Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași
Geosciences Doctoral School
Geography and Geology Faculty

PDH THESIS SUMMARY

Educational Geography in Romania: spatial disparities between urban and rural areas

Scientific coordinator,
Prof. univ. dr. Octavian Groza

Phd. Student,
Victoria Buza

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INTRODUCTION

Educational geography is an interdisciplinary field at the intersection of geography and education. It explores the relationships between geographical space and educational systems, highlighting how territorial factors influence access to education and academic performance. This field has evolved historically in parallel with paradigm shifts in geographical and social sciences. Early studies, dating back to the 19th century, focused on the geographic distribution of schools and local educational needs, reflecting concerns over the expansion of school networks in the context of modern nation-state building. In the second half of the 20th century, with the rise of the quantitative revolution in geography, methodological approaches diversified by incorporating rigorous statistical analyses into educational research, enabling the identification of spatial patterns in school participation and academic outcomes.

In recent decades, under the influence of neoliberal currents (1990s–present), research directions have shifted toward the geography of school choice and the geography of children. Contemporary scholars examine how neoliberal education policies—such as parental freedom to choose schools—reshape the educational landscape, generating inter-institutional competition and potential inequities. They also investigate how students' everyday experiences in different environments (urban vs. rural, affluent vs. marginalized neighborhoods) shape their educational trajectories. Today, educational geography has matured into a field that combines both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to investigate spatial (in)equities in education, offering analytical tools relevant for shaping public policies aimed at reducing social injustices in education.

Education is universally acknowledged as one of the fundamental pillars of societal development. However, equitable access to quality education remains uneven. Territorial disparities, particularly the urban-rural divide - create profound imbalances in children's educational opportunities. Spatial inequalities are a major international concern, with numerous studies showing that students from disadvantaged rural areas tend to perform worse academically, are more likely to drop out, and have limited access to educational resources compared to their urban counterparts. Educational geography, as a subfield at the crossroads of human geography and educational sciences, seeks to address these challenges by examining how space and place influence educational processes. It analyzes the territorial distribution of educational institutions, the typological diversity of schools, and the dynamics of education systems. From urban–rural differences in developed countries to regional gaps in developing ones, research in this area

converges toward reaffirming the necessity of spatial justice in education—the principle that geography should not determine one's right to quality education.

In Romania, educational disparities between urban and rural areas remain persistently relevant, as the national education system continues to face challenges rooted both in historical legacies and current public policy dysfunctions. The post-1990 socio-economic transition has widened existing gaps: large cities have seen increased investments in school infrastructure and a concentration of qualified teachers, whereas most rural localities have experienced school population decline, resource shortages, and school network restructuring. Consequently, the geography of Romania's school network reveals a sharp contrast: rural schools are often vulnerable and scattered, with limited capacity and inadequate facilities, while urban schools—especially in major cities—benefit from superior conditions and attract high-achieving students from wider areas. These territorial inequalities directly affect children's educational opportunities: access to quality schools and the possibility of continuing studies at secondary or tertiary level are often determined by place of residence and proximity to an urban center.

Moreover, urban–rural disparities are not limited to physical infrastructure or access to schools per se. They are also reflected in academic performance, graduation rates, absenteeism, and grade distribution. National exam results consistently reveal a systematic divide: promotion rates and test scores for the Baccalaureate and the National Assessment are significantly lower in rural areas, which also report higher dropout rates compared to urban counterparts. These phenomena raise concerns of educational equity and call for detailed investigation: what are the geographical causes behind these discrepancies? While educational sociology and economics have addressed parts of this issue, explicitly geographical approaches that incorporate spatial and territorial dimensions remain limited in Romanian research. School geography as a subfield attempts to fill this gap by examining how the geographic distribution of educational opportunities influences school equity.

The present study contributes to the development of educational geography in Romania and builds on two major foundations: (1) the international literature, which provides operational concepts and methodologies for analyzing the uneven distribution of educational resources, and (2) the national socio-spatial realities that require context-sensitive solutions. Specifically, the research focuses on three major thematic axes. The first axis addresses school infrastructure and network, examining the geographic distribution of preschool, primary, and lower secondary

schools. It emphasizes the resilience of rural educational spaces in the face of demographic decline, institutional reorganizations (school closures, mergers, adjustments to peri-urban sprawl), and the distances rural students must travel to reach the nearest school, highlighting the fragile balance between geographic accessibility and the quality of education provided.

The second axis evaluates spatial disparities in school performance, using the Baccalaureate exam as a key indicator of educational equity. The analysis includes the territorial distribution of promotion rates, average grades, and related phenomena (such as absenteeism as a symptom of systemic imbalances). Particular attention is given to performance differences between urban and rural students, as well as disparities by gender (girls vs. boys) and by subject (e.g., mathematics vs. Romanian language), exploring whether school stereotypes such as "boys excel in STEM while girls perform better in humanities" are confirmed in contemporary Romania.

The third analytical axis investigates educational mobility at the transition to high school. A case study on high school admissions in 2022 explores the areas of influence of high school centers, patterns of educational migration, and continuation trajectories for students from different geographic areas, particularly rural and small-town settings. This analysis enables the identification of territorial inequalities in actual access to favorable educational paths and the "invisible" barriers to major urban high schools.

Several working hypotheses guided this investigation. The first assumes—almost tautologically in the Romanian context—that significant and persistent performance gaps exist between urban and rural areas, to the detriment of rural communities, reflecting unequal access to resources and opportunities and a symbolic stratification of school value based on geography. The second hypothesis addresses differences by gender and subject area: beyond place of residence, do gender and discipline (e.g., mathematics vs. Romanian language, associated with rationality vs. expressiveness) influence outcomes, possibly revealing lower performance in mathematics in disadvantaged areas or gender-based disparities? It is also hypothesized that the supposed advantages of boys in STEM and girls in humanities, often perpetuated as school stereotypes, may be nuanced, or even reversed, by factors such as teaching quality, intrinsic motivation, and social pressure, particularly in rural areas where girls often outperform boys due to higher school engagement.

A third key hypothesis concerns educational mobility: high school admission involves a particular form of spatial migration. This process is not merely administrative but also a reflection

of territorial inequalities, with structural effects on both sending schools (mostly rural or small-town) and receiving schools (typically urban). In isolated or impoverished rural areas, the proportion of students who continue to high school is significantly lower, suggesting that distance, financial vulnerability, and lack of local options are strong barriers. At the same time, high schools in large cities tend to attract disproportionately higher-achieving students, contributing to a process of polarization in favor of the most competitive institutions.

All these hypotheses converge toward the central objective of this research: to investigate how the geographical distribution of educational disparities shapes school equity and, implicitly, social cohesion. By validating this analytical framework, the dissertation contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underpinning Romania's school geography. Integrating the spatial dimension into the analysis of the educational system allows for a comprehensive perspective on urban–rural imbalances, revealing not only where these inequities occur, but also why they persist so tenaciously, and how, at least in theory, they could be addressed through well-calibrated public policies. Assuming, of course, that such declarative reform initiatives would eventually move beyond the stage of intention.