

# INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES TO INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

*Inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education is a very complex issue which has been in the focus of specialists from several fields, such as psychology, pedagogy, sociology, medicine, social work in recent years. A great number of documents that address this issue have also been adopted. Probably the best known one is "The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education", adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, organized by UNESCO in Salamanca, Spain, 7-10 June 1994. This document underlined for the first time the importance of inclusive school. By being opened to all children, regardless of their problems, an ordinary school with inclusive view is the most efficient way of fighting against discrimination. The process is by no means an easy one, as not all children in a class are willing to recognize and accept difference as normality. In addition, the success of inclusion of children with special educational needs also depends on the way they are accepted by the larger community they live in, which includes besides classmates, family members and teachers as well.*

*Starting from theoretic aspects, in this paper we intend to present our international scientific research that we conducted during the 2009-2010 academic year in some ordinary schools from Romania, Spain, Poland and Italy. The main objective was to understand to which extent school-children with different disabilities were integrated in ordinary classes and how deeply they were accepted from social point of view by their classmates. The representative sample included 800 children, with or without special educational needs, from the countries mentioned above. The research instrument we used was a sociometric test that asked children to express their preferences about their classmates based on different criteria. The results showed us that a great number of non-disabled children were inadequately prepared to accept their disabled classmates and this can be a major obstacle for the latter ones' effective inclusion in mainstream education.*

**Key words:** *inclusion, children with special needs, mainstream education, acceptance.*

## **Romanian and International Experiences in Inclusive Education of Children with Special Educational Needs**

In recent decades, the inclusive education of children with special needs has been debated by a great number of international forums, which have adopted several documents, such

as laws, declarations, recommendations, programs, etc., on ensuring equal chances for people facing difficulties. Romania is making efforts to adjust its legislation to the international laws in this field. Our country has adopted a number of official documents to enable disadvantaged schoolchildren to achieve their full potential (Blândul, 2005).

In this context, one of the documents to which reference is often made when the education of children with special educational needs is discussed is the " *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*", adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, 7 to 10 June 1994, whose article 7 states that: "The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school." (Engelbrecht, Kitching, Nel, 2009).

The inclusive current, which started in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Scandinavian countries, has spread over most countries of the world by now. Through a number of projects, the inclusive approach has proved itself as a viable alternative to the problems faced by special education. In this context, A. Gherguț (2005, p. 75-82) offers a analysis of some of the projects implemented in Europe, as well as of the main directions in training teachers involved in the education of schoolchildren with special educational needs.

"*Valladolid inclusive education project*", implemented in the city of Valladolid, **Spain**, set out with the purpose of integrating a number of disabled children in mainstream education, which they carried out with the following objectives:

- establishing some resource centers to support children and adolescents facing difficulties, as well as to perform early interventions in the cases of people with disabilities;
- integrating some children with special educational needs in ordinary schools and adjusting the study conditions to their needs;
- initial and continuing training of teachers in the field of inclusive education.

As far as the last objective is concerned, the initial training of teachers interested in special education is performed in three stages. Completion of the first stage gives the right to work in preschools and in the field of social pedagogy. Completion of the second stage, which means receiving an academic degree after five-year academic studies in the field of inclusive education, gives the right to work in the field of special psycho-pedagogy. Completion of the third stage means doing in-depth or master's studies and enables specialization in a specific category of deficiencies. Continuing training means completion of one-two year specialist postgraduate courses, specialization in various fields of inclusive education and of social work, as well as obtaining teaching degrees and scientific titles (Fitch, 2003).

In **Italia** – where special schools have been closed down and all schoolchildren with disabilities have been integrated into mainstream education – the project called "*The Didactic Center as Foundation for School and Educational Integration*" has promoted the setting up of inclusive classes with a maximum of 25 children, with or without disabilities. The curriculum was adjusted to the needs of the children with special educational needs, both in respect of the subjects studied and in respect of the therapies they required. The entire school activity was carried out under the supervision of support teachers and of specialists in psycho-pedagogy of integration. In the project were involved other governmental and non-governmental institutions as well. The teachers' initial training is done at two levels. The first one means studying in teacher training colleges for pre- and primary school education. The second one

means short and long term university training for secondary and high school education. In both cases the training in the field of inclusive education is considered insufficient and continuing training is recommended. In this respect, support teachers attend two-year long specialist training modules that provide in-depth specialization in the corresponding field (Driscoll, Carter, 2009, Ditterline, Oakland, 2009).

