THE IMPACT OF LIMITED ACCESS TO CULTURAL RESOURCES ON THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL CHILDREN AND EDUCATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO OVERCOME THIS OBSTACLE

Denisa Ramona CHASCIAR, Ph.D. Student
Babeș-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania
denisaramonachasciar@yahoo.com

Vasile CHASCIAR, Ph.D. Student
University of Craiova
chasciarvasile@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Access to cultural resources plays a key role in children's social and cognitive development, but children in rural areas often face significant limitations in this regard. This study explores the impact of reduced access to culture on social development and interest in authentic values among primary school children in rural areas. Based on applied research in a rural school, the article presents a series of educational interventions aimed at compensating for the lack of cultural resources, including virtual visits to cultural institutions, creative workshops, and collaborations with local artists. The results show an increase in students' interest in culture, an improvement in social skills and a greater level of connectivity between students. The conclusions suggest that the large-scale implementation of these educational solutions can contribute to reducing inequalities in access to culture and to the harmonious integration of students in the community.*

Key words: *access to culture; cultural education; social development; rural inequality; educational interventions.*

Theoretical foundation
Access to culture is a crucial factor in the social and educational development of children, having profound implications for the formation of their identity, values and integration capacities. Culture, defined in an educational sense, represents not only a patrimony of values and knowledge, but also a dynamic process through which individuals are formed and integrated into society (Bourdieu, 1988). In an educational context, culture is understood as a "frame of reference", through which children learn both social norms and relational and critical thinking skills (Bocoș & Jucan, 2008).

The literature shows that exposure to cultural activities contributes significantly to the cognitive, emotional and social development of children. According to Gardner (2005), culture facilitates what we call "multiple intelligence", providing children with opportunities for creative expression, empathy and understanding of diversity. For example, recent studies emphasize that children's participation in cultural activities, such as visual arts, music, or theater, improves communication and collaboration skills (Hanna, 2019).

Cultural education is often defined as an essential component of the modern curriculum, as it promotes fundamental values, such as respect for diversity, critical reflection and creativity (UNESCO, 2020). This approach supports the idea that education must be centered on authentic values, which contributes to the well-being and integral development of children (Cucoș, 2018). In addition, cultural education develops children's ability to reflect on their own culture, but also on other cultures, thus promoting a deeper understanding and openness to cultural diversity (Seligman, 2011).

Seligman (2011) argues that cultural education is a vector of emotional and social development, promoting aspects such as commitment, optimism and connectivity – essential elements for long-term well-being. According to the study conducted by Ronen and Bachar (2019), children who are involved in cultural activities demonstrate a greater capacity for adaptation and social resilience, being better able to collaborate and communicate effectively. Cultural activities also stimulate critical thinking and creativity, forming young people capable of actively contributing to the life of the community (Antonesei, 1996).

Another important aspect is the influence of cultural education on emotional intelligence. As Roman and Balaș (2010) argue, children who participate in cultural activities demonstrate increased emotional intelligence, being able to manage emotions and adapt more easily in various social situations. Culture thus contributes not only to intellectual development, but also to the formation of essential skills for life in society.

The inequality of access to cultural resources between rural and urban areas is a problem that accentuates educational and social disparities. Studies show that limited access to cultural institutions and lack of infrastructure affect the development of children in rural areas, limiting their opportunities to experience and learn from cultural activities (OECD, 2021). In Romania, children in rural areas often have limited access to museums, theatres and libraries, and this affects their cognitive and social development (Eurostat, 2020).

The literature emphasizes that unequal access to culture can reduce children's interest in education and culture, accentuating the tendency of social isolation. According to a study by the European Commission

(2020), cultural disparities lead to a decrease in social connectivity and a sense of belonging among children in rural areas. These factors contribute to difficult social integration and poorer preparation for adult life (Păun & Potolea, 2002).

Living conditions and limited resources in rural areas hinder children's access to cultural activities, with lack of transport and long distances being major obstacles (Roman & Torkos, 2019). In the absence of innovative and adapted educational solutions, children in rural areas risk being deprived of the formation of a cultural identity and the social skills necessary for a harmonious integration into society.

To reduce these disparities, educational interventions adapted to the rural context are essential. Cultural education can provide children in rural areas with formative experiences, such as virtual tours of museums or cultural workshops held in schools. Collaboration with local artists and access to online cultural resources are examples of solutions that can help compensate for rural deprivations (Gardner, 2005; UNESCO, 2020).

