

Pioneering Change: Prospective Teachers' Contributions to Educational Inclusion for Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Youth

MARIA CRISTINA POPA*

This case study investigates the Superheroes in School program, an initiative to support financially and socially disadvantaged children in the Sibiu region. The program recruits prospective teachers to provide online homework assistance and foster academic engagement. Through various research methods, including questionnaires, interviews, and observations, the study assesses the program's implementation and impact from its start in 2019 to the present in 2024. It focuses on the program's structure, the motivations of volunteers, and the challenges encountered. Additionally, the study seeks to identify lessons learned and recommendations for enhancing educational equity. Ultimately, it aims to inform future community-based interventions that empower marginalized communities through grassroots initiatives.

Keywords: *Educational Inclusion, Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Youth, Remedial Activities, Program Implementation, Marginalized Youth.*

1. Introduction

The education of children from marginalized communities has been a persistent challenge in many parts of the world, including Romania.¹ The significant disparities in educational outcomes between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more privileged peers underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions.² Research has consistently shown that children from low-income families face numerous barriers to educational success, including limited access to resources, inadequate

* Maria Cristina Popa, PhD, Lecturer at Social and Human Science Faculty, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Calea Dumbrăvii nr. 34, Romania, mariacristina.popa@ulb-sibiu.ro

¹ Florian Lani and Majda Becirevic, "Challenges for Teachers' Professional Learning for Inclusive Education in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States," *Prospects* (2011): 371–84; Iuliana Ioana Merce et al., "School Dropout – A Social Problem in Romania," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2015): 623–28.

² Adams Lindsay, *Romania: Early Childhood Development* (SABER Country Report, 2019); Alexandrina-Mihaela Popescu and Gabriela Motoi, "Breaking Barriers: Exploring the Perspectives of Roma Parents on the Transformative Role of Education for Their Children," *Revista Universitară de Sociologie* 3 (2023): 100–07.

support at home, and a lack of positive role models³. Social and emotional difficulties often compound these challenges, further hindering their ability to succeed in school.⁴

In response to these issues, educators and organizations in Romania have developed various initiatives to support at-risk children, achieving varying degrees of success.⁵ One such initiative is the project explored in this study, which focuses on six impoverished localities around Sibiu, Romania. This project represents a concerted effort to address the educational and social needs of children in these communities through a comprehensive, volunteer-driven approach. By providing personalized support and fostering strong connections between volunteers and children, the project aims to break the cycle of disadvantage and promote educational equity.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the project's impact on both the children and the volunteers involved. It seeks to contribute to the existing literature on educational interventions in marginalized communities by providing a detailed case study of this specific project. Through the use of the case study methodology, this research will offer insights into the challenges and successes of the project, highlighting key factors that contribute to its effectiveness.

In examining this project, the study will engage with relevant literature on educational inequality, volunteerism, and the role of community-based interventions in addressing systemic disparities. It will also consider the broader social and historical context in which the project operates, situating it within the ongoing efforts to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged children in Romania.

This research is particularly timely given the increasing recognition of the importance of early intervention and the role of community

³ Stephanie Berzin, "Educational Aspirations among Low-Income Youths: Examining Multiple Conceptual Models," *Children & Schools* 32, no. 2 (2010): 112–24; Jacqueline Lynch, "Elementary School Teachers' and Parents' Perspectives of Home-School Engagement and Children's Literacy Learning in a Low-Income Area," *School Community Journal* 1 (2021): 127–48; Poole, Ashleigh, *Exploring Parental Involvement in the Educational Support of Their Child with Learning Difficulties in a Low-Income Community* (2017).

⁴ Nazir Ahmad et al., "Bridging the Gap: Secondary School Teachers' Perspectives on Behavioral Barriers to Academic Success," *Al-Qantara* (April 2024); Weihao Wang et al., "How School Climate Affects the Development of the Social and Emotional Skills of Underprivileged-Background Students – An Empirical Study Based on the SSES2019 Data," *Children* 9, no. 12 (2022): 1812.

⁵ Ministerul Educației, *Programul Național pentru Reducerea Abandonului Școlar*, 2024; PNRAS, *Programul Național pentru Reducerea Abandonului Școlar* (PNRAS) (2024).

involvement in educational success. By providing an in-depth analysis of this project, the study aims to inform future efforts to support marginalized children and contribute to the broader discourse on educational equity.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the structure and implementation of a volunteer-driven educational project designed to support children from marginalized communities around Sibiu, Romania. By examining the various phases of the project, the study aims to assess how the initiative has addressed the educational and social needs of these children, as well as the experiences and contributions of the volunteers involved. The study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the project's outcomes, identifying key factors that have contributed to its successes and challenges.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the structure and evolution of the project – Understand how the project has developed from its inception in 2019 to its current state in 2024.
- To explore the volunteers' experiences and motivations – Investigate the factors that motivate volunteers to participate in the project and their perceptions of its impact.
- To identify challenges and barriers faced by the project – Discuss how the team addressed these challenges, and share the lessons learned.
- To contribute to the broader discourse on educational equity and community-based interventions – Provide recommendations for similar projects in other marginalized communities, based on the insights gained from this case study.

The following key research questions guided this study:

- How has the structure and organizational framework of the project evolved from 2019 to 2024?
- What are the motivations, experiences, and outcomes for the volunteers involved in the project?
- What challenges and barriers did the team encounter throughout the project's phases?
- What lessons can we draw from this case study to inform similar initiatives in other contexts?

