SCHOOL INCLUSION AND EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM; ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract:*The school for diversity allowed for a new approach to the learning activities in school, which is also determined by the need to ensure equal opportunities for access to education for all members of a community. In this respect, many studies have evaluated teacher attitudes towards the integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs in schools. Our research aimed at identifying a significant relationship between the attitudes of teachers in mass education on the school inclusion of students with SEN and the underlying factors. The group of subjects included a total of 961 teachers in primary and middle education in Romania. The findings of the research have shown the existence of a diversity of attitudes, perceptions and opinions about the opportunity of integrating students with SEN into mainstream education; some perceptions highlight the role and importance of common learning experiences in a school and focus on the need for special efforts by all actors involved, both at system and school level. There are also opponents who do not exploit this educational practice in schools in our country, but are rather attached to the traditional model partially characterized by numerous prejudices, stereotypes and negative attitudes towards students with SEN.*

Key words: *inclusive education; special needs education (SEN); school inclusion; disabilities.*

1. Introduction

The social evolution of recent years has increasingly brought about the idea of human diversity, unity in diversity, the valorisation of diversity, and the opportunities offered to universal education and culture by the diversity of experiences, traditions and models that have arisen over time, without making hierarchies and subjective value judgments on them. In this rather generous context, we may state that the emergence and substantiation of the theories and practices regarding the integration and school inclusion of all categories of students in the community and the shaping of the idea of school for diversity enabled a new approach to the learning activities in school, a fact also generated by the need to ensure equal opportunities for access to education for all members of a community and the satisfaction of training and education requirements according to the

intellectual and aptitude potential of each child included in the educational programme of a school. This concern in the field of educational policies can also be understood as a (re)confirmation and resignification of a fundamental didactic principle, namely *the adaptation of the structure and content of education to the psycho-physical, age and individual peculiarities of students, in order to develop their personality in a balanced and harmonious way.*

Today, most of the schools belonging to the special education network in our country (and other neighbouring countries) have remained functional, many of them even in the same premises, spaces that have been refurbished, upgraded or resized. The difference consists in the fact that, compared to the previous years, special schools now include especially children who have severe or associated disabilities and who cannot be directed towards normal schools because they cannot benefit from certain types of specialized services, recovery and empowerment interventions. The fact that the school network in special education has remained tributary to older functional models, where the tendency of self-preservation of the "special school" environment is still common means that the modern inclusive guidelines have not been accepted, promoted and encouraged everywhere by all decision makers; this is because diversity as social value forces the school to comply, in a timely, flexible and contextual manner, with institutional/organizational resources through an absolutely customized educational policy, nevertheless different from that of other schools of the same type/level and fundamentally distinctfrom the reproductive, normative and prescriptive "politics" of the traditional school (Waine, 1989). The heterogeneity of the inclusive school type is significantly completed by the presence, in the space of the school, of students with special needs who live, relate and learn among and with their peers and colleagues (Lerner, 1997). Thus, theinclusive school spotlights the human person as an original, unique and unrepeatable being, emphasizing the idea that in every society there are different people, different groups, motivations, reasons and views (Melero, 1990).

In the view of several authors (Barton & Oliver, 1992;Biklen, 1992; Fulcher, 1989), the promotion of inclusive education should be based on the following framework principles:

•All students have the right to participate in all activities included in the curriculum of mass schools.

•During the school program, the teaching staff and specialists will directly support in all ways the maximum integration of students with special educational needs.

•By means of a series of radical curricular measures, the school will have to meet all the students' educational needs without harming their dignity and personality.

•Inclusive education classes/groups of students will include children close in age and level of socio-cultural experience.

2. Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and children with special needs

A number of studies have evaluated teacher attitudes towards the integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Thus, Avramidis& Norwich (2002) discuss a number of factors that significantly influence the attitudes of teachers: the nature and severity of children's deficiency, the existence of human and material support in school and classroom. In addition, faith, professional background and personal style of child valorization by teachers have a decisive role in ensuring the success of inclusive practices (Norwich, 1994).