Thus, in order to ensure the social and cultural development of children, formal education must include strategies to capitalize on culture adapted to the specificity of the rural environment, providing access to cultural activities that stimulate creativity, empathy and emotional intelligence.

Research:

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of limited access to cultural resources on social development and interest in authentic values among children in rural areas. The study examines to what extent the lack of access to cultural institutions affects the formation of social skills and openness to cultural diversity, proposing educational solutions adapted to this context.

The main hypothesis is that limited access to cultural resources negatively affects children's interest in culture and the formation of social skills. Through innovative and culturally interactive educational activities, children in rural areas can develop essential social skills, improving their social connectivity and interest in cultural diversity.

The study was conducted in a rural school, with primary school students aged between 9 and 10 years old. The research uses a quasi-experimental method, with pre- and post-intervention measurements to identify changes in students' attitudes and social skills.

The research sample includes 30 students from a rural school in Romania, selected based on accessibility to cultural activities and availability to participate in educational interventions.

The assessment tool was the CASEL-SEL questionnaire (*Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning – Social and Emotional Learning*) which has been adapted to assess social and emotional

competences, including communication, collaboration and adaptability. CASEL-SEL is used to measure social interaction skills and is flexible for various educational contexts, being able to provide a clear picture of changes in children's social development.

The intervention program included a series of innovative cultural activities, carried out over six months, aimed at developing students' interest in culture and collaborative skills. These activities have been adapted to the specifics of the rural environment, using available resources and interactive technological means. The proposed activities were:

1. "Culture through my eyes" project

The students were involved in an activity of documenting local traditions and customs. They interviewed members of the community and took photos and videos about unique aspects of life in the village. This project had the role of developing their communication skills and strengthening their sense of belonging to the local community. Through this approach, the children were encouraged to become explorers of their own culture, learning to appreciate local values and pass them on.

2. Creating a Virtual Exhibition

After the completion of the project, the students' works were presented in a virtual exhibition, accessible to parents and other members of the community. This format gave students the chance to see their work publicly appreciated and increase their confidence in their own abilities. The virtual exhibition was a way to bring the community closer to educational activities and to emphasize the importance of local culture.

3. Digital storytelling workshops

Students learned to create digital stories using text, images, and sound to illustrate moments in their lives or community history. This innovative method stimulated creativity and helped children express their ideas in a personal way. The digital stories were an opportunity for students to develop essential technical skills and express themselves in an accessible and attractive format.

4. Heritage exploration through augmented reality

Using augmented reality (AR) applications, the students had the opportunity to explore objects from the Romanian cultural heritage, such as famous monuments and works of art. This technology allowed them to virtually "visit" museums and discover art objects in detail, stimulating their curiosity and interest in national culture. Augmented reality has opened up new cultural horizons for students, providing them with an immersive and modern learning experience.

5. Role-playing games on historical themes

The students participated in role-playing sessions, in which they played characters from the history and culture of Romania. These activities have been designed to develop empathy and critical thinking, engaging students in understanding historical and cultural contexts through active participation. Role-playing fostered collaboration and strengthened students' social skills, helping them to better understand the role that culture plays in their lives and that of the community.

The intervention was structured in three distinct stages, aimed at assessing and developing students' social and emotional skills through innovative cultural activities. Each stage had a well-defined role within the programme, ensuring both the initial assessment and the monitoring of progress and the analysis of the changes that occurred following the intervention.

The first stage, the initial phase, consisted of the application of the CASEL-SEL questionnaire, a tool specially adapted to assess the socio-emotional competences of students. This questionnaire provided an overview of the students' communication, collaboration, empathy and adaptability skills before the intervention began. The application of this tool was intended to identify strengths and areas for improvement, establishing a basis for comparison for subsequent evaluations. Thus, the data collected at this stage allowed an in-depth understanding of the initial level of socio-emotional competences, providing a starting point for measuring progress.

The second stage, the intervention phase, was the core of the program and took place over a period of six months. During this period, the students were involved in various innovative activities, each of which had specific personal and cultural development objectives. The activities were carefully monitored by the teachers, who had the role of observing and documenting the students' reactions and progress in each activity. The involvement of the students in the proposed activities – from the creation of virtual exhibitions and digital storytelling projects, to role-playing games inspired by cultural themes – stimulated a series of fundamental social and emotional competences. During this stage, teachers provided continuous support, encouraging students to actively participate and express themselves freely, ensuring a safe and stimulating environment for their development.