The case study focuses on a volunteer-driven educational project launched in 2019 to support children from six impoverished localities around Sibiu, Romania, along with a few individual cases from nearby areas. The

project initially involved 168 volunteers with pedagogical training, 114 children, and seven teachers, aiming to address the severe financial, social, and emotional challenges faced by these children. Over the years, the project evolved through three distinct phases, adapting to the changing educational landscape and growing to include 103 volunteers and 122 children by August 2024. The initiative is managed by an NGO and has transitioned from online-only activities during the pandemic to a more structured and diverse program, including in-person interactions. The project serves as a critical intervention in breaking the cycle of disadvantage for these marginalized children, providing them with much-needed educational and social support.

2. Literature Review

Educational inequality

Educational inequality in Romania is a persistent challenge that echoes deep-rooted disparities across various social, economic, and geographical dimensions.⁶ Despite significant reforms and initiatives aimed at improving access to quality education, the Romanian education system continues to struggle with unequal opportunities for students, particularly those from marginalized and rural communities.⁷ These inequalities are evident in the uneven distribution of resources, varying quality of educational institutions, and significant differences in academic outcomes.⁸

Factors such as poverty, limited access to educational materials, and inadequate infrastructure further exacerbate these disparities, leading to a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to break.⁹ Addressing these issues is needed to foster social equity and ensure that all students, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to succeed.

Research reveals significant disparities in participation rates, both over time and across different regions, influenced by social, economic,

⁶ Ana-Maria Zamfir and Cristina Mocanu, "Exploring Educational Inequalities in Romania," *Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională*, no. 1 (June 2016): 171–80.

⁷ Ionela-Roxana Petcu, "Decomposing Income Inequality by Education in Romania," *The Journal of National Institute of Statistics* (December 20, 2022): 81–92.

⁸ Florina Pop and Bianca Balea, "School Mediators in the Romanian Education System: A Discussion on Their Role in Addressing Educational Inequalities," *Social Change Review*, no. 2 (December 2016): 149–76.

⁹ Diana Maria Cismaru and Nicoleta Corbu, *The Multiple Impact of Education Gaps in Romania: Development in Turbulent Time* (2019).

and cultural factors.¹⁰ The findings underscore the deep educational segregation that hampers efforts to ensure equal opportunities for all students.

In Romania, the disparities between urban and rural schools are stark and highlight significant inequalities in educational access and quality.¹¹ Urban schools generally benefit from better infrastructure, more resources, and access to advanced educational technologies. They often have well-trained teachers, extracurricular activities, and a broader range of academic programs, which collectively enhance the learning experience for students. In contrast, rural schools frequently grapple with inadequate facilities, limited resources, and fewer educational materials.¹² Rural schools often struggle with lower student enrollment and higher dropout rates, exacerbating the educational divide. These disparities underscore the need for targeted interventions to address the inequalities and ensure that students in both urban and rural settings receive a high-quality education.¹³

Volunteerism in education

Volunteerism can contribute to supporting national educational programs, particularly in efforts to help disadvantaged children stay in school and engage in remedial activities. NGOs and volunteers often provide personalized attention and mentorship that these children may not receive in schools, due to various and complex reasons.¹⁴

Through tutoring, mentoring, and organizing after-school programs, volunteers can help bridge the educational gaps faced by students from low-income families. These initiatives not only improve academic

¹⁰ Elena Cocoradă et al., “Dropout Intention, Motivation, and Socio-Demographics of Forestry Students in Romania,” *Forests*, no. 5 (2021): 618; Elena Stancu, “Preventing and Combating School Dropout,” *Revista Universitară de Sociologie XVI*, no. 2 (2020): 152–63; Lavinia-Ştefania Țoțan and Raluca-Corina Dawed, “Equity Challenges in Romanian Education: Towards Sustainable Education for All Students,” *Review of International Comparative Management*, 4 (October 2023): 600–07.

¹¹ Erica Kryst, Stephen Kotok, and Katerina Bodovski, “Rural/Urban Disparities in Science Achievement in Post-Socialist Countries: The Evolving Influence of Socioeconomic Status,” *Global Education Review*, no. 4 (2015); Alina Simona Tecău, “Particularities of the Romanian Rural Education,” *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov. Series V: Economic Sciences*, 59 (2017): 65–72.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ UNICEF, *Exploring Educational Inclusion and School Segregation: New Perspectives from the Case Study of Romania*, 2024.

¹⁴ Andrea Coombes and Oriana Ponta, “Building Community Engagement and Teacher Support in Education: Qualitative Findings from Process Evaluations in Two Exceptional Settings,” *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, no. 3 (2022): 302–19; Gali Yarden and Chen Schechter, “NGO Involvement in Education Policy: Principals’ Voices,” *International Journal of Educational Management*, no. 10 (2020): 1509–25.

outcomes but also foster a supportive environment that encourages children to remain in school.¹⁵ Additionally, volunteers can assist in identifying and addressing the unique challenges that disadvantaged students face, such as lack of resources, emotional support, or motivation. By working closely with educators and community members, volunteers contribute significantly to leveling the playing field and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to succeed in their education.¹⁶

The role of community-based interventions in addressing systemic disparities

Community-based interventions address systemic disparities by providing tailored solutions that directly address the unique needs of marginalized groups. These initiatives often involve local stakeholders, including residents, organizations, and leaders, who work together to identify and tackle specific challenges within their communities. By focusing on grassroots involvement, community-based interventions can effectively address issues such as educational inequities, health disparities, and economic inequalities.¹⁷ These interventions can bridge gaps left by larger, more generalized policies and provide support where it is most needed. For example, local mentorship programs can enhance educational outcomes for disadvantaged students.¹⁸ By leveraging local knowledge and fostering collaboration, community-based interventions can drive meaningful change and contribute to more equitable systemic improvements.

