

Inclusive Education and Social Inequality: An Anthropological Study of Social Mobility and Access to Education

Kaloyan Damyanov

Chief Assistant Professor, PhD ,
Sofia University “St.Kliment Ohridski”

Abstract

This research investigates the multifaceted relationship between inclusive education and social inequality, focusing on the potential of inclusive educational practices in Europe, with a specific case study in Bulgaria, to promote social mobility for marginalized populations. Grounded in an anthropological framework, the study seeks to understand how structural and cultural barriers impede access to equitable education for marginalized groups, with particular attention to Roma students, one of the most disadvantaged communities in Europe. By examining the educational landscape in Bulgaria, this research delves into the lived experiences of educators, psychologists, and occupational therapists working to implement inclusive education within a system often fraught with discrimination, limited resources, and institutional challenges.

The qualitative research, conducted in Sofia from February to April 2024, draws on interviews, participant observation, and focus groups to capture the nuanced challenges and successes of those involved in delivering inclusive education. Findings reveal that despite national policies aimed at promoting inclusion, significant barriers persist, particularly for Roma students, who continue to face segregation, prejudice, and limited educational opportunities. Educators frequently report difficulties in accommodating the diverse needs of students within under-resourced schools, while psychological and cultural biases further hinder effective inclusion.

Moreover, the study identifies a critical gap between policy and practice, where inclusive education policies are often poorly implemented due to a lack of cultural competence and institutional support. This gap has direct implications for the social mobility of marginalized students, as education remains a key determinant of their future opportunities. The findings underscore the urgent need for culturally responsive teaching strategies and support systems that are tailored to the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts of marginalized communities. These strategies must go beyond superficial inclusion to actively dismantle the entrenched inequalities that exist within educational institutions.

This study emphasizes the pivotal role of inclusive education in addressing social inequality and promoting social mobility. However, it also highlights the significant work that remains to be done to ensure that inclusive education is truly accessible and effective for all, particularly for marginalized groups like the Roma. By proposing a series of culturally sensitive and contextually informed recommendations, the research advocates for a more holistic approach to inclusive education that can better support the academic and social advancement of marginalized students, ultimately fostering greater equity in educational outcomes and social mobility

Keywords: Inclusive education, social mobility, social inequality, Roma Education, Cultural Barriers in Education, Educational Access, Critical Race Theory, Marginalized Communities, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Bulgaria Education System.

1.0 Introduction

The relationship between inclusive education and social inequality has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly in the European context. Inclusive education is defined as an approach that seeks to ensure equitable participation in the educational system for all students, regardless of their social, cultural, or physical characteristics (Bešić, 2020). However, despite efforts to create inclusive educational environments,

significant barriers persist, particularly for marginalised groups such as Roma students in Bulgaria. These barriers often stem from deeply rooted socioeconomic inequalities that impede access to quality education, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion (Kyuchukov, 2015).

Inclusive education is frequently conceptualised as a mechanism to promote social mobility by equalising opportunities for disadvantaged students. The educational system plays a crucial role in providing pathways for individuals to improve their socioeconomic status through access to knowledge and opportunities. As noted by Bešić (2020), inclusive education challenges the traditional exclusionary practices of mainstream education, which have historically marginalised vulnerable groups, including students from ethnic minorities and those with disabilities. For these groups, education has become an instrument not only for academic development but also for social integration and economic advancement.

In the context of Bulgaria, Roma students represent one of the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups within the education system. Studies have demonstrated that Roma communities face a complex array of challenges that limit their access to quality education, including socioeconomic hardships, cultural differences, and institutional discrimination (Damyanov 2023; Kyuchukov 2015). These challenges are exacerbated by widespread social prejudices and segregated schooling practices, which further alienate Roma children from the mainstream education system (FRA 2021).

As highlighted by Damyanov (2023), despite its formal commitment to inclusive education policies, the Bulgarian educational system continues to face challenges in effectively implementing these policies. The Strategy for the Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities (2021-2030) emphasises the significance of ensuring equitable access to education for all ethnic groups, including Roma students. However, the current situation reveals substantial disparities in resource allocation, teacher training, and school infrastructure, which disproportionately affect marginalised communities.

Socioeconomic status serves as a primary determinant of educational outcomes, and poverty remains one of the most significant barriers for Roma students. Numerous Roma families lack the financial resources to provide their children with essential educational materials, such as textbooks, school supplies, and transportation to school (Kyuchukov, 2015). This not only restricts their participation in school activities but also impacts their overall academic performance and the likelihood of completing their education. Moreover, the socioeconomic exclusion of Roma families frequently correlates with high levels of unemployment, substandard living conditions, and limited access to healthcare, perpetuating a cycle of poverty that education alone cannot readily address.