The last stage, the final stage, was intended to evaluate the progress made by the students following the intervention. The CASEL-SEL questionnaire was reapplied to analyse changes in students' social and emotional competences, assessing the impact of the activities on their communication skills, collaboration and interest in cultural values. The results of this phase provided a clear comparison between the initial and final level of skills, highlighting the improvements achieved. This stage allowed a reflection on the effectiveness of the intervention and

highlighted the aspects that contributed the most to the development of the students.

By carrying out these three stages, the intervention created a complete framework for evaluation and development, providing both an initial diagnosis and active monitoring and a final assessment of progress. Structuring the intervention in these stages facilitated a well-organized approach adapted to the needs of the children, contributing to the creation of an educational program with a significant impact on their socio-emotional and cultural development.

Results:

The results of this intervention showed significant changes in the development of students' social skills and cultural interest, highlighting the positive impact of the innovative cultural activities carried out during the six months. The comparative analysis of the data collected through the CASEL-SEL questionnaire before and after the implementation of the program, together with the teachers' observations, highlighted the students' progress in terms of communication, collaboration, empathy and openness to cultural diversity.

One of the most notable results was improved communication and collaboration skills. Activities that involved interaction with peers and community members, such as the "Culture through my eyes" project and the digital storytelling workshops, encouraged students to express themselves more openly and communicate more effectively. As a result of these activities, many of the students demonstrated a greater ability to express their ideas and feelings, as well as a more confident attitude towards their peers and teachers. The data from the questionnaire confirmed a significant increase in the scores on the items related to communication and adaptability, highlighting the effect of these activities on students' openness to social interaction.

Also, activities to explore cultural heritage through augmented reality and role-playing games on historical themes have contributed to the development of critical thinking and empathy. These activities, which encouraged students to explore and identify with characters and cultural contexts, stimulated their curiosity and developed their ability to understand different perspectives. The observations made by the teachers indicated an increase in empathy and the desire to collaborate with colleagues, the students becoming more aware of the importance of collaboration and respecting the opinions of others.

Another significant result was the students' increased interest in local and national culture, demonstrated by their active involvement in the documentation projects and in the virtual exhibition. The activities of documenting local traditions aroused the interest of the students in the cultural heritage of their community, they expressed a greater openness

to cultural values and a desire to participate in similar initiatives in the future. This change was also reflected in the results of the CASEL-SEL questionnaire, where an improvement in the scores related to interest in cultural activities and openness to new experiences was observed.

The overall analysis of the collected data and observations demonstrates that the intervention had a positive impact on the social and cultural development of students, providing them with learning opportunities that complemented formal education. The children became more open, more empathetic and more able to collaborate, and their interest in cultural values intensified, creating the premises for a harmonious development and easier integration into their community.

Conclusions:

The educational intervention implemented demonstrated that, through innovative cultural activities, children from rural areas can develop essential social skills and develop a genuine interest in local and national culture, even in the absence of direct access to traditional cultural institutions. The results of this study emphasize that cultural education has a vital role in the formation of socio-emotional competences and in the development of a cultural identity in primary school students.

The proposed activities, such as cultural documentation projects, digital storytelling and heritage exploration through augmented reality, proved effective in increasing communication and collaboration skills, but also in stimulating critical thinking and empathy. The children were encouraged to express themselves freely, share their ideas and collaborate with their peers, contributing to an open and collaborative learning atmosphere. This experience gave them the opportunity to connect with the values of the community and their cultural identity, thus increasing their sense of belonging.

The observations and data collected during the three phases of the intervention showed that the integration of interactive and digital cultural activities within the school can compensate, at least partially, for the lack of direct access to physical cultural resources. The results of this study can be a starting point for the implementation of similar programs at national level, which reduce the disparities in access to culture between urban and rural areas, thus contributing to the harmonious development of all children.

In conclusion, cultural education adapted to the specificity of the rural environment not only offers children valuable learning opportunities, but also contributes to the development of essential skills for community life. The widespread implementation of such initiatives could support children's integration into society, while developing their respect for diversity and a greater openness to authentic values. These initiatives should be supported by educational policies that promote collaborations

between schools, local communities and cultural institutions, thus ensuring equitable access to cultural and social education for all students.

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