect among all its members. Inclusive policies involve developing and implementing strategies that support the participation and achievement of every student, ensuring that no one is excluded or marginalized. Inclusive practices are the strategies and teaching methods employed to accommodate students' varied learning needs, enabling all to access and engage with the curriculum effectively (Booth & Ainscow, 2016).

Research highlights the importance of conducting studies on this topic. It is essential to identify the factors related to the school context and how they can influence the successful implementation of IE (Aftab et al., 2024), but also to explore the perceptions of all relevant actors: teachers and educational managers (Loreman, 2014) regarding the implementation of IE in schools (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Van Mieghem et al., 2018; Sirem & Çatal, 2022). Educational policymakers decide the school's purpose, vision, and action framework, and principals and teachers translate this into practice while teachers actively implement IE in the school (Rouse, 2017).

Teachers have a crucial role in implementing inclusive policies in schools and classrooms (Chow et al., 2023) as they, through their specific actions, make

these wishes come true. Teachers are not the only ones who can contribute to this regard. School principals also have an essential role in the implementation of IE (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; AuCoin et al., 2020; Pedaste et al., 2021; Sirem & Çatal, 2022), to stimulate innovation and promote changes and improvements regarding inclusive practices (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Harris, 2012), but also the influence of cultures favourable to school inclusion (Hallinger, 2005; Habegger, 2008; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006, apud. Yan & Sin, 2015), supporting, guiding and monitoring teachers in this endeavour. The school principal especially has a role in managing the paradigm shift, being essential in optimizing the practice and culture of the school organization to facilitate the implementation of IE (Pedaste et al., 2021) as well as inclusive policy (Cherkowski & Ragoonaden, 2016; Mac Ruairc, 2013, apud. AuCoin et al., 2020). Effective school management drives consistent changes in the educational system (Day et al., 2009, apud. AuCoin et al., 2020) by providing a meso-level framework that ensures inclusive practices are a constant, high-quality reality at the classroom (micro) level, with the entire school acting cohesively in support of these values.

There is a relationship between the attitude of school principals and the commitment of teachers to implement IE (Al-Mahdy & Emam, 2017; O’Laughlin & Lindle, 2015; Sumbera et al., 2014; apud. Pedaste et al., 2021). Principals can contribute to developing learning communities in the school to facilitate teachers’ professional development in implementing IE (Fluijt et al., 2016; Luștrea & Crașovan, 2020). The professional development of teachers and principals is essential to facilitating a positive perception and attitude towards IE in school (Yan & Sin, 2015; Clipa et al., 2019). Although the role of the school principal in achieving IE has been demonstrated, not much attention has been paid to their perceptions, with the emphasis in research being placed mainly on the teachers’ attitudes (Kielblock, 2018).

In the teaching process in general, but especially in that of IE, one of the essential factors is considered by the teacher, the expectations being that the teachers’ attitudes, perceptions, professional training, and self-confidence are favorable to developing teaching environments that are effective and inclusive (Monsen et al., 2014; Ewing et al., 2018). Teachers are the ones who facilitate the development of students’ skills by applying, implementing, using, and combining various didactic strategies and approaches (Finkelstein et al., 2019). Principals can facilitate the support a teacher needs to ensure quality education in the classroom for all students. In other words, teacher and principal attitudes toward IE are considered essential predictors of IE implementation at the school level (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Kielblock, 2018). IE is determined both by the attitude of school principals (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Al-Mahdy & Emam, 2017; O’Laughlin & Lindle, 2015; Sumbera et al., 2014; apud. Pedaste et al., 2021, Jurca

& Sava, 2023), as well as that of teachers (Verza & Verza, 2011; Gherguț & Frumos, 2019; Jurca et al., 2023).

When measuring IE, attitudes, perceptions, and perspectives are often used interchangeably, which can cause terminological confusion. Although some studies equate perceptions and attitudes, the two concepts are not identical. Attitudes are defined as those beliefs, feelings, and predispositions of a person towards something or someone (Alkhateeb et al., 2016). On the other hand, teachers' perceptions can be defined as how they understand, interpret, and evaluate different aspects of the educational environment, including the level of inclusion in the school. Most studies have investigated teachers' attitudes towards IE, not their perceptions of implementing IE in school. This study will address the concept of perceptions, as we want to see how teachers and educational managers report on inclusion in the schools where they teach. Thus, we can have a reference point regarding the current situation of schools as perceived by two categories of the relevant actors.

The choice to focus on the perception of teachers and educational managers is justified by the small number of studies carried out so far in Romania on this topic. Most studies investigated the teachers' attitudes (Marin, 2016; Frumos, 2018; Clipa et al., 2019; Măța & Clipa, 2020; Luștea, 2023; Jurca et al., 2023) and principals' attitudes (Jurca & Sava, 2023). To the best of our knowledge, only one study in Romania used the Index for Inclusion (Ifl), second edition (2002) (Adet, 2019). One study explored how leadership influences inclusive cultures (Ionescu & Vrășmaș, 2023), while another examined school management in Romania, focussing on visions, values, and community collaboration (Voinea & Turculeț, 2019).