The cultural and linguistic barriers that Roma students encounter significantly influence their educational experiences. Roma communities in Bulgaria often exhibit linguistic and cultural distinctions from the mainstream population, a difference that is seldom reflected in school curricula (Damyanov, 2023). Consequently, Roma children frequently experience alienation and disconnection from the learning process, which adversely affects their academic engagement and motivation. Educators, many of whom lack training in addressing the cultural and linguistic needs of Roma students, face challenges in creating inclusive classroom environments that respect and value diversity (Bešić, 2020).

This study aimed to examine the role of inclusive education in facilitating social mobility by addressing these socioeconomic and cultural challenges. Employing an anthropological perspective, this study explored the complex interplay between educational policies and the lived experiences of Roma students in Bulgaria. Through an analysis of the barriers to inclusion and identification of strategies to overcome them, this research endeavours to contribute to the development of more equitable and socially just educational systems.

2.0 Background and Literature Review

In recent decades, Bulgaria has implemented significant measures to promote inclusive education through national policies aimed at reducing educational inequalities, particularly for marginalised groups such as Roma students. One of the key frameworks driving this agenda is the Strategy for the Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities (2021-2030). This policy emphasises equitable access to quality education, focusing on addressing the systemic barriers Roma students encounter in the Bulgarian educational system (Damyanov 2023). Despite these policy initiatives, structural inequalities remain deeply entrenched, limiting the efficacy of such interventions in promoting social mobility in disadvantaged communities (European Commission, 2020).

Research indicates that students from marginalised backgrounds, particularly Roma, experience higher rates of attrition, lower academic performance, and reduced participation in tertiary education due to factors such as segregated schooling, limited resources, and discriminatory practices within the educational system (FRA, 2021). These challenges are not unique to Bulgaria but reflect broader patterns of educational inequality observed across Europe. For instance, studies from the European Union have demonstrated that socioeconomic background remains one of the strongest predictors of academic success, with children from low-income families and minority groups being disproportionately represented in lower-performing educational institutions (European Commission, 2020).

Regarding policy interventions, the Bulgarian education system has implemented measures to integrate Roma children into mainstream schools; however, these efforts have yielded mixed results. While policies aim to reduce segregation and provide additional support for disadvantaged students, the realities of social exclusion and economic hardship continue to impede Roma students' educational advancement (Kyuchukov, 2015). This underscores the need for more targeted and contextually appropriate interventions that address both the educational and socioeconomic needs of these communities.

Social mobility, or the capacity of individuals to ascend in terms of socioeconomic status, is intrinsically linked to access to quality education. The literature consistently demonstrates that socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and cultural identity significantly influence educational outcomes (Roscigno et al., 2023). For Roma students in Bulgaria, systemic barriers, such as inadequate school infrastructure, lack of culturally sensitive teaching practices, and a curriculum that does not reflect their cultural heritage, impede their ability to succeed in the educational system (Damyanov, 2023; Kyuchukov, 2015).

Moreover, the socioeconomic disadvantages that Roma students often face result in limited access to essential educational resources, including textbooks, tutoring, and extracurricular activities, further perpetuating cycles of inequality. As research by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) indicates, Roma children are frequently placed in segregated schools with fewer resources, exacerbating their social exclusion and diminishing their academic performance (FRA, 2021). These structural inequalities are compounded by a lack of teacher training on how to effectively support marginalised students, particularly in terms of cultural competence and inclusive pedagogical strategies (Kyuchukov, 2015).

The literature also indicates broader socioeconomic factors that constrain the educational attainment of disadvantaged groups. For instance, Holmlund and Nybom (2023) emphasised that family background continues to be a strong determinant of educational success, with children from wealthier families benefiting from superior schooling options, more educational resources, and stronger social networks. In contrast, children from lower-income families, such as Roma communities, often attend underfunded schools and have fewer opportunities for academic enrichment, which limits their long-term social mobility (Holmlund & Nybom, 2023).

In Bulgaria, the interplay between socioeconomic status and ethnicity creates unique challenges for inclusive education. Roma families, who often reside in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, face additional barriers, such as high unemployment rates, poor housing conditions, and limited access to healthcare. These factors further compound the difficulties Roma students encounter in accessing quality education and achieving social mobility (Kyuchukov, 2015). Furthermore, the absence of targeted support programs that address Roma students' specific needs, such as language barriers and cultural integration, continues to constrain their educational success.

