SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS – FROM CONCEPT TO LABEL

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to highlight that some parents and teachers tend to denigrate children with special educational needs (S.E.N.), because most of them think only of children with deficiencies. They can neglect the positive aspects of children with S.E.N. because they are 'blinded' by the negative ones: limitations, incapacities, deficiencies children may have, etc. Also, the discussions during inspections and the micro research conducted as part of the thesis for obtaining the first level of teacher certification, reveals that some teachers and parents use S.E.N. concept as a label. Unfortunately, the S.E.N. label was expanded from child to teacher and then to the school as a whole.*

Keywords: *Special Educational Needs, label, inclusive school*

1. Inclusive education – a controversial education policy

Although Romanian education policy on the inclusion of special education needs (S.E.N.) pupils in mainstream schools started to be implemented in the 1990s, there are still different understandings and perceptions of it among schools or even among teachers of the same school.

Unfortunately there is no connection between the values promoted by inclusive philosophy (tolerance, respect, empathy, cooperation), social values (competition, financial power, performance, individualism), and current practices (especially related to instruction and differentiated evaluation, positive discrimination, inclusive strategies). The different philosophical approaches to inclusion represent an important impediment in realizing this educational policy, leading to reluctance, detachment, ignorance and transfer of responsibility to specialists.

This educational policy derived from international experience occurred according to guaranteeing every child's right to education, providing education for all children, but also in agreement with the dynamics of school life, which is

increasingly confronted with pupils' diversity, more varied styles of learning, less homogeneity in classrooms in terms of educational qualifications and behavioural manifestation (and therefore differences in individual learning requirements).

Thus, mainstream school became an inclusive school (irrespective of the difficulties or intellectual, emotional, social, physical, linguistic, economical limits, etc.), which value cooperation and respect for human dignity, individual ability and authenticity in the context of diversity.

In this context we ask: „If every child in the class is unique, original, gifted, special, different from their colleagues, etc., should they not be treated individually by the teacher, in the sense of developing the potential of every student in the class?" Virtually all children have equal rights in relation to their peers. According to the principle of ensuring equal rights to education, all children can be integrated in mainstream schools and may benefit from the availability, training, skills and time of the teacher. In this respect, differentiated training and positive discrimination - key ways to achieve inclusive education - become the most controversial and sensitive issues, given that the parents of ordinary children criticize teachers for limiting their availability and taking time from their children in order to integrate/help those with S.E.N.

It's not easy for managers to identify the most appropriate and effective solutions for mainstream schools to be recognized by the entire community as inclusive (attract and provide an auspicious learning environment for students with special educational needs) as well as performing or "elite school" (achieve good results in the Olympics, school competitions and national exams) in the current climate, dominated as it is by competition between schools, fewer children (due to falling birth rate) and an increase in school dropout figures.

From the perspective of parents of children with S.E.N. integration into mainstream school is a significant guarantee of children's social integration. Networking with classmates, many of whom come from the same neighbourhood, from the same block even, is considered by parents an important dimension of their psychological development, useful to the recovery / rehabilitation of the child. In contrast, parents of ordinary children are threatening to withdraw if S.E.N. pupils do not leave the class / school.

The issue sprouts controversy among teachers as well. From my observations and the conversations had with teachers on the occasion of special inspections for the obtaining of first level teaching certification, I noticed that some of the teachers agree with the benefits of inclusion upon children with S.E.N., but become reluctant when implementing inclusive practices.

An effective inclusion cannot be achieved by forcing an educational policy because it depends primarily on understanding its philosophy and on the cooperation/support of parents and school - specialists. Inclusive practice shows how difficult this partnership is achieved in our schools. Or, "the most

important aspect of training a team is its functionality" (Dinnebeil, Spino, McInerney, 2011, p. 39).

2. Perception of the term 'special educational needs' as a label

Unfortunately, we frequently discover among parents and teachers a certain lack of information or a tendency to denigrate the issue of S.E.N. children, because most of them think only of children with severe deficiencies. However, the scope of this category of children / pupils with S.E.N. is much broader today: children / students with disabilities, learning difficulties, from vulnerable / marginalized minority groups, institutionalized children, offenders, even gifted students.