To develop inclusive school environments in Romania, the Ifl can be considered a valid tool for achieving this goal. It is one of the most used tools internationally to assess school inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Velez-Calvo et al., 2018; Fernández-Archilla et al., 2020). Although this tool is used in several countries, the Ifl is used inconsistently in Romania. Although the Inclusion Index is recommended as an educational policy tool (Ministry of Education, 2020), it is used sporadically. It is not known enough to allow conclusive data on IE implementation in schools in Romania or to be used consistently in schools as a structured and systematic action benchmark.

## Methodology

Using an explanatory, correlational, and comparative non-experimental design, this study aimed to investigate the perceptions of the teaching staff (teachers and educational managers) regarding the implementation of IE in the schools

and identify the factors that predict significant differences between their perceptions.

**General research question:** What is the perception of the teaching staff (teachers and educational managers) regarding implementing inclusive education in Romania?

**Specific research questions:**

In the perception of educators (teachers and educational managers), what are the most strongly represented aspects of inclusion in Romanian schools?

In the perception of educators (teachers and educational managers), what are the less represented aspects of inclusion in Romanian schools?

**Specific research hypotheses:**

The following research hypotheses were formulated from the premise that educational managers have a decisive role in transforming and promoting inclusive schools (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Khaleel et al., 2021; Adams et al., 2023).

**H1:** There are significant differences regarding inclusive education implemented at the school level in the perception of teachers and educational managers (principals and inspectors) from the perspective of policies, cultures, and practices.

**H2:** There are differences between the factors that predict the different perceptions of teachers and educational managers (principals and inspectors) about school inclusion from the perspective of policies, cultures, and practices.

## Instrument

The Index for Inclusion (Ifl) (Booth & Ainscow, 2016) was used to assess the teachers' perceptions of IE implementation in Romanian schools.

The Ifl comprises 70 items on three general dimensions (culture, policies and practices) and two sub-dimensions. The dimension of creating inclusive school cultures includes sub-dimensions: Strengthening the community (e.g. item: Everyone (students, teachers, parents or community members) is welcome in my school.) and establishing inclusive values (e.g. item: School in which I practice develops shared, inclusive values). The Elaboration of inclusive policies dimension includes the sub-dimensions: School development for all (e.g. item: In the development process of the school where I teach, the school management, teachers, parents, students, and the community participate.) and Ensuring support for diversity (e.g., item: In the school where I teach, there is coordination/synchronization of all forms of support addressed to students). The development of inclusive practices includes developing a curriculum for all (e.g., item: In the school where I teach, children learn and apply knowledge about food production cycles, food consumption, and the importance of water) and organiza-

tion of learning (e.g., item: In the school where I teach, learning activities are planned to take into account the needs of each child.).

In Romania, Ifl is available in the second edition (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) and the last edition, the fourth (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). The only research identified in Romania that used the second edition of the Ifl and other tools calculated the Alpha Cronbach coefficient, resulting in a value above 0.70 (Adet, 2019). No other validity measures in the Romanian context for the Ifl were identified. Given this situation, the Ifl was adopted and validated on the Romanian population in the present study.

The Ifl direct and retrovert translation, expert consultation, and cognitive interviews were conducted. We performed an internal consistency test, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to analyze the data. The values of the Cronbach alpha coefficient exceeded the threshold of 0.9 for all three dimensions: policies, cultures, and practices, indicating outstanding reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

All statistical indices obtained from EFA and CFA were significant (SRMR=.035, RMSE=.064, IFI=.99, CFI=.99). The initial version of the Ifl includes 70 items. Still, after the cognitive interviews and statistical analysis, 64 items were considered for the Romanian version.

## Participants

A total of 1035 teachers from all counties in Romania who had different administrative positions and specializations and taught in pre-university education participated in this research. The study participants were represented by 941 (90.9) females and 94 (9.1%) males. The teaching staff participating in the study hold various positions, such as 18 (1.7%) inspectors, 105 (10.1%) directors, 474 (45.8%) teachers, 31 (3%) itinerant teachers, 48 (4, 6%) counsellor teachers, 212 (20.5%) primary education teachers and 147 (14.2%) preschool education teachers. Of teachers who teach in rural areas, 262 (25.3%) and 773 (74.7%) in urban areas also participated. The schooling cycle at which the teachers taught was from preschool 173 (16.7%), primary school 237 (22.9%), secondary school 331 (32%), and high school 188 (18.2%), but also taught in several cycles 106 (10.2%). Study participants ranged in age from 18-20 to over 60. Most participants, 550 (53.1%), are 40-49. As for seniority, most participants, 615 (59.4%), are over 20 years old.