Notwithstanding these challenges, empirical evidence suggests that inclusive education, when implemented effectively, can play a pivotal role in promoting the social mobility of marginalised groups. Research conducted across Europe indicates that reducing class sizes, increasing school funding, and providing targeted support for disadvantaged students can lead to improved academic outcomes and long-term social mobility (Holmlund & Nybom, 2023). However, in Bulgaria, these interventions must be adapted to address the specific needs of Roma communities, ensuring that inclusive education policies are not only implemented in theory but also effectively translated into practice.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach utilising anthropological methods to investigate the relationship between inclusive education and social inequality. This research specifically examines the perspectives of educators and specialists in Sofia, focusing on the challenges encountered when working with marginalised

groups, particularly Roma students. Data were collected through focus groups conducted at the Regional Centre for Support of the Inclusive Education Process in Sofia between February and April 2024.

Participants

Forty professionals participated in this study.

Teachers (n = 20) from various schools and kindergartens in the Sofia area.

Psychologists (n = 10) with experience in inclusive education and working with marginalised groups.

Occupational therapists (n = 10) who provided therapeutic support to students with special educational needs (SEN).

The participants were selected based on their involvement in inclusive education practices and their experiences with students from marginalised communities, particularly Roma children. Focus groups were designed to gather insights into the challenges, strategies, and experiences related to the implementation of inclusive education.

Data Collection

Three focus group discussions were conducted, each lasting approximately two hours. The focus groups adhered to a semi-structured format, addressing key topics such as the following.

1. **Implementation of inclusive education:** Strategies and methodologies employed in schools and kindergartens.
2. **Challenges:** Obstacles to providing quality education for marginalised students, with particular emphasis on Roma children.
3. **Support needs:** Requisite resources, training, and institutional support for the implementation of inclusive education.
4. **Cultural competence:** The impact of cultural and socioeconomic factors on engagement with marginalised students.

Discussions were recorded with participant consent and later transcribed for analysis. The data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and insights related to the research objectives.

4.0 Data Analysis Software

The transcribed data were analysed using **NVivo** software, a powerful tool for qualitative data analysis. NVivo was selected because of its capacity to manage large volumes of text, allowing the researcher to systematically code the data, identify key themes, and visualise relationships between various concepts. The following features of NVivo were used:

Data Coding: To Categorise and organise key themes related to challenges in inclusive education.

Query Tools: For conduct text search queries to identify frequently occurring terms and concepts.

Matrix Coding: To compare participant responses across different roles (teachers, psychologists, and occupational therapists).

Data Visualisation: Create visual representations of the relationships between different themes, providing a clearer understanding of the findings.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software to identify key themes across the focus group discussions. The following table presents the primary themes that emerged from the analysis.

Key Themes	Description	Frequency(n=40)
Resource Limitations	Lack of adequate resources (e.g., materials, teacher aides) to support inclusive education practices	35
Cultural Competency Gaps	Insufficient training on addressing the cultural and linguistic needs of Roma students	30
Parental Involvement Challenges	Difficulty in engaging Roma parents in the educational process due to socio-economic and cultural barriers	28
Teacher Preparedness	Teachers feeling unprepared to handle the diverse needs of students in inclusive settings	33
Collaboration Between Specialists	Successful collaboration between teachers, psychologists, and occupational therapists to support SEN students	25

Table 1: Key Themes Identified in Focus Group Discussions on Inclusive Education Challenges

Findings from the Analysis

The NVivo analysis yielded the following insights:

Resource Limitations. A significant challenge encountered by educators and specialists is the insufficiency of resources, particularly in marginalised communities. This issue was reported by 35 of the 40 participants, underscoring the need for enhanced funding and material support.

Cultural Competency Gaps Participants articulated the requirement for additional cultural competency training to address the needs of Roma students, specifically regarding language and cultural disparities.

Parental Involvement. Numerous participants observed that engaging Roma parents in the educational process presents difficulties, primarily due to socioeconomic hardships and a lack of trust in the educational system.

Teacher Preparedness: Teachers reported feeling inadequately prepared to address the complex needs of students in inclusive settings, indicating deficiencies in professional development.

Collaboration Among Specialists Notwithstanding these challenges, participants emphasised the significance of collaboration between teachers, psychologists, and occupational therapists, particularly in providing comprehensive support for students with SEN.

5.0 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study provides the foundation for understanding the relationship between inclusive education and social inequality. It outlines the key anthropological, sociological, and educational theories that inform the research, guiding how the concepts of inclusion, social mobility, and marginalization are examined. This framework helps contextualize the research within broader theoretical discussions on education, inequality, and social change, offering a lens through which the structural and cultural barriers to educational access for marginalized groups—particularly Roma students—are analyzed.