The phrase "special educational needs" aims to raise awareness and acceptance of specific difficulties of children as regarded by teachers and parents. It also provides all the professionals and teachers a framework/common language, enabling them the opportunity to effectively exchange information in the development and implementation of personalized intervention programs.

From the perspective of Alois Gherguț, S.E.N. "refers to the educational requirements of certain categories of persons, that are consecutive to some dysfunctions or deficiencies of an intellectual, sensory, psychomotor, physiological nature, etc. or as a consequence of some psycho-emotional, socio-economic or other that places the person/ student in a difficult situation in relation to others, a situation that does not allow the existence or recovery of their intellectual or attitudinal potential under normal circumstances, and it induces a sense of inferiority that emphasizes his condition as a person with special needs" (2006, p. 244).

The integration of children with S.E.N. in mainstream schools aimed to facilitate their integration into the community and increase their social participation. If we see school as a community for teachers and students, then children should not only be provided education but also "care and support". In other words, educational - therapeutic intervention is the 'heart' of inclusion, focusing on the relationships between children and between children and adults. (Hick, Thomas, 2009, p. 129)

Even if this phrase was proposed in order to guide teachers on the need to provide special educational support, we cannot ignore the fact that some of them use the phrase as a label. In this case, students with S.E.N. may behave or learn according to the label they received and the teacher may react inappropriately. For example, teachers can generalize or excessively minimize children's difficulties; they can design repetitive, dull, easy tasks for the child; they can neglect the positive aspects because they are 'blinded' by the negative ones: limitations, incapacities, deficiencies children may have, etc.

Basically, this labelling can lead to a continued expectation of the child's limited or low potential and that they will not be able to learn or adapt to the school environment. The child may be excluded from intellectually, emotionally, socially, motivationally and volitionally engaging activities etc. on the grounds that they disrupt the educational climate of the school and be sent to a specialist (itinerant teacher, speech therapist, school counsellor) on their first behavioural misconduct.

Given the results of the micro-research conducted on a group of 20 teachers from three inclusive schools in Ploiesti (Mărgăriţoiu, 2012, pp. 124-134), we specify that the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs is considered by some teachers as "difficult and inefficient", "an obstacle to educational activities because of their behavioural disorders", "a drag in ensuring the education quality, effectiveness and performance", "a permanent controversy with ordinary children's parents, even direct rejection from them". The obstacles they face daily are numerous:

• Limited intervention from itinerant teachers;
• Rejecting children with special educational needs by the parents of ordinary children, on grounds that they would affect the overall classroom level of performance;
• The lack of a material base and some support instruments in achieving inclusive education;
• Socio-relational marginalizing of children with S.E.N by their classmates;
• Lack of communication and support between the members of the intervention team.

A small category of teachers, the majority enrolled in Master's or teacher training programs, perceive inclusive education as "provocative", "beneficial" and "useful". If in theory and legislation teachers are encouraged to accept that all challenges or issues arising from special educational requirements always enjoy several solutions, in practice the possibilities to implement these goals are limited.

3. Effects of labelling: from children with S.E.N. to inclusive school

One effect of labelling children with special educational needs may be the generalization of some deficiencies / problems / disorders, such as emotional disorders and behaviour, the inability to understand and solve a problem, short attention spans, school demotivation, low levels of aspiration, etc. and neglecting the strengths thereof (skills, qualities, interests).

Also, teachers' exaggerated focus on the cognitive development of students is considered a barrier to real practices of successful integration of children with S.E.N., of adaptation and networking with other colleagues.

Another effect of labelling refers to the fact that it can sometimes prevent children with S.E.N. to befriend ordinary children; labelling acts as a barrier to developing communication skills and social networking. This is reinforced by the negative attitude of some parents who rely on social stereotypes and prejudices (e.g. considering S.E.N. children as "incapable", "useless", "ineffective", "dependent on others", etc.).

The negative effects were not limited only to children with S.E.N., but were extended to the schools that were integrated into. Some parents and teachers have labelled inclusive schools as underperforming and less attractive because of S.E.N. students (often perceived as having mental and behavioural disorders), and hence of the low academic results achieved in this context.