The special and inclusive education in **Romania** is under the authority of the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports and its operation is based on Education Act No. 84/1995. The schoolchildren with medium and severe learning difficulties, as well as those whose deficiencies make them unable to attend ordinary preschools, primary and secondary educational institutions, go to special schools, according to their specific deficiencies. On the other hand, schoolchildren with mild learning difficulties, behavior disorders, other less severe physical or sensory deficiencies are integrated into mainstream education, where their education is based on a curriculum adjusted to their needs (the same subjects as for the other children, but at a different level). In Romania, schoolchildren with disabilities benefit from support from itinerant teachers, who, together with the teachers of a particular class, adjust the school curriculum to the needs of these children, do exercises with them during classes or organize various personalized therapeutic activities with them in specially equipped resource rooms (Blândul, 2005).

The „*Learning by doing, living by working*” partnership is one of the most recent international cooperation projects, which is being implemented in seven schools, both special and ordinary, that have integrated children with disabilities in Portugal, Poland, England, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain and Romania. The goal of the project is the setting up of five types of workshops for schoolchildren with various ages and degrees of disabilities. The duration of the project is two years, from 2009 to 2011. Out of the five workshops suggested (“Art and crafts”, “Music and dance, drama and play”, “Kitchen and garden”, “Sport”, and “Information and Guidance”), each school was invited to implement at least two. The schools that have opted for the same workshops are expected to develop activities and final products in partnership while exchanging teachers and involving the schoolchildren. In addition, in each school a support group is set up for the children and their parents. The project has also included a comparative scientific research that wanted to show to which extent schoolchildren from ordinary schools were ready to accept their classmates with disabilities and help in this way their better integration into community. The research and its results are presented in detail in the second half of this article. One of the goals of the project is to publish a guide, along with a DVD, about ways of implementing a protected workshop. The project’s main goal is to raise awareness among the professional community and win the support of the local one for the development of such workshops in the future (Pantazi, 2009).

## Research Methodology

### *The Objectives*

Starting from theoretic findings, with this research we aimed at understanding the status of schoolchildren with disabilities that have been integrated either individually or in groups into ordinary schools in various EU countries. Specifically, we aimed at establishing the social poles at which they might be found, the depth of the socio-affective relations with their classmates, as well as at understanding those individual personality traits that make them be liked or rejected by the other members of the school community.

### *The Sample*

As we have already mentioned, this research has been carried out within the international project "*Learning by doing, living by working*". It has included a number of 802 students with or without disabilities, who attend primary and lower secondary mainstream educational institutions in 4 European partner countries: Romania, Spain, Italy and Poland. Generically, in the case of the disabled children, their problems covered a large range, from mild and medium learning difficulties, speech problems, psychomotor and sensory problems, to various forms of deviant behavior etc. However, the types and degrees of their health problems did not prevent them from meeting the requirements of ordinary schools. The ages of the schoolchildren included in the sample were between 8 and 14 years, with 51.7% being girls, and 48,3% being boys. Table 1 includes other statistical data relevant to the sample of the research.

**Table 1. The structure of the group of subjects included in the research.**

Country	No. of schools	No. of forms	Total of children	Children with SEN*	Percentage %
Romania	8	34	554	46	8.3
Spain	2	5	117	10	8.54
Italy	2	4	89	13	14.6
Poland	1	2	42	6	14.28
TOTAL	13	45	802	75	9.53

\* *Special Educational Needs*

We decided to choose such a large sample (including both schools well positioned within the educational systems of their countries and schools not that well rated) because we wanted to get an overall picture of the inclusive educational practices at European level 16 years after the Salamanca Declaration was adopted. Specifically, by choosing such a great number of schoolchildren who benefit from inclusive education in four countries we could receive particularly relevant data about whether or not these educational institutions can indeed ensure the optimum educational framework for a true school integration. In addition, a research carried out in different countries, with different educational systems and different approaches to inclusion, can produce extremely useful comparative data.