Table 1  
*Descriptive summary of the sample*

Features	N	%	Features	N	%
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Age range</b>		
Female	941	90.9	18 – 20	4	0.4
Male	94	9.1	21 – 30	66	6.4
<b>School level</b>			31 – 39	135	13
Preschool	173	16.7	40 – 49	550	53.1
Primary school	237	22.9	50 – 59	250	24.2
Secondary school	331	32	peste 60	30	2.9
High school	188	18.2	<b>Teaching experience (in years)</b>		
More then one	106	10.2	0 – 3	59	5.7
<b>Teaching role</b>			3 – 5	27	2.6
School inspector	18	1.7	5 – 10	58	5.6
Principal	105	10.1	10 – 15	93	9
Teacher	474	45.8	15 – 20	183	17.7
Support teacher	31	3	peste 20	615	59.4
School counselor	48	4.6	<b>School environment</b>		
Teacher of primary education	212	20.5	Urban	773	74.7
Teacher for preschool education	147	14.2	Rural	262	25.3

## Data collection

The indicators in the IFl were translated; three translations were made from English to Romanian, and the reverse was made from Romanian to English to identify the most suitable version of the translation in Romanian. The experts' opinion was requested to establish the closest form of the items that would fit in the Romanian context to confirm the validity of the translated items' content. Also, to ensure the instrument's validity, a first qualitative pre-test was carried out, which consisted of 5 cognitive interviews with teachers from different schools. Changes were made to the items based on the qualitative interpretation of the cognitive interview. Also, the first quantitative pre-test was carried out, and data was collected through the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire was distributed through the county school inspectorates between May and June 2023. The participants were informed about the study's purpose and the data's confidentiality. Thus, completing the form, they agreed to participate in this study. The form consisted of two sections, one for demographic data collection and the other section containing the questionnaire items. The survey carried out was approved by the Scientific Council of University Research, with approval number 86978/20.11.2023.

## Data analysis

The Friedman test was used to identify if, from the teachers' perception, there are differences between the ranks of the analyzed items for each dimension. Data were subjected to statistical analysis to determine variations in perceptions of school inclusion among inspectors, principals, and teachers. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used for this purpose. In addition, to assess differences in factors predicting perceptions of school inclusion for inspectors, principals, and teachers, standard multiple regression analyses were conducted.

## Results

### Presentation of the results related to the first two research questions

The Friedman test was used for each dimension, which included cultures, policies, and inclusive school practices to answer the research questions. For all sizes, the test is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). This result shows substantial differences between the ranks of the analyzed items. The following results are presented in detail for each item by size (Table 2).

Table 2

*The results of the Friedman test for teachers' perceptions of the implementation of inclusive education in schools for the dimension of inclusive school cultures*

Creating inclusive cultures			
Building community	Mean Rank	Establishing inclusive values	Mean Rank
A.1.1. Everyone (students, teachers, parents or community members) is welcome in my school	7.39*	A.2.8. The school where I teach promotes non-violent interactions and dispute mediation.	6.08*
A.1.11. The school staff where I teach is interested in the school family relationship.	6.89*	A.2.2. The school where I teach encourages respect for all human rights.	6.07*
A.1.8. The school encourages acceptance of diversity (understanding the interaction between people worldwide).	6.73*	A.2.3. The school where I teach encourages respect for protecting Planet Earth.	5.96*
A.1.2. The staff of the school where I work is cooperative.	6.66*	A.2.10. The school where I teach contributes to children's and adults' physical and mental health (parents, teachers, auxiliary teaching staff, non-teaching staff).	5.69*



Table 2 (cont.)

Creating inclusive cultures			
Building community	Mean Rank	Establishing inclusive values	Mean Rank
A.1.6. The school staff where I teach and the authorities (other local institutions) work well together.	5.85*	A.2.9. The school where I teach encourages children and adults (teachers, parents, auxiliary teaching staff, and non-teaching staff) to accept themselves unconditionally.	5.65*
A.1.10. The school where I teach, and the local community develop each other.	5.7*	A.2.7. The school where I teach fights all forms of discrimination.	5.57*
A.1.4. The staff and children in my school respect each other.	5.68*	A.2.4. In the school where I teach, inclusion is seen as an opportunity to increase participation for all.	5.47*
A.1.7. The school where I teach is a model of democratic citizenship (a socially involved, informed citizen).	5.62*		
A.1.3. The children in my school help each other.	5.38*		
A.1.5. The school staff and parents/guardians of all students in the school where I teach collaborate.	5.09*		
A.1.9. The adults and children in the school where I teach are open and understanding gender diversity.	5*		

Note: \*  $p < .001$ .

The highest-ranked items show that teaching staff value openness to the community and the school-family relationship. However, collaboration between parents and school staff, as well as acceptance of gender diversity, are less emphasized. It suggests that while teachers are open to community involvement, they struggle with fostering diversity and deeper parent-school cooperation. Additionally, promoting non-violent interactions and respecting human rights are highly valued, but combating discrimination and viewing inclusion to increase participation are less prioritized. It reflects a focus on non-violence but not necessarily on embracing diversity.