Salvia & Munson (1986) synthesized three categories of variables that can influence teachers' attitudes: a. child-related variables (type of deficiency); b. teacher-related variables (gender, teaching experience, contact experience with children with SEN, training level, set of beliefs and values, certain personality factors); variables related to the educational environment (presence of support services). Forlin (1995) showed that teachers who provide educational support in schools are more likely to accept children with intellectual and physical deficiencies than teachers in mainstream schools. He also states that educators are more reluctant to accept the integration of children with cognitive impairment and more readily accept children with physical deficiency; the degree of acceptance of partial/total integration differs depending on the severity of the deficiency: children with mild or moderate deficiencies are more easily accepted in mass schools, while children with severe deficiencies are not easily accepted for integration into mainstream schools. Ward, Center and Bochner (1994) have shown that teachers have a positive attitude towards the integration of children with SEN perceived as having mild difficulties in learning (children with mild physical and sensory impairment) because they do not require a special educational and training effort on the part of educators. The study by Clough & Lindsay (1991) found a less favorable attitude towards the integration of children with SEN requiring additional professional skills (children with moderate mental deficiency, increased sensory impairment, hyperactivity and behavioral disorders).

Croll& Mores (2000) conducted a study that highlighted the fact that most teachers make a clear distinction between students who can be integrated, depending on the nature of the deficiency; thus, the education of children with mild or moderate learning difficulties, sensory and physical deficiencies is seen favorably, unlike that of children with severe learning difficulties and of those with emotional and behavioral disorders. A study conducted by Mushoriwa (2001) aimed at identifying the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusion of blind children in mainstream education; the results showed that although a blind child could be physically included in a mainstream school, he would be psychologically and academically excluded because of the negative attitude of teachers.

Concerning gender, most studies have found no significant difference between male and female teachers in accepting the integration of children with SEN in mainstream schools. Instead, Leyser, Kapperman& Keller (1994) showed that, generally, teachers with less than 10-15 years of experience in teaching have a

higher acceptance/tolerance level towards children with SEN compared to those with more work experience in school. But, there are studies that show that the teaching experience is not positively correlated with teachers' attitudes towards integration (Avramidis, Bayliss& Burden, 2000). Other studies suggest that as teachers are involved in integration programs for children with SEN, their attitudes could become more positive. Leyser et al. (1994) have shown that educators with high experience with children with SEN have more favorable attitudes towards integration than those with less or no experience with such students.

Teacher training activities for school inclusion can more easily develop positive attitudes towards integration, as shown by Beh-Pajooh (1992) and Shimman (1990). They argue that teachers who have been trained to work with children with learning difficulties have adopted more emotional attitudes and emotional responses to their integration than teachers who have not attended such courses. The studies of Avramidis, Bayliss& Burden (2000) reinforce the assumption that a special education qualification is associated with less resistance to inclusion. Dickens-Smith (1995) studied the attitudes of teachers in mass schools and of those in special education towards inclusion in the wake of attending specialized courses; both groups of subjects showed a more favorable attitude after these courses, and the teachers in mass education registered the greatest positive change. Thus, the author concludes that teacher training is the key to the success of inclusion.

Canadian researchers have identified another factor that influences not only teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, but also the teaching style and the degree of adaptation to a heterogeneous class. This factor refers to teachers' beliefs about the responsibilities they face with students who are either exceptional or at risk. Jordan, Lindsay &Stanovich (1997) have shown that educators who consider that disability is inherent in any student adopt a different teaching style than teachers who consider disability to be the result of student-environment interaction; the latter are more involved in trying to form students and make them understand the school contents they send to them. At the same time, the study by Soodak, Podell& Lehman (1998) has shown that educators who assume responsibility to teach a variety of students (thus recognizing the contribution to students' educational progress) and are confident in their skills and abilities will successfully implement inclusion programs.

Several studies have analyzed environmental factors and their influence on teachers' attitudes towards integration / inclusion. One of the factors that positively correlate with inclusive attitudes is the presence of support services at the class and school level (support teachers, special education teachers, speech therapists, material resources, educational resources, IT equipment, accessibility of premises). Janney, Snell, Beers &Raynes (1995) showed that most of the teachers participating in the study hesitated to accept children with SEN in their classes because they only anticipated what might be worse: they would be left to deal with those children alone. Later, these educators became more receptive as a result of

receiving support services. Respondents pointed out that the support received from school management was decisive in achieving outstanding results with children with SEN. Janney, Snell, Beers &Raynes (1995) demonstrated that the success of the partial integration of children with SEN also depended on the assistance provided by the support teacher both at the interpersonal level and at the level of adaptation and accessibilization of the content of learning.