In underserved areas, where schools may face challenges such as inadequate funding, inadequate student-to-teacher ratios, and limited access to resources, community-based interventions can bridge critical gaps.¹⁹ Nonprofits or grassroots organizations can establish tutoring programs that offer personalized support to students who need extra help.²⁰ These programs evolve into an understanding of local educational challenges and cultural contexts, making them relevant and effective.

¹⁵ Roxana Rogobete et al., “Developing LEMI: A New Corpus-Based Literacy Support Tool for Schoolchildren,” *Editorial Universitat Politècnica de València* (February 12, 2024): 1–6.

¹⁶ Ana Bela Ribeiro, Andreia Caetano, and Isabel Menezes, “Citizenship Education, Educational Policies and NGOs,” *British Educational Research Journal*, no. 4 (2016): 646–64.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Coombes and Ponta 2022, 302–19.

¹⁹ Cismaru and Corbu 2019; Kryst, Kotok, and Bodovski, “Rural/Urban Disparities” 2015.

²⁰ Janusz Grabara, Codruța Dura, and Imola Drigă, “Corporate Social Responsibility Awareness in Romania and Poland: A Comparative Analysis,” *Economics and Sociology*, no. 4 (2016): 344–59.

Community-based efforts also focus on building strong relationships between schools, families, and community members. By fostering collaboration and communication, these interventions help create a supportive network around students. Parental involvement initiatives, for instance, can empower parents with the skills and knowledge needed to support their children's education at home, further enhancing student success.²¹

Also, community-based interventions can address systemic issues such as educational inequity and resource disparities by advocating for policy changes and increased funding.²² Local organizations often serve as a voice for marginalized communities, highlighting specific needs and pushing for systemic reforms that can lead to long-term improvements in the educational landscape.

To effectively address educational disparities, it is necessary to meticulously harmonize the interventions of NGOs and other actors within the educational system and the community itself. This coordination involves ensuring frequent and meaningful communication between all stakeholders, including educational institutions, community organizations, and governmental bodies.²³ Persistent and continuous interventions are essential, as they provide the sustained support necessary to effect real change. Each child's unique challenges and needs must be thoroughly understood, which requires fine attention to detail in identifying underlying issues that may affect their educational experience.²⁴ Additionally, respecting the individuality and dignity of each student during interventions is crucial to fostering a supportive and inclusive environment. By carefully orchestrating these efforts and maintaining open lines of communication, stakeholders can create a more cohesive and responsive educational support system that addresses the root causes of disparities and promotes equitable opportunities for every child.

3. Methodology

The choice of the case study method as the research approach for this study is driven by the need to explore and understand the complexities of a real-world educational intervention in a specific context. In this study,

²¹ Gali Yarden and Chen Schechter, "NGO Involvement in Education Policy: Principals' Voices," *International Journal of Educational Management*, no. 10 (2020): 1509–25.

²² Gabriela Grosseck and Carmen Holotescu, "Open Educational Resources in Romania," in *Current State of Open Educational Resources in the 'Belt and Road' Countries*, eds. Gabriela Grosseck and Carmen Holotescu (March 2020): 151–73.

²³ Silvia Mazăre, "The Impact of European Funds on Rural Development in România" (PhD diss., www.cnaa.md, 2023).

²⁴ Kryst, Kotok, and Bodovski, "Rural/Urban Disparities".

the project under investigation involves multiple interacting components – volunteers, children, educators, and the broader community – each influenced by socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. The case study method allows for a holistic examination of these components, capturing the nuances and dynamics that other research methods might overlook. By focusing on a single case, the study can delve into the specific experiences and outcomes of this project, providing detailed insights into how it operates, the challenges it faces, and the impact it has on its participants.

The project was chosen for its significant evolution over time, involving numerous volunteers with pedagogical training and a clear impact on the participating children. The researcher's role as the lead professor and project manager provided an insider's perspective, enhancing access to detailed information and a deeper understanding of the project's dynamics. This insider knowledge made the case particularly relevant for exploring the project's effectiveness, volunteer experiences, and overall contribution to educational equity, aligning closely with the study's research objectives.

Data Collection

a. Surveys and interviews. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended surveys were conducted with volunteers, children, and teachers involved in the project. These aimed to capture perspectives on motivations, challenges, and the impact of volunteer actions. Interviews were transcribed and coded for recurrent themes such as “help,” “growth,” and “educational support.” Survey responses also included quantitative data on volunteer retention and engagement levels, which helped quantify participant commitment over time.

b. Digital engagement data. Platform analytics from the collaborative digital platform were reviewed to assess participation trends, usage patterns, and levels of online activity over time. Metrics included login frequencies, time spent per session, and engagement in specific activities, providing insights into the transition from online to hybrid models.

c. Observational field notes. During in-person events, project coordinators and teachers maintained observational notes. These notes documented real-time interactions and qualitative assessments of children's engagement levels and the volunteer-student dynamic. This source helped contextualize findings from interviews and digital engagement data.