### *The Instrument*

The research took place from October 2009 to April 2010 and included two key aspects: the study of socio-affective relations in ordinary classes that included both disabled and non-disabled children, as well as the analysis from a psycho-pedagogical point of view of children who were "centers of affinity", "centers of rejection", and of those who were isolated. The research methodology included a sociometric survey (together with its associated tool – sociometric test), semi-structured interviews with teachers (head teachers and teachers) who taught in the 45 forms included in the research and the analysis of the psycho-pedagogical data sheets of the schoolchildren belonging to the areas studied. The sociometric test given to the children asked all students in a class to choose 3 classmates they preferred and 3 whom they rejected based on the following five criteria: *affinity* ( $C_1$  – learning,  $C_2$  – leisure

time,  $C_3$  – regret about separation from those classmates who, hypothetically, would change classes,  $C_4$  – unconditional support), and *authority* ( $C_5$  – choosing the leader of the class) The quantitative interpretation was done by including the weighted data in the sociometric matrixes prepared for each criterion. Later, using the results of the sociometric survey, the interviews with the teachers and the analysis of the data sheets of children placed in the affinity, rejection and isolation areas we aimed at preparing their psycho-pedagogic profiles in order to understand the possible causes that led to acceptance, rejection or isolation in the case of children with special educational needs.

## Results of Research

The results of the sociometric tests given to the children are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. The sociometric status proportion of students with disabilities integrated in mainstream education in countries included in research (%).**

Country	The sociometric status proportion of students with disabilities integrated in mainstream education		
	Students with medium status	Isolated students	Excluded students
Romania	30	18	52
Spain	40	10	50
Italy	62	23	15
Poland	50	18	34

The quantitative interpretation of this data offers us a series of very interesting information. First of all, regardless the country, the majority of the disabled schoolchildren integrated in mainstream education belong either to the areas of "centers of rejections" or to those of isolated children in their classes. There are fairly few who have medium status within their school communities, which means a reasonable record of being chosen or rejected by their classmates. It is even more interesting to see that not even one child with disabilities can be found in the area of "centers of affinity", which shows that none of these children has been able to impose themselves as leader in any of the 5 criteria of the survey. A first conclusion that can be drawn is that, regardless the country of origin, disabled children who study in ordinary schools do not receive much sympathy from their classmates, their presence in ordinary classes being at the best tolerated.

A second interesting aspect refers to the differences between the countries of the project as they are shown by the results of the sociometric tests. Thus, the percentage of disabled schoolchildren integrated in ordinary classes is fairly the same in the countries, from 8.3 % (Romania) to 14.6 % (Italy) (see Table 1). In the same way, the sociometric statuses of the disabled schoolchildren integrated in ordinary classes show fairly little differences. However, if we look at Italy we see that 62% of the disabled children are accepted to a rather great extent by their other schoolmates. At the opposite pole we will find Romania and Spain, where 52 % and 50 % respectively, of the children with special needs are excluded from the communities they study in (see Table 2). These data can be directly linked with the fact that in Italy there is virtually no segregated special education. In this country, all schoolchildren, regardless of their special needs and school results, have the opportunity to attend ordinary classes.

The first aspect of our discussion refers to the different national strategies regarding inclusion of children with disabilities. The study of the psycho-pedagogic data sheets and of the interviews with teachers directly involved in the educational process, has shown that the ordinary Italian schools included in the research were attended both by children with a normal physical and mental development, and by children with various disabilities, emotional problems, learning difficulties, other associated disabilities, or, simply, immigrants who faced difficulties in adjusting to the rules and the culture of their adoptive country. In the conditions of this "imposed diversity", Italian schoolchildren would opt for other criteria than those connected with the presence/absence of a certain disability when they choose their friends, and the children with disabilities would no longer be sure "victims" of discrimination. On the contrary, in a country like Romania, where the culture of diversity in schools (regardless of the aspect taken into account) is not a widespread phenomenon, the reservations expressed by "normal" schoolchildren towards their classmates facing difficulties may seem understandable. However, the difference between the number of children in the Romanian and Italian samples may also be a possible reason of the differences between the two countries, which takes us to the need for further study of the problem.