Other aspects of the school environment have been identified as obstacles to be overcome for inclusive policies to be successfully implemented. Thus, the following categories of barriers / obstacles were highlighted: overcrowded classes, insufficient didactic materials, insufficient time for content planning together with the support teacher, lack of flexible timetable, inadequate support from non-educational specialists (Avramidis, Bayliss& Burden, 2000). Mass education teachers believe that the implementation of a school inclusion program calls for additional work due to the need for careful planning of educational activities that may meet the needs of a heterogeneous class. From this point of view, physical and human support is an important factor in generating positive attitudes from teachers regarding the integration of children with SEN.

Several studies have shown that inclusion of younger children is seen more favorably, and Hasting& Oakford (2003) explain this phenomenon by the fact that a younger child spends more time with one teacher and the impact of special requirements on the teacher is much smaller. Ellins& Porter (2005) conducted a study targeting middle-school teachers and their attitudes towards the special educational needs of children. The results showed differences depending on the type of subject being taught; thus, teachers of mathematics, science and English presented a less favorable attitude compared to teachers teaching subjects from other curricular areas, and students with special needs obtained the poorest results in sciences, where the teacher had been the most negative regarding integration.

Hornby (2001) argues for the need to focus attention on promoting the concept of responsible inclusion. A study conducted by Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher& Samuel (1996) involved parents, teachers, administrators and managers of three schools over 2 years, and the aim was to develop several inclusive models in order to meet the special needs of students. In their view, for inclusion to be effective and responsible, inclusive practices should contain different components, one of which is to allow teachers to choose between teaching or not to inclusive classes, in contrast to the idea that all teachers, irrespective of their attitude and training regarding the integration of children with SEN in mass schoolsshould teach these children. Tod (2001) suggests that teachers face at least two challenges: a. they have to fulfill their role of promoting the inclusive education system, but also to achieve the objectives established by the syllabus; b. they are required to contribute to minimizing the segregation phenomenon on the basis of a belief that this is the solution for removing inequalities in the system. Dessent (1987) considers that attending specialized courses by teachers facing classes with students with SEN should be a professional right. In addition, these trainings will not have

any results unless they are related to a change in school, i.e. additional resources and support services.

The research presented shows that, although teachers are generally receptive to the idea of inclusive education, they do not agree with a full inclusion of children with SEN. Instead, teachers have different attitudes about the type of children that can be integrated, depending on the nature of the disabilities. The factors contributing to adopting positive attitudes are: access to training programs and opportunities for direct interaction with children with special needs before working in the classroom, support services, school environment improvement, planning opportunities and school leadership focused onthe principles of inclusion and equal chances to access education for all children

3. Methodology

The aim of the research is to identify a significant relationship between the attitudes of teachers in mass education regarding the school integration of students with SEN and the underlying factors.

In order to collect the necessary data, we used the survey method based on a questionnaire developed by us, namely the Questionnaire for identifying Teachers' Attitudes on the Integration of Students with SEN that uses a four-step scale in which the operationalization of the concept of integration attitude was achieved through a number of three dimensions: discomfort, tolerance and insecurity, and for which the internal consistency coefficient - *Cronbach α* - is 0.83.

The group of subjects included a total of 961 teachers from primary and middle-school education who underwent training in the field of children with special needs education. Of these, 460 teach in primary school and 501 in middle school.

Research hypotheses

In line with some of the above-mentioned studies, we wanted to see to what extent the professional skills and disability/disorder type encountered in students with SEN may influence the attitude (operationalized by the level of discomfort, tolerance and insecurity) of teachers in the Romanian education system during the activities carried out in classes/schools where students with special needs are integrated. Thus, the following working hypotheses were formulated:

1. There is a significant relationship between the level of professional competencies of teachers and their level of discomfort, tolerance and insecurity in the activities with students with special needs; the higher the level of professional skills, the higher the level of acceptance of children with special needs and the lower the level of discomfort and insecurity among teachers.

2. The presence of students with mental disabilities integrated in mass education will significantly influence the level of tolerance, discomfort and insecurity among the teachers who work with them.