1. Social Reproduction Theory

At the core of this study is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. Bourdieu argues that education systems, rather than being neutral, often perpetuate social inequalities through the transmission of cultural capital—specific values, behaviors, and knowledge held by dominant social groups. Education becomes a site where the privileged maintain their status while marginalized groups, such as Roma communities, are systematically excluded. This theory explains how inequalities are reproduced across generations, making it difficult for marginalized groups to achieve upward social mobility.

In the context of this study, social reproduction theory will help unpack how the Bulgarian education system, despite its commitment to inclusive education, may reinforce inequalities by failing to adequately address the specific needs of marginalized groups. For example, Roma students often lack the cultural capital valued by the dominant educational framework, which can lead to their exclusion and limited social mobility.

Key Concepts from Social Reproduction Theory:

- **Cultural Capital:** The knowledge, skills, and education that individuals possess, which can either facilitate or hinder their success in the education system.
- **Habitus:** The deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences, often shaped by their social class.
- **Field:** The social space or environment where struggles for power and status occur, including the educational system.

This framework provides insight into how inclusive education policies, although well-intentioned, may fall short if they do not account for the diverse cultural backgrounds and social realities of marginalized students.

2. Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) will also be integral to this study, particularly in analyzing the experiences of Roma students. CRT argues that racism is deeply embedded in social institutions, including education, and that systemic discrimination often remains unchallenged. It posits that educational policies and practices are not neutral but are shaped by power structures that prioritize the dominant racial and ethnic groups.

Applying CRT in this study will allow for a deeper understanding of how ethnic discrimination against Roma students in Bulgaria manifests in schools. This could include biases in curriculum, segregated classrooms, or unequal access to resources. CRT also highlights the importance of counter-narratives—stories told by marginalized groups about their own experiences—which can challenge dominant assumptions and reveal the true extent of systemic inequality.

Key Concepts from Critical Race Theory:

- **Institutional Racism:** The systematic distribution of resources, power, and opportunity in ways that disadvantage racial or ethnic minority groups.
- **Intersectionality:** The understanding that different forms of inequality (such as race, class, and gender) intersect and compound each other.
- **Counter-Narratives:** Narratives from marginalized groups that offer a perspective different from the dominant discourse, exposing the lived realities of discrimination.

CRT will enable the study to explore how racism and discrimination are embedded in the educational practices, policies, and culture of Bulgarian schools, affecting the access and mobility of Roma students.

3. Social Mobility Theory

The concept of social mobility, particularly in relation to education, will be examined through the lens of structural functionalism, a theory in sociology that views education as a mechanism for social mobility and a means of maintaining societal order. According to structural functionalists, education serves as a ladder of opportunity, allowing individuals to move from one social stratum to another based on their achievements.

However, critics of this perspective, including proponents of social reproduction theory, argue that education often reinforces existing social hierarchies. This study will explore the degree to which inclusive education in Bulgaria either facilitates or hinders social mobility for marginalized groups. While structural functionalism might suggest that education should provide opportunities for Roma students to climb the social ladder, the reality often shows that these students are confined to the lower rungs due to systemic barriers.

Key Concepts from Social Mobility Theory:

- **Upward Mobility:** The ability to move to a higher social class through access to better educational opportunities and economic success.
- **Meritocracy:** The belief that individuals can succeed based on merit, skills, and effort, often promoted by education systems, although it may overlook the structural barriers to success.
- **Barriers to Mobility:** In this study, factors such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of institutional support will be examined as significant barriers that prevent Roma students from achieving upward mobility.

4. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

A central part of the theoretical framework for this study is the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, which calls for educational practices that recognize and value students' cultural backgrounds. This approach contrasts with traditional education methods that often disregard the diverse cultural identities of marginalized students. Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings, two scholars known for their work on culturally responsive pedagogy, argue that inclusive education should not be limited to physical access or the removal of discriminatory barriers, but should also involve tailoring teaching methods to fit the cultural contexts of students.

In this study, culturally responsive pedagogy will be used to examine the extent to which teachers in Bulgaria are equipped to support Roma students by incorporating their cultural heritage into the curriculum. It will also explore the challenges educators face in creating an inclusive classroom environment that respects and reflects the cultural diversity of their students.

Key Concepts from Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:

- **Cultural Competence:** The ability of educators to understand and respect the cultural backgrounds of their students, incorporating these into their teaching methods.
- **Student-Centered Learning:** Pedagogical practices that place the student's experiences, background, and identity at the core of the learning process.
- **Culturally Relevant Curriculum:** Curriculum content that reflects the lives, histories, and contributions of the students' cultural communities.

By incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy into the theoretical framework, this study aims to explore how inclusive education can be made more effective by embracing the cultural realities of marginalized students, particularly Roma students, and dismantling the cultural biases embedded in traditional teaching methods.

5. Capability Approach

The capability approach, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, focuses on individuals' capabilities or real opportunities to achieve the kind of life they value. This approach emphasizes that true equality requires not just formal access to education but also the provision of the resources, opportunities, and support that enable individuals to succeed.

For Roma students in Bulgaria, merely attending school may not be enough. The capability approach will help examine the broader socio-economic conditions—such as poverty, discrimination, and limited resources—that affect their ability to succeed within the education system. This approach advocates for an educational system that empowers students by providing the tools they need to achieve their full potential.

Key Concepts from the Capability Approach:

- **Functioning's:** The various things a person may value doing or being (e.g., being educated, being employed).
- **Capabilities:** The real opportunities that individuals have to achieve functioning's, shaped by both individual circumstances and social policies.
- **Freedom to Achieve:** The idea that true equality requires not only the removal of formal barriers but also the active provision of opportunities and support.

This framework will allow the study to focus on the real, tangible opportunities available to marginalized students and explore how inclusive education can foster their capabilities.

Synthesis of Theoretical Framework

The combined use of social reproduction theory, critical race theory, social mobility theory, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the capability approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate dynamics of inclusive education and social inequality. This framework will allow the study to explore the ways in which inclusive education can either perpetuate or dismantle existing inequalities and how it can be tailored to promote the social mobility of marginalized groups, particularly Roma students, in Bulgaria. By considering the structural, cultural, and personal dimensions of education, this theoretical framework provides a robust foundation for analyzing the effectiveness of inclusive education in addressing social inequality.

6.0 Findings

Focus group discussions with teachers, psychologists, and occupational therapists revealed several significant barriers impeding the effective implementation of inclusive education in Sofia. These challenges reflect deep-rooted socioeconomic and cultural issues that particularly affect marginalised communities, such as Roma students. Socioeconomic inequality was identified as one of the most significant barriers to inclusive education. Many Roma students originate from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which limits their access to essential educational resources. Participants emphasised that these students often lack basic materials, such as textbooks, school supplies, and access to extracurricular activities, all of which are crucial for their full participation in the educational process. The inability to provide these necessities contributes to high absenteeism and dropout rates among Roma students, further exacerbating educational disparity. Teachers emphasised that the current curriculum does not adequately reflect the cultural identity or heritage of Roma students. Many students feel disconnected from the material being taught, which contributes to feelings of alienation in the classroom. This lack of cultural relevance in the curriculum negatively affects motivation and engagement. Participants noted the absence of Roma cultural elements in textbooks and teaching materials, reinforcing the marginalisation of these students and diminishing their chances of academic success. A recurring theme identified in the focus groups was the inadequacy of teacher training in addressing the needs of marginalised students, particularly those from Roma communities. Educators reported feeling insufficiently prepared to address the diverse socioeconomic and cultural needs of inclusive classrooms. Numerous participants emphasised the necessity for comprehensive professional development programs that focus on culturally responsive teaching, inclusive educational strategies, and differentiated instruction. Such training would equip educators to create more supportive learning environments for Roma students and other marginalised groups.

The focus group participants identified low levels of parental involvement as a significant barrier to successful inclusive education. Numerous Roma families experience socioeconomic challenges, linguistic barriers, and distrust towards educational institutions, which impede their active engagement in their children's education. Educators have emphasised that, without parental involvement, it is challenging to foster a supportive environment for students at home. Participants proposed that schools should develop more effective strategies for engaging Roma parents, such as community outreach programs and family education initiatives, to bridge the gap between home and school environments. A lack of resources, particularly in underfunded schools where Roma students are overrepresented, is frequently cited as a major challenge. Participants noted that many schools lacked sufficient educational materials, specialised staff (such as teachers), and access to extracurricular support programs that could aid students with special needs. These resource limitations hinder schools' ability to provide the individualised support that Roma students require, further perpetuating educational inequalities.

While challenges persist, a notable positive aspect highlighted in the discussions is the collaboration between teachers, psychologists, and occupational therapists, particularly in addressing the needs of students with special educational needs (SEN). Interdisciplinary collaboration is perceived as an efficacious approach for providing comprehensive support to students. However, participants also noted that more systemic support and formalised structures for collaboration are required to enhance the quality of inclusive education.