The highest-ranked items in the dimension of inclusive policies emphasize supporting new students and accepting all children (Table 3). Lower-ranked items indicate less focus on preparing students for diverse future environments and sustainability efforts. Efforts are being made to reduce bullying and barriers to participation, but there is less emphasis on professional development for di-

versity and coordination of support services. It suggests a focus on immediate inclusion and student support but a gap in long-term preparation and environmental consciousness.

Table 3

*Results of the Friedman test for teachers' perception of the implementation of inclusive education in schools for the dimension of inclusive school policies*

Producing inclusive policies			
Developing the school for all	Mean Rank	Organizing support for diversity	Mean Rank
B.1.7. All new children are helped to settle into my school.	6.86*	B.2.7. Bullying is discouraged/minimized in my school.	4.34*
B.1.6. The school I teach accepts all the children in its locality.	6.84*	B.2.6. In the school where I teach, barriers to student participation in school and extracurricular/extracurricular activities are reduced.	4.05*
B.1.8. In the classroom, the teaching and learning groups are organized equitably to support the learning of all the children in the school where I teach.	6.43*	B.2.5. The internal regulations of the school where I teach explain the standard of behaviour expected of students at school (school rules) for learning and curriculum development.	4.25*
B.1.5. All new employees are helped to settle into the school where they teach.	6.23*	B.2.4. The school where I teach ensures that 'special educational needs' policies support inclusion.	4.13*
B.1.2. The school where I teach takes an inclusive approach to leadership through a leadership style that excludes discrimination, bias and favouritism based on colour, race and other characteristics and allows employees to feel valued for their contribution.	6.14*	B.2.3. The school where I teach supports continuity in the education of institutionalized children (in the child protection system)	3.97*
B.1.1. The school management, teachers, parents, students and the community participate in the development process of the school where I teach.	6.09*	B.2.2. The professional development activities of the school where I teach help staff to respond to diversity	3.59*
B.1.3. Appointments and promotions of teachers and students in the school where they teach are correct.	5.95*	B.2.1. In the school where I teach, there is coordination/synchronization of all support addressed to students.	3.67*

Table 3 (cont.)

Producing inclusive policies			
Developing the school for all	Mean Rank	Organizing support for diversity	Mean Rank
B.1.4. the teaching and non-teaching staff's expertise (strengths, skills, training programs completed, etc.) is known and used in my school.	5.91*		
B.1.10. The school where I teach is accessible in terms of physical space, and the buildings and grounds are designed to support the participation of all people.	5.86*		
B.1.9. Children are well prepared to adapt to different environments/contexts during and after their studies.	5.53*		
B.1.11. The school is reducing its carbon footprint (pollution level) and water consumption.	4.15*		

Table 4

*Results of the Friedman test for teachers' perception of the implementation of inclusive education in schools for the dimension of inclusive school practices*

Evolving inclusive practices			
Constructing curricula for all	Mean Rank	Orchestrating learning	Mean Rank
C.1.5. Children constantly learn about health and relationships in my school.	7.68	C.2.2. In the school where I teach, learning activities encourage the participation of all children.	7.94
C.1.6. In my school, children constantly learn about planet Earth, the solar system, and the universe.	7.67	C.2.12. In the school where I teach, extracurricular activities involve all the children.	7.78
C.1.9. In my school, children constantly learn about communication and communication technology.	7.31	C.2.8. In my school, behavioural discipline is based on mutual respect.	7.46
C.1.7. In the school where I teach, the children are constantly studying life on Earth	7.28	C.2.4. In the school where I teach, children are actively involved in their learning process.	7.28
C.1.1. In the school where I teach, children learn and apply knowledge about food production cycles, food consumption, and water's importance.	7.26	C.2.7. In the school where I teach, assessments encourage the achievement of all children	7.18

Table 4 (cont.)

Evolving inclusive practices			
Constructing curricula for all	Mean Rank	Orchestrating learning	Mean Rank
C.1.3. In my school, children constantly learn about housing and the environment.	6.86	C.2.3. In the school where I teach, children are encouraged to think critically and be confident in their opinions	7.17
C.1.10. In my school, children get involved and create literature, art and music.	6.64	C.2.13. In the school where I teach, the potential of local resources is known and exploited for the benefit of the school.	6.91
C.1.8. In my school, the children constantly investigate energy sources.	5.96	C.2.1. Learning activities are planned in the school where I teach, considering each child's needs.	6.85
C.1.11. In the school where I teach, children constantly learn about the labour market and connect it to developing their interests.	5.87	C.2.10. In the school where I teach, teaching staff develop shared resources to support learning.	6.74
C.1.2. In the school where I teach, children constantly study how to dress and what accessories to use.	5.18	C.2.6. In the school where I teach, the lessons develop an understanding of the similarities and differences between people.	6.74
C.1.12. In the school where I teach, children constantly learn about ethics, power, and government.	5.15	C.2.5. Children learn from each other in my school.	6.69
C.1.4. In the school where I teach, children ask themselves questions about how and why people move out of town and into the world.	5.14	C.2.9. In the school where I teach, the teaching staff plan, teach and analyze together.	6.52
		C.2.11. In the school where I teach, homework is set individually to contribute to each child's learning.	5.72