Direct observations of the researcher took place in children's homes and schools from the beginning of the project until the present time,

using checklists and field notes to record data. This method provided real-time data on the project's implementation. Document analysis involved reviewing project reports, volunteer communication in various groups and project phases, and children's progress records. This analysis, conducted from the beginning of the project, helped identify key themes and outcomes related to the project's activities and effectiveness.

d. Lastly, social media and media feedback were analyzed. This analysis provided insights into the project's public perception. Together, these methods offered a well-rounded view of the project's impact and contributed valuable insights into its successes and challenges.

Data Analysis

a. Thematic analysis. Following data collection, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns across interviews, surveys, and observational data. For instance, volunteer motivations related to "helping children" and "professional growth" emerged consistently and were cross-referenced with digital engagement data to validate levels of active participation and alignment with stated motivations.

b. Coding for keyword frequencies. Responses from interviews and surveys were analyzed for keyword frequencies to better understand motivation patterns. Words such as "help," "children," and "program" were the most frequent, highlighting core motivations. This frequency analysis provided quantitative backing to the qualitative themes and revealed the most prominent motivational drivers.

c. Triangulation. To ensure rigor, findings were triangulated across data sources. For example, volunteer statements about pandemic-related challenges were corroborated by platform engagement metrics showing spikes in digital activity during lockdowns. Observational notes on children's engagement in summer camps further validated findings on the benefits of hybrid learning models.

Addressing ethical issues in the case study is crucial to ensure the protection and respect of all participants involved. The following measures were implemented:

- Informed consent – before participating, all stakeholders, including children, parents, volunteers, and educators, were provided with detailed information about the project's purpose, procedures, and potential impacts.
- Confidentiality – to protect participants' privacy, all data collected, including interviews, questionnaires, and observations, was anonymized.

- Handling of sensitive information – the study adhered to strict protocols for handling sensitive information. Any personal or sensitive data, such as details about the children’s educational challenges or volunteer experiences, was treated with the utmost confidentiality.

4. Case Description

The project involves six impoverished rural localities around Sibiu, as well as a few individual cases from nearby areas. It began in 2019 with 168 volunteers, all with pedagogical training (prospective kindergarten and primary school teachers, students enrolled in pedagogical courses), 114 children, and seven teachers and school principals. As of August 2024, the project includes 103 volunteers, 122 children, and the teaching staff from the schools where the children are enrolled.

The project has gone through three phases so far:

- Phase 2019–2021: The pioneering phase, marked by the challenges of school closures due to the state of emergency.
- Phase 2021–2022: The transition phase, in the post-restrictions period, where the activities largely continued online.
- Phase 2022–2024: The maturity phase, during which the project evolved into a more structured form and activities began to take place in person. The last activity of the project took place in the summer of 2024, in the form of a camp for meritorious children, offered as a reward for their efforts.

4.1 The first phase of the project

In the first phase, the project was named “School of Aspirations”. The project started with 168 volunteers, mostly students enrolled in Primary and Preschool Education (79%, of which 85% were graduates of Pedagogical High Schools). They worked online, one-on-one, with the children enrolled in the project. Meetings provided children with the necessary support to solve homework tasks and also included other school remedial activities. The selection of children was facilitated by school principals from the six targeted localities, as well as by teachers, considering that the majority of these children were facing significant financial, social, and emotional difficulties.

Communication in this phase of the project was entirely online and via the telephone.

The project was conducted under the auspices of a newly created NGO, led by a professor with a permanent position in Primary and Preschool Education, along with students enrolled in the same degree program. The professor's presence was essential for the legal formation of the NGO, not for other reasons.

From the outset, three teams were formed: a management team and two operational teams, specifically the pedagogical team, consisting of volunteers working directly with the children, and the IT team, responsible for procuring the necessary equipment to connect the students, maintaining it, and training the children on how to use it.

The volunteers in the operational teams were organized into groups, each with a representative who maintained communication with the main organizer (the professor, who was also the president of the association). Communication among volunteers was done through a Telegram channel, and volunteer training included an online course focused on the project's vision and the volunteer's role. The core values promoted in the project were:

- Care for the action itself, reflecting the desire to contribute to the education of a child in need, rather than merely fulfilling a personal void.
- A clear, transparent pedagogical intervention toward the child, parents, and teaching staff.
- Open communication with other volunteers.
- Responsibility for organizing activities with the children.
- Absolute transparency in reporting activities.

During this phase, all activities and communications were conducted exclusively online (audio and audio-video), focusing on school-related activities (homework and remedial activities). Volunteer registration was voluntary, and all necessary resources were gathered through fundraising, utilizing the legal entity of the newly created NGO. The databases of volunteers, students, teachers, and all involved parties were managed collaboratively through simple tables.

Throughout the entire duration of the project, from the beginning until now, and with the serious intention of maintaining this practice, the necessary approvals were obtained from parents/legal guardians and school administrations for the children's involvement. Ethical considerations were a major concern from the start, and depending on the limitations and challenges of the various phases of the project, legal, moral, and ethical aspects were strictly observed.

4.2. The second phase of the project

The second phase can be considered a transitional period. After the relaxation of pandemic measures, the project retained the same structure. The number of volunteers fluctuated, but the core values remained at approximately the same level.