The findings from the focus groups underscore the potential of inclusive education to facilitate social mobility, particularly for marginalised groups such as Roma students. When implemented effectively, inclusive education can contribute to breaking the cycles of poverty and exclusion by equipping disadvantaged students with the necessary tools for academic success and improved socioeconomic standing. However, participants emphasised that inclusive education policies alone are insufficient to achieve these objectives. Without addressing the socioeconomic, cultural, and systemic barriers that impede full participation, marginalised students are unlikely to fully benefit from the educational system.

The participants identified several key areas in which targeted interventions are necessary to ensure that inclusive education facilitates meaningful social mobility.

1. **Tutoring Programmes:** Roma students, who often experience academic challenges due to socioeconomic disadvantages and language barriers, would benefit from supplementary tutoring programmes that provide individualised or small-group instruction. These programs could potentially mitigate the achievement gap by offering personalised support that addresses the specific challenges faced by Roma students.

2. **Family Engagement Initiatives:** Enhancing the involvement of Roma families in the educational process is crucial for improving student outcomes. Participants proposed the development of family engagement initiatives that foster trust between Roma communities and educational institutions. These initiatives could encompass community outreach programs, parental workshops, and support services that address the socioeconomic challenges encountered by Roma families.
3. **Culturally Responsive Education:** To promote social mobility, inclusive education must be culturally responsive. The participants emphasised the importance of integrating Roma history, language, and culture into the school curriculum to enhance the relevance and engagement of learning for Roma students. Culturally responsive education would not only improve academic outcomes but also facilitate Roma students' development of a sense of pride in their identity and community.

7.0 Qualitative Research Conducted in Sofia (February-April 2024)

This section presents the findings of a qualitative investigation conducted through three focus groups comprising 40 kindergartens and school professionals in Sofia. The participants encompassed educators, psychologists, and occupational therapists who provided their experiences and insights regarding the challenges and successes of implementing inclusive education, particularly with marginalised groups such as Roma students.

Key Findings

1. Collaboration Among Professionals

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in supporting marginalised students. Teachers, psychologists, and occupational therapists highlighted how integrating therapeutic practices, such as sensory integration and cognitive-behavioural interventions, into the classroom helped improve the academic engagement and social integration of Roma students and other children with special educational needs (SEN). This collaboration ensured a more holistic approach, allowing professionals to address both the academic and emotional needs of students.

2. Impact of Socio-economic Status

Socioeconomic challenges remain a significant barrier to inclusive education. Roma families often struggle to afford the necessary school supplies, extracurricular activities, and other educational resources. Participants noted that these limitations directly affected Roma students' ability to participate fully in classroom activities, contributing to higher absenteeism and lower academic achievement. These discussions further reveal that schools in disadvantaged areas are often underfunded, exacerbating the resource gap between students from low-income families and their peers.

3. Cultural Competence

The need for a more culturally responsive curriculum was a central theme in these discussions. Participants highlighted that the absence of Roma history, language, and traditions in the curriculum contributed to the alienation of Roma students, diminishing their engagement and sense of belonging. Teachers pointed out that increasing cultural competence among staff through professional development focused on Roma culture and inclusive pedagogical strategies would significantly enhance the learning environment for all students. Such an approach would foster respect for diversity and create an inclusive atmosphere in which every student feels valued.

Key Theme	Description	Frequency of Mention (n=40)
Collaboration Among Professionals	Importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in supporting academic and emotional needs of marginalized students	30
Socio-economic Challenges	Impact of financial barriers on the ability of Roma students to fully engage in the educational process	35
Cultural Competence	Need for a culturally responsive curriculum that includes Roma history and traditions	28
Resource Limitations	Lack of adequate teaching resources, especially in schools in disadvantaged areas	33

Teacher Preparedness	Insufficient teacher training in inclusive education and cultural competence	29
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Table 2: Key Themes from Focus Group Discussions on Inclusive Education