In the dimension of inclusive practices, the focus is on developing a curriculum for all students (Table 4). The top-ranked items show that teachers emphasize health, relationships, and environmental education. However, topics like ethics, power, and government receive less attention. For learning organizations, high-ranking items highlight the encouragement of student participation in both academic and extracurricular activities. Lower-ranked items indicate a lack of collaboration among teaching staff and the absence of individualized homework assignments, which suggests a commitment to broad educational themes but gaps in collaborative planning and personalized learning.

## Presentation of results verifying hypothesis 1 (H1)

To confirm if there are significant differences regarding inclusive education implemented at the school level, in the perception of teachers and educational managers, from the perspective of policies, cultures, and practices, one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) was used as a statistical technique (Table 5).

One-way ANOVA analysis of variance was used to verify the first research hypothesis.

The obtained data indicate that there are statistically significant differences for all measured dimensions, cultures [ $F(6,1028) = 6.44, p < .001$ ], with medium to high intensity ( $d=.71$ ), policies [ $F(6,1028) = 5.07, p < .001$ ], with high intensity ( $d=.85$ ), practices [ $F(6,1028) = 3.83, p < .001$ ], with medium to high intensity ( $d=.64$ ) and for the total score [ $F(6,1028) = 5.84, p < .001$ ], with high intensity ( $d=.81$ ). We can state that the first hypothesis is supported by the data obtained, respectively there are differences between teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusive education implemented at the school level, depending on the managerial level, on all dimensions.

The Games-Howel post hoc test was then applied to verify which groups differed significantly for each dimension. The following section will present the differences between each group by size.

For the culture dimension, the results demonstrate statistically significant differences between principals, middle and high school teachers, counsellors and itinerant professors. Thus, principals ( $M=4.6, p < .001$ ) consider more than secondary and high school teachers ( $M=4.29, p < .001$ ), counsellors ( $M=4.22, p < .05$ ) and itinerant professors ( $M=4.13, p < .05$ ) that there is an inclusive culture in the school. No differences were obtained between principals and teachers for primary and preschool education. Still, differences can be observed between middle and high school teachers and teachers for primary and preschool education. In this case, teachers for preschool education ( $M=4.53, p < .01$ ) believe more than teachers of primary education ( $M=4.48, p < .05$ ) and secondary and high school ( $M=4.29, p < .01$ ) that there is an inclusive culture in the school.

Significant differences were obtained between principals, counsellors, and secondary and high school education teachers for the political dimension. We can see that principals ( $M=4.6, p < .001$ ) believe more than middle and high school teachers ( $M=4.2, p < .001$ ) and counsellors ( $M=4.09, p < .01$ ) that there are inclusive policies in school.

For the practical dimension, differences can also be noted between the groups of principals, middle school and high school teachers and counsellors. Also, for this dimension, the category formed by directors ( $M=4.24, p < .001$ ) considers more than secondary and high school teachers ( $M=3.92, p < .001$ ) and counsellors ( $M=3.75, p < .05$ ) that the school has inclusive practices.

Table 5

*One-Way ANOVA results for teachers' perception of the implementation of inclusive education in schools, according to managerial level*

	Teaching role (N=1035)														F	d
	School Principals (n=105)		School Inspectors (n=18)		Teachers (n=474)		School counsellor (n=48)		Support teacher (n=31)		Teacher of primary education (n=212)		Teacher for preschool education (n=147)			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Inclusive culture	4.6 ced	.43	4.12	.82	4.29 afg	.78	4.22 a	.68	4.13 a	.80	4.48 c	.61	4.53 c	.58	6.44*	.71
Inclusive practices	4.6 cd	.58	3.94	.86	4.2 a	.89	4.09 a	.83	4.25	.79	4.37	.77	4.37	.72	5.07*	.85
Inclusive policies	4.24 cd	.67	3.64	1.00	3.92 a	.98	3.75 a	.95	3.81	1.08	4.07	.93	4.16	.90	3.83*	.64
Inclusive School	4.48 cd	.44	3.9	.84	4.14 ag	.81	4.02 a	.76	4.07	.83	4.3	.68	4.35 c	.64	5.84*	.81

Note: \*  $p < .001$ . Differences regarding the teaching role: School Principals (a), School Inspectors (b), Teachers (c), School counsellor (d), Support teachers (e), Primary education teacher (f), Preschool education teacher (g), according to post hoc Games-Howell comparisons, as the homogeneity test is significant in all cases.

