

Barriers and Acceptance in Romanian Inclusive Education

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Abstract: The inclusion in mainstream education of the students with special educational needs is a complex process which involves several factors that should act concomitantly and take into consideration all the pupils' rights to free and appropriate education. With a view to highlighting the importance of eliminating labels, the present paper brings to the fore psychological and other kinds of difficulties in the didactic and instruction-education process. Beyond the identification of barriers and of main problems, the most important step is represented by designating solutions to the unsatisfactory situations that may occur.

Key words: psychological difficulties, labels, inclusive education, students with special educational needs

1. Introduction

Academic competition as the main desiderate of the educational system could be a sign of a narrow vision, thus losing on the way those students with special educational needs. Even pupils without disabilities can be marginalized, as very many times only intellectual abilities are valorised while creative efforts (in domains such as music, theatre, etc.) or interpersonal abilities, take second place. Education as a whole should not disregard such aspects under any circumstances: discrimination may lead to lack of self-esteem of otherwise valuable individuals who can have an important contribution to society as a whole.

Research results show that in Romania there isn't any system of detailed and explicit monitoring of schooling as far as special educational needs learners are concerned. By *special educational needs pupils* is understood "all children who have developmental difficulties that affect: their learning, their behavioural, emotional and social development; their communication and their ability to care for themselves and gain independence" (Lindsay, 2007: 3). A term such as *disability* is geographically and historically circumscribed to a certain society; nevertheless, ever since the appearance and extensive use of the medical model, disability has been viewed as a deficiency, an abnormal condition. Consensus upon the understanding of terms seems to have been established through the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, where the people with disabilities were viewed as "those persons who have substantial and long-term physical, mental, intellectual, sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society, on an equal basis with others" (apud Mara & Hunyadi, 2017: 532).

In the light of the previously mentioned conceptual clarifications, one has to be aware of the difficulties that emerge in the present day Romanian *inclusive education*, as they are generated by the effort of adapting the teaching-learning process to the needs and requirements of a class, irrespective of their biological (physical or psychological) growth or their provenience (social or psychological environment). Beside the constant need for specialty courses, there appear situations whose management is responsible for the success of the educational process.

2. Problem Statement - Between Barriers and Acceptance in Romanian Inclusive Education

2.1. General and Romanian Context

The need of an educational system that could compete other such systems of nowadays society (such as technology or economy) as far as the speed of development is concerned, is an issue of great concern for specialists. Figures place Romania on the last places in what regards the indicators proposed at the European level, remaining one of the dragging behind countries which have not accomplished any of the objectives set for the year 2020 (Cf. Popescu, 2019: 508). Strictly connected to the delicate aspect of teaching pupils with special needs, *The Education and Training Monitor* estimates that “nearly 40% of principals in lower secondary schools in the UE declare that the shortage of teachers teaching students with special needs hinders the quality of instruction at their school”(European Commission, 2019: 12). Historically speaking, *inclusive approaches of learning* in Romania date as far back as the year 1924, but the inclusion of pupils with special needs in the mainstream education has become more energetic starting with the post-communist years, reflecting an active preoccupation at the level of the policy of adopting similar European strategies. Nevertheless, as researchers show, “having to effectively make possible the seamless inclusion of learners with various typologies and degrees of learning disabilities in the mainstream classrooms was then and still is today one prominent national and continental priority in the political discourses on education.”(Mitescu Manea, 2017: 756).

2.2. Complexity of Inclusion Approach

Inclusion represents the goal of overcoming obstacles that may hinder the participation in school activities of absolutely all students, irrespective of what aspect (of physical, mental, emotional or social nature) may make them different. The complexity of the inclusion approach resides in the preoccupation of finding the best practices to prepare all the representatives of the young generation for the demands of an “information-based, technology driven, global society” in which the traditional subjects which are taught in schools are blended with interdisciplinary themes such as “global awareness, civic literacy, health literacy, financial economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy, civic, health, environmental literacy” and with other specific skills and expertise that are necessary for their success in the future: learning and innovation, information media and technology etc. (Crețu, 2017: 673).

2.3. *Psychological Approach of Inclusion*

In the process of mainstream inclusive education there can be detected “intrinsic tensions and dilemmas” (Kershner, 2016: 114), which can be solved through dialogue and communication generally speaking. The need of having either one-to-one discussions or opportunities to talk about how to receive and give help places a great emphasis on the importance of further teacher training. The European Commission underlines this issue as well: “While 92% of teachers report regular participation in professional development, 21% of them report a further need for training on teaching students with special needs.”(European Commission, 2019: 12).

According to Ruth Kershner, when approaching the *psychology of inclusion*, there are some key aspects to be dealt with: the sense of belonging (pointing out the sense of support and

enjoyment, of safety and sharing in the educational environment), the diversity (in classroom activities it is essential for every participant to be aware that people are different and unique), the participation (pupil's active participation is prerequisite of a democratic school life). These key words prove that psychological judgement contributes to "the dialogues essential for developing inclusive education, with particular reference to classroom practice and teachers' thinking in inclusive pedagogy"(Kershner, 2016: 131).