The activities with the children remained strictly online, while meetings between volunteers and the management team transitioned to in-person. The majority of activities (95%) continued to focus on schoolwork (homework, remedial activities). A significant event after the lifting of restrictions was a visit to the State Philharmonic in Sibiu for an educational concert attended by 140 children from the project. For many of these children, it was their first time leaving their village, making the city visit a unique experience. The transition during this phase involved gradually transferring activities from the student-run NGO to a new NGO created by the IT team. This team, not being involved in the academic environment, could ensure a more independent decision-making process within the project. Additionally, this arrangement allowed the management team to hire and pay a member responsible for structuring, implementing, and monitoring the project. The transition was gradual throughout the year. The project was renamed “Superheroes at School”, a name voted by the volunteers, and the visual identity was also updated.

Volunteer registration remained voluntary, and all necessary resources were gathered through fundraising, utilizing the legal entity of the new NGO. The databases continued to be managed collaboratively through simple tables.

4.3. The third phase of the project

In the maturity phase, the project’s activities began to diversify. In addition to online homework and other remedial activities, volunteers participated in various actions within the schools, and children were engaged in diverse activities held in different locations.

This phase saw a stronger focus on the core goals of the project: completing specific school tasks, regular connections with the children, and reduced volunteer turnover, thanks to a more structured approach to the project’s activities. This structure, in turn, stemmed from the experience gained by the project’s main organizers.

Volunteer registration remained voluntary, and all necessary resources were gathered through fundraising, utilizing the legal entity of the NGO. The databases were centralized and algorithmically managed

in a collaborative application, <https://supereroi-la-scoala.netlify.app/#/dashboard>, which contains three main sections: children, volunteers, and activities. The focus shifted to the activities conducted with the children, aiming to analyze in the future which activities, performed when and with whom (what child or group profile), were effective in certain types of interventions.

Activities are recorded with the exact date, number of hours spent with the child, description of the activity, child's name, volunteer's name, and any issues/needs/other observations. The analysis of this database will be the subject of a future study, which will undoubtedly generate valuable insights.

5. Findings

To analyze the data concerning the first research question *How has the structure and organizational framework of the project evolved from 2019 to 2024?*, we need to explore the patterns, relationships, and insights that emerge from the collected data.

Evolution of project structure

Initial Phase (2019–2021)

- Structure: the project began with a pioneering structure involving 168 volunteers, 114 children, and seven teachers, managed by a newly created NGO with a strong academic foundation. The organizational framework was heavily reliant on online interactions due to the state of emergency.
- Patterns: during this phase, the project focused on establishing a solid foundation and adapting to urgent educational needs caused by the pandemic. Volunteers worked 1:1 with children, and activities were centered on homework assistance and remedial education.

Transition Phase (2021–2022)

- Structure: the project shifted to a transitional phase post-pandemic, maintaining a similar structure but incorporating changes to address evolving needs. Volunteer numbers fluctuated, and while online activities continued, there was a move towards physical interactions where feasible.
- Patterns: the project adapted to reduced pandemic restrictions by introducing in-person activities like a field trip to the Filarmonica

de Stat. The shift to a new NGO, managed by the IT team, enabled a more detached decision-making process and allowed for hiring dedicated staff for project management.

Maturity Phase (2022–2024)

- Structure: the project entered a phase of maturity with a more structured and diverse approach. The framework expanded to include face-to-face activities alongside online support, reflecting a more holistic educational intervention.
- Patterns: the introduction of diverse activities beyond academic support, such as summer camps, indicated a broader scope. The organizational structure became more refined with the development of a collaborative digital platform for data management and project monitoring.

Relationships and insights

Organizational flexibility. The evolution from an emergency response to a structured intervention illustrates the project's flexibility and ability to adapt to changing circumstances. The shift from online to hybrid and in-person activities reflects an understanding of the needs of both children and volunteers.

Volunteer management. Initial reliance on volunteers with pedagogical backgrounds provided a strong foundation. However, as the project matured, the addition of dedicated managerial and IT staff highlighted the importance of specialized roles in sustaining and expanding project activities.

Impact of phase transitions. Each phase transition brought new insights and adjustments. For instance, the move to in-person activities post-pandemic had a significant positive impact on engagement and the overall experience of participants, as evidenced by the successful summer camp and physical field trips.

Data integration. The development and use of a collaborative digital platform in the maturity phase improved data tracking and analysis, facilitating better monitoring of both volunteer activities and children's progress. This technological advancement reflects the project's commitment to continuous improvement and accountability.

To analyze the data concerning the second research question, *How do volunteer motivations relate to their actions and the overall effectiveness of their involvement?*, which focuses on understanding how volunteer motivations relate to their actions and the overall effectiveness of their

involvement, we need to examine the patterns, relationships, and insights that emerge from the motivations provided by the volunteers. Most frequent words in the corpus: help (53); children (53); want (39); wish (12); program (12).

To better understand how volunteer motivations translate into specific actions, we employed a systematic coding approach. Volunteer motivations were categorized into themes, including altruistic, personal growth, professional goals, and emotional impact. This approach allowed us to track how these categories were associated with particular volunteer behaviors within the program. For example, volunteers driven by altruistic motives, such as helping children, were frequently engaged in direct tutoring or mentoring sessions. In contrast, those motivated by professional development showed an interest in roles with additional responsibilities, such as organizing activities or leading instructional sessions. By mapping specific motivations to actions, we provide a structured analysis that clarifies the pathways through which motivations influence volunteer behavior and contribute to the program's effectiveness.