The results demonstrate significant differences between principals, middle and high school teachers, and counsellors regarding the total score for the inclusive school variable, e.g.: ( $M=4.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) principals as well as more than half of the high school teachers ( $M=4.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and counsellors ( $M=4.02$ ,  $p < .01$ ), believe that the school is inclusive. We can also observe that there are differences between preschool teachers and middle and high school teachers. Among them, preschool teachers ( $M=4.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ) believe more than middle and high school teachers ( $M=4.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ) that the school is inclusive.

### Presentation of results that verify hypothesis 2

A simple regression analysis was performed for each factor and category of participants to identify the factors that predict the different perceptions of teachers and educational managers regarding school inclusion from the perspective of policies, cultures and practices (Table 6).

Table 6  
*Results of simple regression analysis to predict inclusive school cultures by managerial level*

Factors	Principals			Inspectors			Teachers		
	$\beta$	p	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	p	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	p	$\Delta R^2$
Practices	.25	.00	.23	.68	.00	.89	.35	.00	.67
Policies	.37	.00		.34	.01		.50	.00	
Gender	.01	.84		-.06	.46		.00	.99	
School environment	.00	.92		-.00	.97		.01	.41	
Age range	.17	.08		-.07	.61		.01	.72	
Teaching experience (in years)	-.02	.83		.07	.62		-.00	.91	
Continuous training	-.03	.73		.12	.21		-.02	.17	
School level	-.10	.24		.01	.90		-.03	.10	

A simple regression analysis was performed to identify factors that predict inclusive school cultures at each managerial level (inspectors, principals, and teachers). According to the data for all three categories, the factors predicting inclusive school cultures emerged as practices and policies,  $p < .01$ .

The simple regression model for the directors' category significantly predicted cultures in proportion to 23%. The strongest predictor is represented by policies ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by practices ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For the inspector category, the simple regression model significantly predicted 89% of cultures, the strongest predictor being practices ( $\beta = .68$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by policies ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, for the category of teachers, the regression model predicted 67% inclusive cultures, the strongest predictor emerged as policies

( $\beta = .50$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by practices ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results represent that the more inclusive the policies and practices, the more inclusive the culture becomes.

Next, we will present the simple regression analysis to identify the factors that predict inclusive school practices at each managerial level (Table 7).

Table 7

*Results of simple regression analysis to predict inclusive school practices by managerial level*

Factors	Principals			Inspectors			Teachers		
	$\beta$	p	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	p	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	p	$\Delta R^2$
Culture	.27	.00	.18	1.13	.00	.85	.38	.00	.62
Policies	.26	.01		-.24	.21		.44	.00	
Gender	.10	.26		.05	.62		-.01	.40	
School environment	.01	.87		-.07	.50		-.04	.03	
Age range	-.00	.93		-.03	.85		.02	.31	
Teaching experience (in years)	-.01	.86		.05	.78		-.04	.29	
Continuous training	.12	.19		-.13	.25		.01	.48	
School level	-.06	.45		.13	.36		-.01	.42	

The simple regression model for the directors' category significantly predicted the practices in the proportion of 18%. The strongest predictor is represented by cultures ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by policies ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $p < .01$ ). For the category of inspectors, the simple regression model significantly predicted the practices in a proportion of 85%, the only predictor being represented by cultures ( $\beta = 1.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Last but not least, for the category of teachers, the regression model predicted 62% inclusive practices, the strongest predictor turned out to be represented by policies ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by cultures ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results show that perceptions of school-inclusive practices of all three categories, by managerial level, are predicted by cultures,  $p < .01$ . This emerges as the only significant factor in each category. As for the category of teachers and principals, we can see an additional factor represented by policies. Thus, principals and teachers perceive that the more inclusive policies and cultures are, the more inclusive school practices become.

Regarding the last dimension, inclusive school policies, a simple regression analysis was performed to identify the factors that predict this dimension at each managerial level (Table 8). According to the data, cultures are the only common factor perceived by each category (superintendents, principals, teachers) to predict inclusive school policies,  $p < .01$ .



Table 8  
*Results of simple regression analysis to predict inclusive school policies by managerial level*

Factors	Principals			Inspectors			Teachers		
	$\beta$	p	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	p	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	p	$\Delta R^2$
Culture	.36	.00	.26	1.41	.01	.64	.48	.00	.67
Practices	.23	.01		-.61	.21		.38	.00	
Age range	-.22	.03		0.6	.76		-.03	.26	
Gender	-.08	.33		.14	.37		.01	.55	
School environment	-.02	.81		.09	.57		.01	.39	
Teaching experience (in years)	.18	.07		-.29	.30		.06	.11	
Continuous training	.14	.10		-.18	.33		.02	.18	
School level	-.07	.41		-.21	.37		.00	.90	

The simple regression model for the directors' category significantly predicted policies in proportion to 26%. The strongest predictor is represented by cultures ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by practices ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and age ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ). It is observed that for the dimension of inclusive school policies, age is an additional factor that emerged significantly only for the category represented by principals. Thus, the younger the principals, the more inclusive they believe school policies are.