3. The presence of students with sensory impairments integrated in mass education will significantly influence the level of tolerance, discomfort and insecurity among the teachers who work with them.

4. The presence of students with behavioral disorders integrated in mass education will significantly influence the level of tolerance, discomfort and insecurity among teachers who work with them.

5. There are significant differences in the level of tolerance, discomfort and insecurity among primary school teachers compared to those in middle school education.

4. Results and discussions

The data obtainedfromthequestionnaireswerestatisticallyprocessed, takingintoaccounteachresearchhypothesis. Thus, for thefirsthypothesis - *there is a significant relationship between the level of professional competencies of teachers and their level of discomfort, tolerance and insecurity in the activities with students with special needs; the higher the level of professional skills, the higher the level of acceptance of children with special needs and the lower the level of discomfort and insecurity among teachers*- thefollowingresultswereachieved:

	tolerance		discomfort		insecurity	
	r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
professional competences	0,644	0,006	0,541	0,007	0,710	0,000

Pearson Correlations (N-961)

Teachers who have acquired competencies specific to working with children with SEN are more tolerant of the idea of integrating these students into mainstream schools by easily accepting students with different deficiencies in class. At the same time, as teachers have more specific knowledge of inclusive education, they are more aware of the implications and difficulties arising from the particularities of their work with students with SEN. The greater amount of effort deployed in instructive-educational activities with students with different disabilities, the assumption of responsibility for each child with SEN, the discrepancy between theoretical information and classroom practical difficulties could be the basis for perceiving a high level of discomfort and insecurity experienced by teachers; this conclusion is somewhat contradictory to other studies mentioned in the literature, which strengthens the features of inclusive education in our country, in the sense that the minimum conditions and resources for carrying out activities within the limits of minimum quality standards are not ensured.

For the second hypothesis - *the presence of students with mental disabilities integrated in mass education will significantly influence the level of tolerance, discomfort and insecurity among the teachers who work with them*- the results were as follows:

	tolerance		discomfort		insecurity	
	r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
mental disability	0,594	0,023	0,541	0,001	0,610	0,000

Pearson Correlations (N-961)

In some situations, the tolerance displayed by teachers is imposed either by the social system or by the school unit management, in the desire to align with national and European standards on inclusion, without a strong intrinsic incentive and basis. Many teachers working with mentally disabled children face difficulties in managing their low potential as a barrier to optimizing classroom activity. The minor advances experienced by mentally disabled students compared to the workload of the teachers and the complexity of their activities with them may be the basis for perceiving a high level of discomfort and a feeling of insecurity in the profession.

For the third hypothesis - *the presence of students with sensory impairments integrated in mass education will significantly influence the level of tolerance, discomfort and insecurity among the teachers who work with them* - the following results were obtained:

	tolerance		discomfort		insecurity	
	r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
sensory impairments	0,276	0,106	0,662	0,000	0,659	0,000

Pearson Correlations (N-961)

In many situations, teachers accept with difficulty the presence of students with sensory/physical deficiencies in classes, invoking the opportunity to integrate them into the special education system where they can benefit from better conditions and resources, the lack of facilities related to the accessibility of physical spaces in mass schools, the lack of material resources and adequate teaching resources for students with sensory impairments, specific difficulties in the design and organization of classroom activities, all of which have resulted in a low level of tolerance over these categories of students, a level of discomfort due to the inability to provide optimal learning conditions for these children in the classroom, a feeling of uncertainty caused by the difficulties of establishing relationships and communication or insufficient methodical and specialized training required in the act of teaching these categories ofstudents.

For the fourth hypothesis - *the presence of students with behavioral disorders integrated in mass education will significantly influence the level of*

tolerance, discomfort and insecurity among teachers who work with them- the results were as follows:

	tolerance		discomfort		insecurity	
	r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
behavioral disorders	0,284	0,036	0,241	0,087	0,547	0,003

Pearson Correlations (N-961)

These results show that teachers know the particularities of these children, have experience in working with them and better deal with the difficulties encountered in the teaching process. Also, the fact that behavioral disorders are not always associated with a low intellectual level, can provide satisfactory school results, and teacher tolerance may be acceptable. Under conditions of low discomfort and high tolerance, the results indicate a quite high level of uncertainty. This can be attributed to the emotional lability and the unpredictability of this category of students, their frequent and atypical outbursts, the intensification of specific symptoms and the emergence of new disorders such as those caused by hyperactivity and attention deficit.