Grounding our findings in established research on volunteer motivation helps contextualize how certain motivational factors affect volunteer actions and program outcomes. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), for instance, suggests that motivations fulfilling intrinsic needs – such as the desire for competence, autonomy, and social connection – often result in sustained and high-quality volunteer engagement. This theory aligns with our findings; volunteers driven by intrinsic motivations (e.g., personal growth and helping others) frequently showed longer-term commitment and a higher level of interaction with children. Previous studies in similar educational settings confirm that aligning volunteer roles with intrinsic motivations can enhance both volunteer satisfaction and program success. Integrating these theoretical perspectives supports a more robust understanding of how volunteer motivations contribute meaningfully to the project's impact.

Assessing the impact of volunteer motivations on the program's effectiveness requires connecting these motivations to measurable outcomes within the project. For instance, we observed that volunteers with strong altruistic motivations consistently engaged in roles directly benefiting children's learning outcomes, as evidenced by regular attendance logs and feedback from project coordinators. Additionally, volunteers motivated by personal growth often took on extra responsibilities and demonstrated initiative in suggesting new activities, which contributed to the program's

diversity and adaptability. These examples illustrate that volunteers' motivations had tangible effects on both the stability of volunteer engagement and the quality of support provided to children. By linking motivational factors to specific outcomes, we highlight the role of motivation in enhancing the project's impact beyond speculative reasoning.

Motivations related to helping children

- **Patterns:** a significant number of volunteers expressed a desire to help children, with a strong emphasis on providing support for educational needs, such as homework and general learning. Words like “ajuta” (help) and “copii” (children) were mentioned frequently.
- **Relationships:** this motivation likely drives volunteers to engage actively in tutoring, mentoring, and creating supportive learning environments. Their actions are directly aligned with their motivations, focusing on providing academic assistance and emotional support to children.
- **Insights:** volunteers who are motivated by a genuine desire to help children are more likely to engage in activities that directly benefit the children's educational and emotional well-being. This alignment between motivation and action can enhance the effectiveness of their involvement.

Motivations related to personal growth and experience

- **Patterns:** volunteers also expressed a strong desire for personal development, including gaining experience, learning new skills, and understanding pedagogical practices. Words such as “experiență” (experience) and “dezvoltare” (development) are prevalent.
- **Relationships:** volunteers with motivations focused on personal growth are likely to seek opportunities to acquire new skills and gain practical experience. This can lead to their active participation in various roles within the volunteer program, from tutoring to curriculum development.
- **Insights:** the focus on personal growth may lead to more engaged and proactive volunteers who seek to maximize their learning opportunities. This not only benefits their professional development but can also improve the quality of their contributions.

Motivations related to professional goals

- Patterns: Many volunteers are motivated by career aspirations, particularly in the field of education. Terms like “professor” (teacher) and “pedagogie” (pedagogy) highlight this motivation.
- Relationships: Volunteers with clear professional goals related to education are likely to take on roles that align with their career ambitions, such as leading educational activities or mentoring other volunteers.
- Insights: The alignment of volunteer actions with professional goals can lead to high levels of commitment and effectiveness. These volunteers may bring a higher level of expertise and a more structured approach to their work.

Motivations related to emotional and inspirational impact

- Patterns: emotional motivations, such as a desire to inspire or show love, are also significant. Terms like “iubire” (love) and “in-spirație” (inspiration) appear in the responses.
- Relationships: volunteers motivated by emotional and inspirational factors are likely to focus on creating positive, supportive environments that foster children’s confidence and enthusiasm for learning.
- Insights: volunteers driven by emotional connections and the desire to inspire may contribute to a more positive and supportive atmosphere, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the program by addressing the emotional needs of the children.

Motivations related to specific contexts and conditions

- Patterns: there is also a notable interest in working with disadvantaged children or in specific contexts like rural areas. Terms such as “defavorizați” (disadvantaged) and “mediu rural” (rural environment) are mentioned.
- Relationships: volunteers motivated by the need to address specific conditions are likely to engage in targeted actions to overcome barriers related to these contexts, such as providing additional support or resources.
- Insights: addressing specific needs and conditions can improve the effectiveness of the volunteer program by ensuring that it is responsive to the unique challenges faced by different groups of children.



Figure 1. *Volunteers' motivation at the beginning of the project*

To address the third research question “*What challenges and barriers have been encountered throughout the project's phases?*”, we need to analyze the data to identify recurring issues, their impact, and the strategies used to overcome them.

Challenges and barriers across phases

Initial Phase (2019–2021)

- Pandemic-related restrictions: the primary challenge was the need to transition to online platforms due to the state of emergency. This created barriers to effective communication and limited the ability to conduct in-person activities, which were crucial for building relationships and providing hands-on support.
- Technological limitations: both volunteers and children faced difficulties with technology access and proficiency. Limited access to reliable internet and devices hindered the effectiveness of online learning and support.
- Organizational setup: establishing a new NGO and developing a functional organizational framework from scratch posed significant logistical and administrative challenges.

Transition Phase (2021–2022)

- Fluctuating volunteer numbers: the variability in volunteer numbers during this phase affected the consistency of support provided to children. Recruitment and retention challenges were notable as the project adjusted to post-pandemic conditions.
- Adaptation to hybrid model: balancing online and in-person activities required adjustments in planning and execution. Ensuring

ing that both formats were equally effective and accessible was a persistent challenge.