For the category of inspectors, the simple regression model significantly predicted policies in proportion to 64%, the only significant predictor being represented by cultures ( $\beta = 1.41$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Last but not least, for the teachers category, the regression model predicted 67% inclusive policies, the strongest predictor being cultures ( $\beta = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by practices ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results highlight that teachers and principals believe that the more inclusive cultures and practices are, the more inclusive policies become.

## Discussion

Based on an explanatory, comparative, and correlational non-experimental design, the results showed that principals better perceive the implementation of IE in the school on all three dimensions—policies, practices, and inclusive cultures.

Firstly, the data of the present research highlighted that in the perception of Romanian teachers, the emphasis is on facilitating the accommodation of new students in school, accepting everyone, and making efforts to remove the barriers that stand in the way of participation in the educational process. However, the aspects related to the students' future preparation so they can manage var-

ious situations, as well as the professional training regarding diversity and the coordination of support services, came out less rated. IE training programs should focus on teachers' teaching and learning of inclusive practices so clear and specific methodological elements can be adapted to classes to meet these needs. Training courses should emphasize the importance of a culture of collaboration and cooperation within the multidisciplinary team and case management. Acceptance of diversity, especially of gender, is more difficult to achieve in traditional and conservative Romanian culture. Changing attitudes can take generations, but vocational training courses can address gender diversity issues.

Inclusive practices involve actively engaging all students, valuing their daily experiences, making adaptations, individualized planning, overcoming barriers, collaborating, and providing support (Forlin et al., 2013; Finkelstein et al., 2019). In Romania, teachers focus on curriculum topics like health, relationships, and environmental education and encourage student participation in extracurricular activities. However, there is less emphasis on teacher collaboration and tailoring tasks to individual needs. It indicates a gap between general curriculum goals and personalized learning practices. These results show that both teachers and educational managers need to work on policy aspects (e.g., preparing students for the future to cope with diverse situations, professional training on diversity, and better coordination of service support) and practices (e.g., collaboration in teaching and individualization of assignments), to develop inclusive cultures in the school. Professional training programs in inclusive education should emphasize collaboration not only in the multidisciplinary team for students with SEN but also in teaching, beyond exceptional cases, so that collaboration and synchronization of educational actions is a habit that leads to progress in student achievement. Individualization and differentiation in teaching should again be applied not only to students with SEN but to all students as an element of adapting teaching to the needs of students.

Secondly, school principals presented significantly better perceptions of school inclusion. This result can be explained by occupying a specific managerial position. School principals are more directly involved in the day-to-day management of inclusion initiatives in their schools, such as overseeing the development and implementation of individualized support plans for students with diverse needs, coordinating support services, and providing guidance and support to teachers. In contrast, teachers are directly involved in the classroom, facing various challenges. They need the support of the school principal to manage the different situations and identify solutions, as his role in promoting a culture of inclusion in their school community is known (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Thirdly, the results obtained through regression analysis led to identifying common and distinct factors among the three categories (teachers, principals, and inspectors), which predict their perception of the implementation of IE in

schools. According to the data, inclusive cultures are indicated by inclusive practices and policies for all three categories. The results show that according to the perception of teachers, principals, and inspectors, inclusive policies and practices are needed to improve inclusive cultures. Inclusive policies involve encouraging participation by all students and staff and supporting activities that increase the ability to respond to the diversity of everyone's needs (Booth & Ainscow, 2016).

Regarding inclusive school practices, the only common factor perceived by each category that significantly predicts cultures represents this dimension. All three categories perceive that to have inclusive practices in school, it is necessary to have inclusive school cultures. On the other hand, for teachers and principals, an additional factor can be distinguished that did not emerge significantly for inspectors: inclusive policies. In other words, principals and teachers believe that in addition to cultures, inclusive school policies are also necessary for school practices to be truly inclusive. The perception of inspectors, principals, and teachers regarding inclusive school policies is predicted by cultures, being the only common factor. This factor shows that all three participants believe school cultures must be genuinely inclusive to have inclusive policies. Cultures, in the perception of the teaching staff involved in this research, are seen more as openness to the community and interest in the school-family relationship. Less attention is paid to parent-school collaboration and openness to diversity, especially regarding gender. Although they show interest in the school family relationship, the partnership between these relevant actors is not well-rated. In the teachers' perception, inclusive values are represented by non-violence but not by respect for diversity. To have genuinely inclusive cultures involves a good collaboration between all teaching staff, the recognition of diversity, and the coexistence of different life forms, which promotes beneficial communication between the relevant actors (Booth & Ainscow, 2016; Ainscow, 2020).