Another aspect worth considering is the discussion of the reasons why some children with disabilities are either excluded from or isolated within their school communities. The qualitative interpretation of the psycho-pedagogic data sheet of these children and of the interviews with teachers shows a number of common reasons in all 4 countries included in the research. A first set of such reasons might be given by the communication barriers between disabled schoolchildren and their classmates. These barriers might result either from the hearing impairments and speech problems of the corresponding children or from a number of intellectual or socio-relational dysfunctions which prevent them to relate properly to the other children. As far as the communication problems are concerned, it seems that not speaking the language of the adoptive country is not a strong enough reason to exclude immigrant children from the school community. Another set of reasons is given by the disabled children's learning difficulties, which prevent them from keeping pace with their classmates. As in many countries educational achievement is associated with school success, it seems obvious why most of the children with special needs are rejected at this very criterion. Certain deficiencies (paraparesis, paraplegia and other deficiencies of the central nervous system), a number of syndromes (Asperger, ADHD, etc.) generate additional problems that prevent the children concerned from taking part in the life of their communities and become in this way friends with their schoolmates. In several cases behavior disorders are given as reason for not choosing schoolchildren with disabilities as partners for leisure time activities or as leaders of school groups. However, it was good to see that the other classmates were willing to help them when they needed help. In some cases they even expressed their regret about children with special educational needs possibly changing classes.

### **Limits of Research**

The current research wanted to be a comparative one, meant to assess inclusive education practices in 4 partner countries involved in a European project, as well as to look at the way in which children with disabilities integrated in mainstream education were accepted socially by their classmates. One of the limits of our research was given by the fact that the sample of subjects studied included only children from the schools taking part in the partnership, which might have affected the representativity of the samples at national levels. Only in the case of Romania were there a higher number of schools assessed, which gives an increased

representativity to the sample in this country. Another limit of the research is given by the too general presentation of the results obtained, which is, however, in line with the requirements imposed on an article of such a standard. It is no doubt that a detailed analysis of each class or school would have offered additional information that could not be captured when only the big picture was given. Overcoming these limits will become compulsory challenges for future researches. In such future studies we will aim at capturing the psychopedagogic profiles of leaders, of those who are excluded, and of those who are marginalized in ordinary classes. We want to achieve that by using questionnaires that assess the psychosocial atmosphere of the corresponding classes. We also aim at developing didactic strategies for optimizing cohesion of school groups in which children with disabilities are integrated.

## Conclusion

The subject of inclusive education is one of the most sensitive and controversial topics discussed within the European Union. Of the arguments that support inclusive education, here are few that are worth mentioning: the knowledge taught, the curriculum planning frameworks, which are very different from the simplified ones used in special education; groups and classes in special education cannot be homogenized due to the individual differences in the children included in them, etc. On the other side, the supporters of segregated education argue that the smaller number of children in a special class allows a better teaching than in ordinary classes; special education employs instructors who are specialists both in the subjects taught and in special psycho-pedagogy, and so on (Farell, 2008). Despite all these arguments, several European countries have adopted policies that favor integration of children with disabilities and are implementing a number of projects that promote multinational partnerships in this field.

The results of our research prove that children with disabilities seem to be aware of their own school and social status in the class, without benefiting, however, from much concession when their school progress and performances are assessed. In this respect, a personalized curriculum – an unquestionable requisite for the successful school integration of this category of children – does not solve the problem on its own. Emotional support and acceptance by all other classmates are also needed to ensure equal chances for these children's development. However, the data obtained from this research shows us that as far as this last aspect is concerned, there is much work to do, the statuses of children with disabilities in the classroom being influenced by a number of factors, such as the type and degree of their disabilities, the therapeutic program followed, the recovery prognosis, the social background, the family's economic and cultural status, the community's general attitude, and so on. Nevertheless, the same results also show favorable premises for integration, which are given by the openness of all schoolchildren, whether with special needs or not, to communication and cooperation.

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