- In-person interaction difficulties: shifting from online to in-person activities involved logistical issues, such as coordinating transportation for field trips and managing new health and safety protocols.

Maturity Phase (2022–2024)

- Resource allocation: expanding the project to include a wider range of activities, such as summer camps and diverse educational interventions, required careful resource management. Ensuring adequate funding and staffing for these new initiatives was a challenge.
- Data management: while the development of a collaborative digital platform improved data tracking, it also introduced challenges in data integration and analysis. Ensuring the platform's effectiveness and maintaining data accuracy were ongoing concerns.
- Scaling up: as the project grew, maintaining the quality of interventions and support while scaling operations posed difficulties. Ensuring that new volunteers and staff were effectively integrated into the project required additional training and oversight.

Patterns and insights

Adaptability. A key pattern across all phases is the project's ability to adapt to external and internal challenges. From navigating pandemic restrictions to integrating new technologies and expanding activities, the project demonstrated flexibility and resilience in addressing barriers.

Resource and logistical management. Challenges related to resource allocation and logistical coordination were prominent, particularly as the project scaled up and introduced new activities. Effective management of these aspects was crucial for sustaining and enhancing the project's impact.

Volunteer dynamics. Fluctuating volunteer numbers and the need for specialized roles highlighted the importance of effective volunteer recruitment, retention, and management strategies. Consistent support for volunteers through training and engagement was essential for maintaining project quality.

Technological and data management. The evolution from basic technological use to a sophisticated data management system underscores the project's commitment to continuous improvement. However, this

transition also brought challenges in ensuring the platform's functionality and data accuracy.

To address the fourth research question, *What lessons can be drawn from this case study to inform similar initiatives in other contexts?*, we need to analyze the data to extract insights that can guide the implementation of comparable projects.

Key lessons and insights

Adaptability is essential. The project's ability to adapt to various challenges, from pandemic restrictions to changing organizational needs, underscores the importance of flexibility. Successful projects must be prepared to pivot their strategies and operational models in response to unforeseen circumstances. Implementing adaptive frameworks that allow for quick responses to changing conditions can enhance the resilience and sustainability of similar initiatives.

Technology must be integrated. The transition from basic online tools to a sophisticated digital platform for managing data and activities highlights the significance of effective technology use. The project's development of a collaborative platform improved data tracking and operational efficiency. Investing in robust technology and data management systems is essential for monitoring progress, managing resources, and ensuring effective communication in educational projects.

Volunteers need to be recruited and convinced to stay. Fluctuations in volunteer numbers and the challenges of maintaining consistent support reveal the importance of effective volunteer management. Recruiting and retaining motivated volunteers is crucial for sustaining project activities and impact. Developing comprehensive recruitment strategies, providing ongoing training, and ensuring clear communication and support can help maintain a committed and effective volunteer base.

Resource management and scalability needs to be analyzed. Managing resources effectively, especially when scaling up activities, was a recurring challenge. The project's expansion required careful planning and allocation of funds and staff. Similar initiatives should plan for resource management from the outset, including budgeting for expansion and ensuring adequate staffing and support for new activities.

Engaging and empowering participants needs to be continuous. The project's focus on diverse activities, including summer camps and field trips, demonstrated the value of engaging participants in enriching experiences beyond traditional educational support. Providing varied and

engaging activities can enhance the effectiveness of educational programs and contribute to the overall well-being and motivation of participants.

Decision-making needs to be data-driven. The implementation of a digital platform for tracking and analyzing data improved decision-making and project evaluation. Accurate and comprehensive data collection provided valuable insights into the project's impact and areas for improvement.

Emphasizing data-driven approaches in project management allows for better assessment of effectiveness, identification of challenges, and informed decision-making.

Patterns and relationships

A key pattern is that the project's ability to adapt to changing conditions and needs was critical to its success. Flexibility in operational strategies and responses to challenges played a significant role in maintaining and expanding the project's impact.

The relationship between technological integration and operational efficiency is evident. The development and use of advanced data management tools were crucial for streamlining processes and improving project outcomes.

The fluctuations in volunteer numbers highlight the need for strong volunteer management practices. Effective recruitment, training, and support are essential for maintaining volunteer engagement and ensuring project continuity.

The challenges of resource management during scaling underscore the importance of strategic planning. Ensuring that resources are appropriately allocated and managed supports the successful expansion and sustainability of initiatives.

6. Discussion

The findings from this case study provide significant insights into the management and evolution of educational projects, especially in challenging contexts. One of the broader implications is the demonstrated importance of adaptability and flexibility in project management. The project's ability to transition from an emergency response to a structured, multi-faceted program underscores the necessity of agile approaches in education initiatives. This finding contributes to a deeper understanding of how educational projects can effectively respond to both sudden disruptions and long-term needs.

Also, the findings from this case study offer significant insights into how volunteer motivations can influence their actions and overall effectiveness in educational settings. By highlighting the alignment between volunteers' motivations and their contributions, this research underscores the importance of understanding and leveraging these motivations to optimize volunteer engagement and impact. This case study contributes to the broader field of volunteerism and education by demonstrating that a deep understanding of volunteer motivations can lead to more targeted and effective interventions, ultimately enhancing the outcomes for the beneficiaries of volunteer programs.

Comparing these findings with existing literature reveals both consistencies and new insights. Previous studies have consistently shown that volunteers are motivated by factors such as a desire to help others and personal growth. However, this case study adds nuance by demonstrating how specific motivations, such as the desire to address educational inequalities or work in particular contexts, directly influence the nature of volunteer activities and their effectiveness. While literature often generalizes volunteer motivations and impacts, this case study provides detailed evidence of how these factors play out in practice, offering a richer understanding of the dynamics at play.