This time, compared to the previously presented dimensions, we have an additional factor represented by the age of principals: the younger they are, the more inclusive they think school policies are than principals with more years of life. This factor is specific only to directors and not to the other two categories. The data show a significant correlation between the three factors that underlie the formation of an inclusive school. This result indicates that school policies and practices positively correlate with an inclusive school culture. A possible explanation lies in the fact that educational managers are the primary facilitators, as they can help shape the overall organizational climate, policies, and practices in an educational system (Lian, 2020). Thus, the results of this study highlighted even more the essential role of academic managers, especially school principals, in improving and promoting school inclusion in Romania as well, in agreement

with other studies (Urton et al., 2014; Thompson, 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Khaleel et al., 2021; Adams et al., 2023).

Another possible implication is that principals could incorporate strategies into the Institutional Development Plan (IDP) to enhance inclusive education (IE) implementation in schools systematically. By doing so, they can establish learning communities that support achieving these goals. Additionally, the findings provide valuable data from Romania that can contribute to international discussions on how IE is perceived and implemented by educational managers and teachers.

## **Limits and Future Research**

The first limitation of the study was the lack of qualitative data. Only a quantitative perspective can provide in-depth interpretations and authentic data on the inclusive reality in the school. Also, we cannot detect to what extent the professors' answers are not socially desirable. It is desirable to continue the research in the future, starting from the conclusions reached from a qualitative perspective and using interviews, focus groups, or case studies to overcome these obstacles. The second limitation of this research is that it evaluated and analyzed only the teachers' perspectives. Future research will continue to investigate the parents' and students' perceptions about implementing IE in schools.

## **Conclusion**

The quantitative research design allowed the identification of relevant factors and the comparison of the perceptions of teachers and educational managers regarding the implementation of IE in Romanian schools. Using Ifl, an instrument that has proven outstanding psychometric qualities for the Romanian context, it was possible to provide an image of the perspective of the teachers and educational managers about implementing IE in Romanian schools.

The results showed that openness to inclusion and non-discriminatory acceptance of any student are declarative values often supported by the teachers. However, acceptance of diversity and tolerance towards any category of students, including gender divergent, is not well represented. We can conclude that, in terms of policies and values, inclusive education is well-represented in schools. Unfortunately, the other two inclusive dimensions still leave room for improvement: there is still no culture of collaboration between teachers, and collaboration with parents is perceived as more one-way school-parent, less with the reverse initiative, parent-school. At the level of inclusive practices, ele-

ments still need to be improved: collaboration in the multidisciplinary team, individualization of instruction, coordination of support services, students' preparation toward resilience and adaptability, preparation for the labour market, and democratic involvement. The teacher training programs should address these themes but approach them through inclusive teaching, with lessons designed for all students, not in a segregationist manner, with activities for typical students and students with SEN.

The measured differences indicate that principals perceive inclusive education (IE) as being more effectively implemented in their schools compared to teachers' perceptions. Also, the results showed that the external factors related to policies, cultures, and inclusive school practices are considered more relevant for implementing IE at the school level than the internal factors related to the person (age, seniority, gender, school environment). In conclusion, the findings suggest that while principals have a more optimistic view of implementing inclusive education (IE) in their schools, teachers perceive more challenges. This discrepancy highlights the need for improved communication and alignment between school leaders and teachers to ensure that inclusive practices are effectively understood and applied. Additionally, the results provide valuable insights for international discussions on IE implementation, using data from Romania to inform global perspectives.

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## Poglądy menadżerów i nauczycieli oświaty na temat wdrażania edukacji włączającej w rumuńskich szkołach

### Streszczenie

Edukacja włączająca (IE), trzydzieści lat po Deklaracji z Salamanki (1994), nadal stanowi wyzwanie wymagające rozwiązań opartych na dowodach. W Rumunii edukacja włączająca skupiała się głównie na integracji uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi (SEN) w szkołach ogólnodostępnych. Jednakże nie osiągnięto jeszcze pełnego włączenia. Kluczową rolę w pomyślnym wdrażaniu IE w szkołach odgrywają nauczyciele i menadżerowie oświaty. Niniejsze badanie ma na celu zbadanie czynników, które w istotny sposób przewidują różnice między postrzeganiem nauczycieli i menadżerów oświaty na temat wdrażania IE w rumuńskich szkołach. Aby osiągnąć cel badania, zastosowano projekt ilościowy, nieeksperymentalny, przekrojowy, porównawczy i korelacyjny. W sumie 1035 uczestników, w tym 123 menadżerów oświaty (inspektorów i dyrektorów), odpowiedziało na rumuńską, dostosowaną kulturowo 4. edycję Indeksu na rzecz włączenia społecznego. Wyniki pokazały, że dyrektorzy postrzegają szkoły jako bardziej włączające niż nauczyciele. Czynniki, które przewidują te różnice, to czynniki związane z polityką, kulturą i praktykami, a nie z wiekiem, stażem pracy, płcią i środowiskiem. Jedynie w przypadku młodszych dyrektorów w zakresie polityki szkoły włączającej zidentyfikowano wyraźny czynnik związany z wiekiem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja włączająca, szkoła włączająca, indeks włączania.