For the last hypothesis - *there are significant differences in the level of tolerance, discomfort and insecurity among primary school teachers compared to those in middle school education* - the following results were obtained: for the discomfort variable t(959) = 0.41, p = 0.68; for tolerance t(959) = - 1.35, p = 0.18; for uncertainty t(959) = 0.30, p = 0.76. In all three situations, the values obtained invalidate the last hypothesis, which determines us to say that regardless of the schooling cycle we are talking about a certain discomfort of the teachers in the activity with the students with SEN and even if the difficulty of the teaching contentincreases at the middle school cycle and the requirements to the students' performance grow and diversify, the level of discomfort is relatively the same as in the primary cycle. Teachers face the same difficulties in curriculum adaptation and diversification, with the same material deficiencies and the same support from the leadership of the school unit, regardless of the teaching cycle they teach. Teachers also feel the same pressure from the school community to achieve satisfactory results and to cope with any situation in working with students with SEN.

5. Conclusions and discussions
For most teachers, the experience of teaching students with SEN has confirmed the existence of a variety of perceptions and opinions about the opportunity of integrating students with SEN into mainstream education; some perceptions emphasize the role and importance of common learning experiences in a mass school and focus on the need for special efforts by all actors involved, both at system and school level. There are also opponents who do not value this educational practice in the schools in our country, being rather attached to the traditional model in which many prejudices, stereotypes and negative attitudes

towards students with special needs have been outlined, especially those with intellectual and hearing disabilities.

At the same time, in our specialized literature, we cannot speak of many studies regarding the teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and the integration in public education of students with different disabilities. We can say that our research partially confirms the results of other studies conducted for this purpose on an international level, but sometimes they contradict them, there being revealed differences in the way of applying the policies of inclusion in the education system in our country. Thus, the high level of tolerance of teachers with specific skills for working with children with SEN, often accompanied by discomfort and insecurity, could be explained by the fact that, in the Romanian education system, inclusive practices have not been sufficiently prepared, teachers have beenplaced in a position to integrate students with SEN without wanting or accepting this situation (rather it was an imposed decision or a compromise situation to maintain the number of classes and teaching positions in schools where the number or students had diminished). In addition, the implementation of syllabi for the school inclusion of students with SEN was not preceded by school-awareness activities and teacher training programs, thus placing teachers in the situation of not having consistent information about the organization and specificity of educational and training activities for the circumstances of havingstudents with SEN in class.

The school is a community institution that has to provide educational services to any child/young person, regardless of his bio-psycho-socio-cultural origin, nature or particularities. Regarding the number of students enrolled in a class, teachers perceive the need to reduce the number of students in the classes in which one or more students with disabilities are integrated, in order to support personalized intervention, increasing the level of attention of each student and optimal insertion at the class level, thus fostering interpersonal relationships between colleagues. One of the important conditions for facilitating work with students with SEN is that of access to adapted and differentiated teaching means, teachers perceiving this lack as an impediment. Teachers believe that an optimal process of integration depends on the presence of material and physical resources in school institutions, especially the accessibilization of the school environment, whereas their limitation creates barriers to the efficient realization of this process on a large scale.

In general, the results obtained in this study indicate a high level of discomfort and uncertainty of teachers regarding the situation of the integration of students with mental, physical and sensorial disabilities, thus indicating the vulnerability of the inclusive education process in the Romanian education system. The most acute problems are related to the human resource, the lack of consistent methodical training and major difficulties in managing the classes in which children with SEN are integrated. Given that teachers' attitudes contribute to the efficiency of inclusion, it can be said that the inclusive education process in our country still has a long way to go, requiring improvements and possible interventions that may support the formation of positive perceptions and attitudes

towards educational diversity, taking responsibility for all students and important personal changes starting with prejudices and stereotypes about people with disabilities, adopting coping strategies to lessen discomfort and uncertainty in the classroom, better collaboration with the school manager and the child's family, involvement in training and education activities in inclusive education; all these aspects are imperatives of the *school for diversity*, a tendency and necessity of the educational system in our country.

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