3. Research Questions

Taking into consideration the fact that currently Romania has a mass educational system, regulated through the National Education Law no 1/2011, respectively a *special education system* and an *integrated education system*, stipulated by the same law, there seems to be a conflict between those who plead for the necessity of including children with disabilities in the mass education scheme and the dissolution of all forms of special schooling, on the one hand, and the supporters of the continuation of the special education for the children with disabilities, on the other. However, *The UN Convention on the Rights on the Persons with Disabilities* entered into force in Europe in 2011, and all European member states signed and ratified it. Therefore, in the light of the *European Disability Strategy*, one major preoccupation should consist in promoting inclusive education and lifelong learning for all categories of pupils.

Throughout our approach, a special attention will be paid to answering the following questions:

1. What is the situation of the Romanian education system regarding the perception of the students with *special educational needs*?
2. Which are the main barriers in the process of *inclusion* in the Romanian mainstream education?
3. How can they be overcome?

4. Purpose of the Study

With a view to detecting the difficulties teachers encounter in the classroom, the present paper is meant to investigate the need to eliminate barriers in mainstream education and offer examples of good practice so that special education needs students can benefit from an adequate form of training. The attitude towards inclusion is the main factor for all the elements that are involved in education; therefore, the approach of the psychological difficulties when working with students with disabilities, learning in the same class with colleagues without disabilities will be accompanied by possible solutions.

5. Research Methods

The present study is based on methods such as the theoretical-systematic analysis of studies concerned with the present research issue, and also comparison and synthesis of the theoretical aspects found relevant in the above mentioned approaches.

6. Findings

After the historical moment marked by the year 1989, Romania has experienced a difficult, but continuous development, as an expression of “an awareness and recognition of the number of children with *special educational needs*” and of “the need to

ensure equal rights to education for all children, no matter their difficulties.”(Cojocariu et al, 2017: 652) The teacher is the key element in the transformation of the traditional school into a proper environment for the implementation of distinct categories of beneficiaries, meant to create long term effects with the aim of their subsequent full integration.

There is a high degree of complexity when it comes to assessing the situation of *inclusive education* in nowadays Romania because it involves a synergic action of several factors: the necessity to create normal living conditions for all children and young people, to make the educational system accessible to everybody, irrespective of their development characteristics or their living conditions (social, economic, cultural etc.), to cultivate respect towards diversity and uniqueness, to promote non-discrimination in school and society through equal chances of educational and social success, as well as the interference at an early stage in order to eliminate all kinds of barriers in learning and development and the social involvement of each individual, regardless of their features. Reality shows that there appear numerous obstacles in the way of the students with *special educational needs*: the negative attitudes manifested by principals and teachers, the lack of methodology and of proper learning materials, the scarcity of means of access appropriate to their disability, the need of support services (counselling, educational and professional orientation, and so on). Research done in this field demonstrates the fact that once children are included in a segregated form of education, there is hardly any chance for them to continue in mainstream education: the educational route is clear, there are no changes possible in the future. The Romanian legislative background presents some inconsistencies which circumvent the promotion of *inclusive education* and allow an important part to *segregated special education*. Thus, disability

continues to be one of the main causes of the educational disadvantage and exclusion (Cf. Manea, 2016: 5). As a consequence, the success of the disabled people depends very much on both their own and their families' efforts.

It is true that the concept of *special educational needs* is more comprehensive than that of *disability* (Cf. Vrăsmaş, 2015:66) and that the two terms are not synonyms; nevertheless, they are both used when referring to integrated learning with the aim of emphasizing the needs of the educational system.

The three approaches to the pupils with *special educational needs* represent stages towards identifying the most adequate solution to their special necessities:

a. in *segregated form of education* children with disabilities are educated in special schools (separated by mainstream educational institutions) or at their home;

b. in *integrated learning*, children study in special classes, in special school units integrated in the mainstream education; and finally,

c. in *inclusive learning*, children with disabilities learn indeed in mainstream educational unities, where the entire educational system has been undergoing transformations in order to face all students' needs.