For practitioners and policymakers, these findings emphasize the need to tailor volunteer programs to align with the diverse motivations of volunteers. By recognizing and addressing these motivations, programs can enhance volunteer satisfaction and effectiveness, leading to better outcomes for the children served. Practitioners should consider implementing strategies that support volunteers' personal and professional growth, as well as their emotional and inspirational needs. Policymakers might use these insights to design volunteer recruitment and training programs that capitalize on the identified motivations, ensuring that volunteer efforts are both fulfilling for participants and beneficial for the communities they serve. Additionally, the study suggests that targeted support for volunteers working in specific contexts, such as disadvantaged areas, can amplify the impact of their contributions.

Additionally, the study highlights the critical role of technological integration and data-driven decision-making in enhancing project effectiveness. By developing and utilizing a collaborative digital platform, the project improved its capacity for monitoring, evaluation, and management. This insight suggests that similar initiatives can benefit significantly

from investing in technology to streamline operations and gather actionable data.

When compared with existing literature, the findings align with studies emphasizing the importance of adaptability in educational projects, particularly those affected by external disruptions such as pandemics. Previous research has similarly highlighted the need for flexible strategies and the integration of technology in managing educational programs. However, the case study introduces new insights into the practical challenges of scaling up and managing resources during project expansion, which is less frequently addressed in the literature.

Unlike some studies that focus primarily on theoretical frameworks, this case study provides concrete examples of how these theories play out in practice. The experiences with fluctuating volunteer numbers and the adaptation of hybrid learning models offer additional nuances to existing discussions about volunteer management and educational technology integration.

For practitioners, the study emphasizes the need for robust planning and adaptability in educational projects. It suggests that practitioners should prepare for unexpected challenges and have flexible frameworks in place. Investing in technology for data management and integrating diverse activities can also enhance the effectiveness of educational initiatives.

Policymakers can draw from the study's findings to support the development of adaptable educational programs and allocate resources for technological advancements. Understanding the practical challenges and successes experienced by the project can inform policy decisions related to funding, resource allocation, and support for similar initiatives.

For other stakeholders, such as community organizations and educational NGOs, the case study provides valuable lessons on managing volunteer dynamics, scaling operations, and engaging participants. By applying these insights, stakeholders can improve their project designs and implementations, contributing to more effective and sustainable educational interventions.

7. Limitations

A key limitation of this study is its primary focus on technical and logistical aspects of the project's implementation, such as the transition from online to hybrid formats and the development of data management systems. While these elements are crucial for understanding the project's operational framework, the study does not delve as deeply into interperson-

al or cultural challenges that may have influenced interactions between volunteers and children. Differences in social backgrounds, cultural perspectives, and interpersonal dynamics could have affected volunteer-child relationships, communication styles, and even the volunteers' approaches to providing support. This omission means that any potential barriers arising from these differences remain underexplored. Future studies could enrich this analysis by examining how these social and cultural factors impact volunteer engagement, children's receptiveness to support, and overall project outcomes. This expanded focus would provide a more comprehensive view of the challenges encountered and offer valuable insights for similar educational initiatives.

Another limitation of this study is its focus primarily on the experiences and perspectives of volunteers, which may narrow the understanding of the project's broader impact. Including perspectives from other key actors – such as children's parents, schoolteachers, or community leaders – could offer a more comprehensive view of the program's effectiveness and reveal additional challenges or dynamics that influence educational inclusion. Expanding the scope to include these perspectives would likely enhance the study's relevance and applicability to similar educational initiatives aimed at supporting disadvantaged children.

8. Conclusion

The case study provides several key findings regarding the evolution and effectiveness of the educational project. The project successfully adapted from an emergency online response during the pandemic to a more structured, hybrid model incorporating both in-person and online activities. Key factors contributing to its success include the ability to manage and integrate technology effectively, the importance of flexibility in handling unforeseen challenges, and the value of engaging participants through diverse activities. The development and use of a collaborative digital platform proved instrumental in enhancing data management and operational efficiency, while fluctuations in volunteer numbers highlighted the need for strong recruitment and retention strategies.

Several limitations of the study should be noted. The findings are based on a single case study, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other contexts or projects. The scope of the case study was specific to a particular geographic area and demographic, which may not fully represent the diverse challenges and solutions applicable to different settings or populations. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported

data from volunteers and participants may introduce biases that could affect the accuracy of the findings.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct similar studies across different contexts and settings to assess the generalizability of the findings. Comparative case studies could provide insights into how varying conditions influence the effectiveness of educational projects. Practitioners should focus on developing flexible and adaptable project frameworks, investing in technology for improved data management, and implementing robust volunteer management practices. Policymakers should consider supporting initiatives that integrate technology and provide resources for adaptive project planning. Future research could also explore the long-term impacts of such projects on participants and communities to better understand their sustained effects.

This case study underscores the importance of adaptability, technological integration, and effective management in educational projects. Its findings contribute valuable insights into how projects can navigate challenges and evolve. By highlighting successful strategies and identifying areas for improvement, the study offers practical lessons for similar initiatives. The case study's contributions extend to enhancing understanding of project management in education and providing actionable recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers aiming to implement effective and resilient educational interventions.