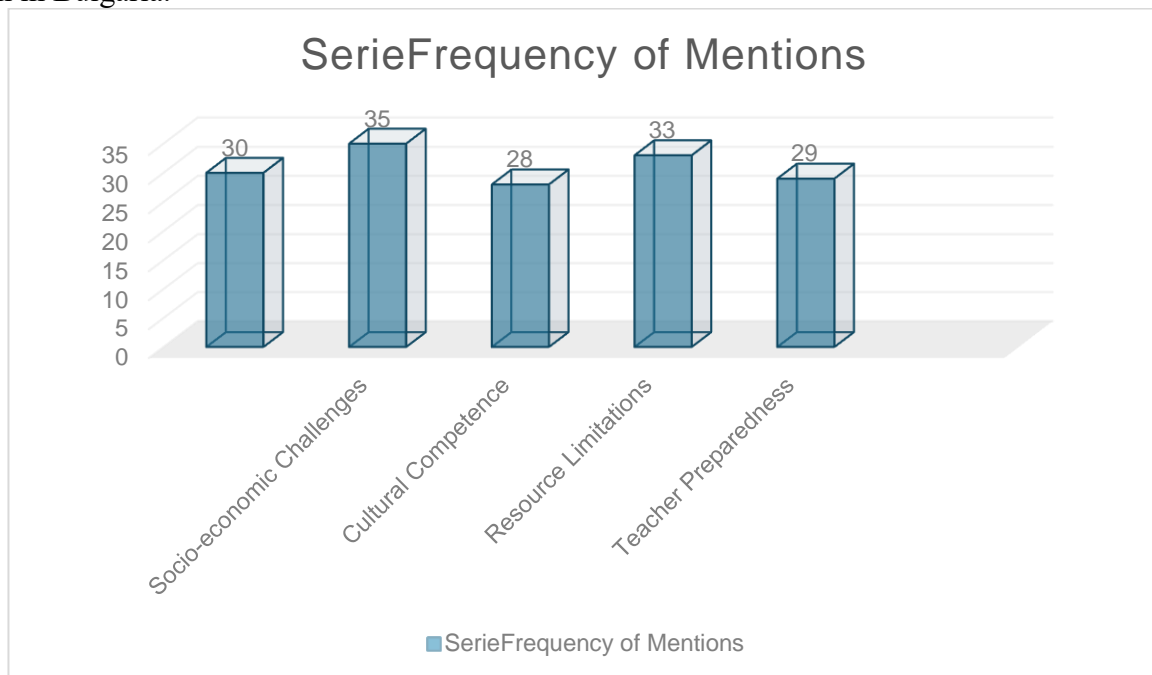
The bar chart below visualises the key themes identified during the focus group discussions with 40 professionals in Sofia, including teachers, psychologists, and occupational therapists, regarding the challenges of implementing inclusive education. Each bar represents the frequency with which the participants mentioned a particular theme.

Socioeconomic Challenges (mentioned by 35 participants) were the most frequently discussed issue. This underscores the substantial impact of financial barriers on students' capacity to participate fully in inclusive education.

Resource Limitations (mentioned by 33 participants) and Collaboration Among Professionals (mentioned by 30 participants) were also highly prominent concerns. These themes emphasise the necessity for enhanced access to resources, such as learning materials and staff support, and the significance of interdisciplinary cooperation in supporting marginalised students.

Teacher Preparedness (mentioned by 29 participants) and Cultural Competence (mentioned by 28 participants) were mentioned slightly less frequently, but remained critical. These themes underline the need for additional teacher training to address diverse learning needs and curriculum adjustments to incorporate cultural elements that reflect the backgrounds of marginalised groups, especially Roma students.

The chart highlights priority areas where interventions are needed to enhance the effectiveness of inclusive education in Bulgaria.



This bar chart provides a concise visual representation of the most frequently discussed themes and highlights the most significant barriers to inclusive education in Bulgaria. This graphical representation corroborates the findings by illustrating which challenges were most prominently identified by the participants during the focus group sessions.

8.0 Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate a strong correlation with the existing literature regarding the challenges associated with implementing inclusive education policies in socioeconomically diverse contexts (Rosigno et al., 2023). The findings derived from the focus group discussions elucidate that socioeconomic and cultural barriers constitute significant impediments to achieving genuinely inclusive education, particularly for marginalised groups such as Roma students in Bulgaria. These barriers not only reflect broader societal inequalities but also stem from systemic issues within the educational system that necessitate targeted interventions.

A salient insight of this study is the substantial impact of socioeconomic disparities on Roma students' access to quality education. This finding aligns with global research, which indicates that students from low-income families are disproportionately affected by limited access to resources, including textbooks, extracurricular activities, and school supplies (Holmlund & Nybom, 2023). In Bulgaria, these disparities are particularly pronounced in communities with a high concentration of Roma families, where insufficient funding for schools in disadvantaged areas exacerbates the educational gap.

Resource limitations are not solely a matter of funding but also encompass the availability of support staff and specialised services. As elucidated by the focus group participants, numerous educational institutions lack the requisite infrastructure to provide individualised support for students with special educational needs (SEN), including Roma students, who may require additional academic or emotional assistance. This aligns with Kyuchukov's (2015) research, which underscores that Roma students often attend under-resourced schools, contributing to higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement.

Another critical barrier identified in this study was the lack of cultural competence within the educational system. The current curriculum frequently fails to reflect the cultural identities of Roma students, resulting in feelings of alienation and disengagement during the learning process. This is congruent with Damyanov's (2023) observation that the curricula in Bulgaria frequently overlook the cultural and linguistic diversity of Roma communities, thereby reinforcing social exclusion in the classroom.