According to the specialists in the field, each type of education above has advantages and disadvantages. In terms of pluses, for example, in *segregated education*, the teachers already have the necessary training, the school units are endowed with educational resources and specialized equipment, and the pupils with complex or severe disabilities can be taken care of better than in the other two types of learning previously mentioned. However, the learners are deprived of the opportunity to socialize

and are predisposed to continuous exclusion; also, the costs with providing education are estimated to be 7-9 times higher than if the pupils were included in mainstream education, not to mention the money spent on transportation (Cf. Manea, 2016:17). As far as integrated learning is concerned, the main benefits are the pupils' possibility to mix socially with other children from their community, and thus, barriers and negative attitudes are eliminated. What is more, by studying in integrated school units, their social integration is facilitated. The drawbacks are the pressure of the limited resources, and the difficulty at the level of the teaching staff to adapt their methods and strategies to all the types of *special educational needs*. Regarding the *inclusive education* in Romania, the inconvenients are: the limited resources of the schools, the insufficiently updated abilities of the teachers and also the high costs of curricular adjustment in order to allow a high level of individualised flexibility (Cf. Manea, 2016:18). Equally costly are the adjustment of the school infrastructure and the aids and teaching materials meant to improve communication and participation of the pupils with disabilities. It is a generally accepted truth that support is needed from the part of parents, volunteers and of other children. Last but not least, mention should be made of the expenses with the training of itinerant teachers. This type of educational approach is by far the most appropriate and in accordance with international laws, responding properly to the needs of equality and respect for all pupils. The pluses in *inclusive learning* are numerous: the attitude towards diversity is changed when all children learn together; school performance is higher than in segregated education, the learners are less stigmatized and more socially included; the costs are lower; the pupils with special educational needs benefit from a broader curriculum than that in special schools, and so on. All the barriers are worth fighting with if one

takes into consideration the disadvantages of segregated learning, where children are doomed to perpetual discrimination and exclusion.

In the last decades there has been a constant accumulation of experiences at the international level that affirm the benefits of *educational integration*, and finally, inclusion, this last step being consistent with international regulations. As it clearly results from the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, inclusive education can be interpreted both as an aim and as a means to reach a certain goal. In this way, the impact of inclusive education goes beyond the effort of making the present day learning system open and accessible to everybody. Thus, it will involve a change in this system with the aim of being able to adapt to the sense of difference conveyed by disability generally speaking through an educational reform based on a common vision upon diversity.

The main barriers in Romanian educational system are to be found starting with the current legislation, where there is no clear-cut distinction between *integration* and *inclusion*, although they appear very well-defined in the international documents referring to education. The absence of a committed attitude in order to ensure inclusive education for children with disabilities speaks of a tendency to ignore and even reject it at the level of the learning system and society as a whole. Therefore, the steps to be taken should start with enforcing laws meant to facilitate an easier access to education – by providing the learners with disabilities with accessible and efficient means of transportation, by eliminating the architectural barriers, such as inappropriate bench height, lack of handrails on corridors and stairs, inappropriate use of light and colour schemes, both in the school units and in the recreational areas, by introducing educational material resources

that facilitate their understanding of the national curriculum, including assistive technologies, etc.

When it comes to ensuring success of an *inclusive educational system* in Romania, of great importance is the teachers' attitude towards inclusion. This type of learning is sometimes perceived as a limitation factor as far as academic performance is concerned. Researchers on the teaching process in a classroom where there are also students with disabilities identify a set of problems that impede both teaching and learning, such as: the fact that there is not a differentiated educational curriculum, the number of pupils in a school class is considerably large (which makes it very difficult for a teacher to address everybody according to their level and learning needs during each class hour), the need of qualified teachers as well as of teacher training (most teachers in the mainstream schools in Romania are not trained to cope with learners that have special needs), also the need of creating a "learning community where students with SEN – [i.e., *special educational needs*; my note] - are supported by teachers of different specialities, by itinerant teachers, by family, by classmates, etc."(Blându, 2019: 524).

It stands to reason that approaching each of the problems above in a mature and realistic way will definitely lead to a significant improvement in the learners' school performance, on the one hand, and their successful integration into society, on the other. Therefore, by designing a customized curriculum, which should be based on specific objectives corresponding to pupils' needs, by using learning strategies and interactivity in the teaching-learning-assessing process considering the characteristics of the pupils, by cultivating the sense of belonging and diversity, based on the feeling that everyone is respected for being different and unique, all these will give all learners equal chances to

participate actively in classroom activities and develop their skills according to their unique personalities and abilities.

Conclusion

The access to education of the pupils with *special educational needs* encounters different kinds of barriers, which are not always compatible with the requirements of quality *inclusive education*. Therefore, steps should be taken with a view to promoting the minimal standards of access to all types of educational establishments by investing in teachers' training so that they will be able to treat properly the students' diversity in the classroom, especially by including small and older pupils with disabilities. It is vital that all materials and learning resources should be provided in an accessible and easily adaptable manner and that money should be invested in assistive technology. Also, particular attention should be paid to ensuring special devices for the pupils with disabilities (frequency modulation systems, screen readers, adaptive seating, etc). Of an utmost importance is the involvement of organizations of persons with disabilities in the process of educational planning and monitoring. The two parts (teacher-students) involved in the educational process are confronted with demanding situations. Through a correct attitude manifested in the classroom and through suitable training, resources and strategies, it is clear that teachers (helped by the legislative system) can manage the learning process successfully. Only by taking into consideration the difficulties the pupils face will teachers be able to create favourable conditions for all categories of students to meet the challenges of the future and be able to prove they are ready for success in their life as adults.

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