In conclusion, the integration and stigmatization of pupils with special educational needs denigrate school as a whole, as labelling practically extends from child to school level. Sometimes this contagion is due to cases of children with severe or associated deficiencies integrated into mainstream schools at the insistence of their parents without considering the consequences for ordinary children.

Sometimes parents refuse to seek expertise to establish a diagnosis of their children's difficulties and hence of their special educational needs. Some of the managers also contribute to this situation by adopting inappropriate attitudes (lack of involvement, marginalization) or by addressing briefly, as an imposed requirement, the issue of integrating children with S.E.N. in mainstream schools. Janney et al. (1995, p. 432) believes that teachers show a higher tolerance for inclusion if the principal is supportive.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The phrase 'special educational needs' had different meanings for teachers, parents and students. Although it was created to protect and support, the term S.E.N. can create a lasting stigma for the child, if teachers, parents and ordinary children understand and use it as a label.

Lani Florian (2008, p. 203) shows how difficult it is for children with S.E.N. because they experience two contradictory feelings simultaneously: acceptance and rejection. The child is both included and excluded from certain activities / games by some teachers or classmates.

"At school age, when students do not compare with themselves, but with others, including due to excessive interference from parents and teachers" (Şoitu, 1997, p. 193), labelling may only increase the distance between them.

Unfortunately, some of the teachers can develop stereotypes based on this label that violates the student's self-esteem and blocks their path to others. Centred on achieving academic performance, teachers forget that "we perceive ourselves and we know who we are through assessments and

evaluations made by others who become mirrors that reflect our behaviour. We depend so much on these images offered by others that we meet the world inclined to make selective perceptions" (Şoitu, 1997, p. 34).

The discussions during inspections and the micro research conducted as part of the thesis for obtaining the first level of teacher certification, reveals that the greatest difficulties faced by teachers in the integration of children with S.E.N. are generated mostly by the negative beliefs of ordinary children's parents; they do not accept the presence of children with S.E.N. in mainstream schools. Furthermore, the S.E.N. label was expanded from child to teacher ("not good/ non-performing") and then to the school as a whole.

In order to change the present situation in some of the inclusive schools, we propose the following lines of action:

- curricular and extracurricular activities centring on maximizing interactions between children with S.E.N. and their colleagues, so as to become friends. An analysis of studies conducted by Ruijs and Peetsma (2009, p. 76) shows that ordinary students develop a more open attitude towards students with S.E.N., but favourites remain their ordinary peers;

- increase the involvement of specialists in inclusive schools, in managing relationships between parents of ordinary children and parents of children with S.E.N.;

- identifying ways in which parents of children with S.E.N. to raise awareness and convince parents of ordinary children on the benefits of inclusive school, along with teachers. Parents are the first "teachers", of a child in terms of tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Also, parents of children with S.E.N. should understand that it is not only the teacher's duty to advocate for inclusive education; they can also achieve effective lobbying for inclusive school;

- revision and refinement of the S.E.N. coin phrase, in agreement with the new concepts proposed by some European countries and the USA. Traian Vrăşmaş mentions the evolution of the S.E.N. concept internationally to reduce the relative labelling which may happen due to the appellation "special", which is sometimes assumed that can damage human dignity:

• in Spain (2006): "specific educational support needs" (we notice how the term "special" is exchanged for "specific" and thus becomes connotative for support);

• in Scotland (2004): „additional support needs" (and thus, instead of being "special", the needs are assimilated to additional support besides what other children already receive in school);

• in French Canada: „besoins educatifs particuliers" (the adjective "particular" reveals the fact that each human being that learns has their own peculiarities);

• in Wales (2014): „additional learning needs" (Vrăşmaş, 2015, p. 28).

In fact, at the centre of the national educational policy advocating for inclusive schools is a set of moral and emotional issues related to the principle of positive discrimination for children with S.E.N. and they require deep analysis to identify viable solutions.

Out of their desire for social development, it is essential that school actors understand that the term S.E.N. used in our schools, as in other European countries, is not intended to categorize or to harm children's self-esteem, but to identify their real learning difficulties and school adjustment issues to ensure a personalized educational approach, thus providing personal autonomy and adequate socio-professional integration; in this way, we are challenging some people's bias in considering them an "economic burden" to society.

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