Consequently, the significance of cultural competence cannot be overlooked. Educators who are not adequately trained to comprehend the cultural backgrounds of their students may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or fail to address the specific learning needs of marginalised groups. As this study reveals, professional development programs that focus on cultivating cultural competence among teachers are essential for creating more inclusive classrooms in which all students feel valued and supported. This finding corroborates previous research advocating culturally responsive teaching practices as a key component of effective inclusive education (Bešić, 2020).

Teacher preparedness has emerged as a recurring theme in focus groups, with numerous educators expressing that they feel inadequately equipped to manage the diverse needs of students in inclusive settings. This is particularly evident for Roma students, who may encounter both academic and socio-emotional challenges that necessitate specialised attention. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive professional development programs that train teachers to utilise differentiated instruction and inclusive teaching strategies, particularly for marginalised students.

Professional development is crucial for bridging the gap between policy and practice. While Bulgaria's national policies on inclusive education provide a framework for integration, their efficacy depends on teachers' ability to implement them effectively in the classroom. Without ongoing training and support, educators may struggle to meet the diverse needs of their students, thus limiting the potential of inclusive education to foster social mobility and reduce inequality.

This study also emphasises the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between teachers, psychologists, and occupational therapists in supporting Roma students and other marginalised groups. The focus group participants reported that effective collaboration between specialists is essential for addressing the complex needs of students with SEN, including those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. This finding aligns with the broader literature on inclusive education, which advocates a multidisciplinary approach to providing comprehensive support for students (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018).

Such collaboration facilitates the integration of therapeutic practices into the classroom, which can enhance both academic and social outcomes for marginalised students. However, as this study reveals, there remains a need for more formalised structures and systemic support to facilitate this collaboration, particularly in under-resourced schools.

The findings demonstrate that without targeted interventions, the potential of inclusive education to promote social mobility remains limited. For Roma students, these interventions must extend beyond the classroom to address the socioeconomic and cultural barriers they encounter. Initiatives such as tutoring programs, extracurricular support, and family engagement strategies are crucial for assisting Roma students in bridging the educational gap and achieving academic success.

Moreover, policies that promote the inclusion of marginalised groups must be accompanied by adequate funding and resources. Without the financial means to support inclusive practices, educational institutions will continue to struggle to provide the necessary infrastructure and support systems for their most vulnerable students.

9.0 Conclusion

In summary, this study underscores the critical necessity for a comprehensive approach to inclusive education that not only acknowledges but also actively addresses the socio-economic and cultural barriers encountered by marginalised students, particularly Roma children in Bulgaria. Although notable progress has been made in the Bulgarian educational system in recent years through the implementation of policies aimed at fostering inclusion, the findings of this study reveal that significant challenges persist. These challenges are deeply entrenched in both systemic inequalities and a paucity of sufficient resources, impeding the full realisation of these policies' intended objectives.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. First, targeted interventions that provide additional support for Roma students, such as tutoring programs, financial assistance for school supplies, and engagement initiatives for Roma families, are essential for creating an environment conducive to these students' academic success. Without addressing immediate socioeconomic disadvantages, the efficacy of inclusive education is significantly compromised.

Second, the professional development of educators is of paramount importance. The research findings indicate that numerous educators perceive themselves as inadequately prepared to address the diverse needs of marginalised students, particularly those from culturally distinct backgrounds. Continuous professional development programs that emphasise the cultivation of cultural competence, differentiated instruction, and inclusive pedagogical strategies are essential to equip educators with the necessary skills to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments. This is particularly significant in classrooms with a high proportion of Roma students who frequently encounter both academic and social challenges.

Third, interdisciplinary collaboration among educators, psychologists, occupational therapists, and other specialists is crucial for providing comprehensive support to students with special educational needs (SEN). This study underscores how such collaboration enhances both academic outcomes and social integration, particularly when therapeutic practices are incorporated into classroom settings. To ensure the efficacy of these interdisciplinary efforts, educational institutions require formalised structures and support systems that facilitate ongoing collaboration.

By focusing on these critical areas, targeted interventions, teacher training, and interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusive education can evolve into a robust mechanism for reducing social inequality. For marginalised groups, particularly Roma students, who are most affected by socioeconomic and cultural exclusion, inclusive education offers a pathway towards enhanced social mobility. However, realising this potential necessitates a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and the broader community to address the complex and interconnected barriers that these students encounter. Only through such comprehensive measures can inclusive education truly function as an instrument of equality and integration in a Bulgarian society.

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