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Inclusive education versus special education on the Romanian educational system

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Abstract

In last twenty years, Romanian schools have gradually tried to open and to adapt the educational offer in relation with the new directions of change in educational activities (the result of integration and inclusion programs). An analysis of the national situation has revealed a number of strands in the improvement and development of educational services for the integration of children with special needs and disabilities in mainstreaming schools; to understand the distance between theory and practice in terms of the quality of education services for children with disabilities, we gather some information taken from various reports and documents prepared by authorized institutions in the field.

1. Theoretical Perspective

In recent decades, increasingly more countries have encouraged the idea of an inclusive society, open and flexible to the phenomenon of human diversity. Each student is unique and has its value, whatever obstacles we have in school learning. Learning and development is also unique to each student, depending on the style, rhythm, and characteristics as well as its merits, skills, expectations, and previous experience. Thus, social policies and strategies focusing on the following priority directions of action have been developed (Ghergut, 2006):

- legislative action - adoption of antidiscrimination legislation package to remove all existing barriers for inclusion of people with disabilities;
- change of attitude - engaging in educational activities for understanding the needs and rights of persons with disabilities;
- services that promote independent living for people with disabilities;
- family support - allocating resources to families of persons with disabilities to ensure their support and social inclusion;
- access to employment, key inclusion, and social integration;
- public information programs that strengthen partnerships with organizations of persons with disabilities to improve the image of these people and to sensitize community members on human diversity;

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education system - schools have to participate and support the understanding and acceptance of rights of persons with disabilities, helping to eliminate fears, myths, and misconceptions on the human quality of these people.

Inclusion in the school context refers to the process of bringing up children, with or without special education needs, in the same premises and under the same conditions, with the final goal of full participation of all children in school and extracurricular activities. The first condition for integration is the conscious acceptance of members of the group for each person, benefiting from an educational service based on a flexible curriculum (Vrasmas & Daunt, 1997). Inclusive education represents a continuous process of improving the school, aiming at exploiting existing resources (especially human resources), in order to support the participation of the education process of all pupils from the community. This means that a special school may also be inclusive or may develop inclusive practices in working with children. Open and friendly schools, in which the focus is on a flexible curriculum, increasing the quality of teaching and learning, continuous evaluation and education partnership, are considered inclusive schools.

Inclusion is at the heart of a comprehensive education system appropriate to a society which has, as main values, promoting and giving importance to diversity and equal rights. This system is characterized by:
- interpersonal relationships open, positive, based on partnership;
- flexible curricula, educational strategies and support services for students with learning disabilities;
- promoting equal rights and responsibilities and access to opportunities;
- partnership with families/parents;
- active involvement of community in school programs;
- encouraging the exercise of the right attitude and word (Ainscow, 1999, 2004).

If integrated education is centered on objectives related to education in conditions of normalcy for children with special needs (the focus is on children and school support services for them), inclusive education is mainly centered on adapting the school to the specific learning requirements of children and, by extension, the school generally must adapt to the different kind of children into the community, which implies an overall reform and development of schools (Stainback & Stainback, Forest, 1998).

The benefits of inclusion are reflected in the creation of a tolerant society that respects diversity, which values their own culture and others, and avoids social tensions, providing a flexible educational experience that is fundamental to a quality education (Daunt, 1993).

2. Romanian context for inclusion

Romania's concerns and interest in education and in the educational and socio-professional integration of people with disabilities or learning problems have resulted in practical measures, some applied long before launching the concept of inclusive education in the literature. One argument for this is the Education Law of 1924, which provides the establishment, in regular school, of classes for children with mental disabilities and for children with health and sensorial problems (blind, deaf and dumb). This is, in all likelihood, the first entry in an official document concerning the organization of school structure (classes) differential mass schools, for children with various types of problems, or rather, integrated forms of education (which at that time did not wear that name).

After the communist regime¹ change, the social and educational services for people with special needs in our country have undergone a series of transformations. Here are some milestones (Ghergut, 2006):
- The onset of non-governmental organizations in education and social welfare services for people with special requirements and the opening in 1990 of the UNICEF representation in Romania, in Bucharest, one of the main partners of governmental institutions in this area, were absolute firsts for social services.
- In autumn 1993, the first pilot projects for integration were applied (carried out between 1993 and 1997), which proposed, on the one hand, the promotion of school and social integration of children with disabilities and, on the other hand, the successful implementation of strategies generalizing such practices at the national level.

¹ Until 1990 and the years prior to the emergence of the new Law of Education in 1995, the education for children with disabilities was provided only by the special education network.
In 1995, the Education Law was passed, which allowed for the inclusion of special education as part and parcel of the national education system and the connection to international trends and developments.

After 1997, the development of partnerships between schools and national and relevant international organizations in the field (RENINCO, UNICEF, UNESCO, etc.) was extended, developing training programs for teachers in regular schools and special schools (partnerships for professionals and volunteers).

In the period June 2002-December 2003, the National Program ‘A school for all’, launched by the Ministry of Education, in partnership with UNICEF Romania, National Authority for Child Protection and Adoption (NACP), and the Association RENINCO Romania, was developed. This program aimed to inform the population about the advantages of school integration of children with special needs, increasing awareness and preparing the school and the community to integrate children and youth with special educational needs.

In 2011 a new Law of Education was adopted, which includes a special chapter on the education of children with special needs and ways to ensure equal opportunities to education through the development of inclusive school programs.

In order to create a shift toward a more inclusive approach to education, resources must be allocated to change attitudes, behavior, teaching methodologies, curricula, and the environment, so that educators can better meet the needs of all learners. An analysis of the situation nationally has revealed a number of strands in the improvement and development of educational services in the education system:

- Change strategies in approaching the child with special needs by focusing on individualization, flexibility, and diversified activities in the classroom with students;
- Diversification of educational services that allow access to school for children and adolescents with disabilities, without separating them from their families;
- Transformation of normal schools into inclusive schools (open to all categories of children) with extension services provided by special schools or mainstream schools, and changing some of them into resource centers for integration;
- Increasing the number of institutional structures (developed with the help of NGOs) that provide educational services in school and organizing, in each community, one resource center which will be able to manage teaching and methodological changes in regular schools and help them to become more inclusive;
- Developing and expanding programs for training and further training for teachers;

3. From theory to practice

To better understand the distance between theory and practice in our educational system, we appeal to some information taken from various reports and documents prepared by authorized institutions in the field (National Council on Disability Report of Romania, the monitoring report on progress recorded in the field of social inclusion, reports of Phare Projects on education and social inclusion). The chapters on education capture a number of positive and negative aspects in relation to the education of persons with disabilities in our country. The positive aspects mentioned include the following:

- The education of persons with disabilities is mainly regulated by laws written in accordance with relevant international provisions.
- School integration of children with special educational needs can be achieved by special education institutions, groups and special classes in regular schools and preschool establishments, ordinary schools (individually), including units of instruction in minority languages.
- Special education is an integral part of the national education system, as coordinated by the Ministry of Education.
- Partnerships between NGOs and the authorities or schools to diversify and approach special education needs have been developed.

The negative aspects include:

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1 In Chapter VI, entitled ‘Special education’, Articles 41-46 had references to pupils with special education needs.
- Existence of many bureaucratic barriers in cooperation programs of common interest at institutions and administrative responsibility for the problems of people with special requirements.
- Children with disabilities are a big challenge for the educational system; many schools do not meet the conditions that satisfy the diversity of special educational needs of all students, including those with disabilities (the current school model cultivates especially intellectual skills, acquisition of academic knowledge and the competition; it cannot adequately respond to the basic educational needs of all children, including those with disabilities).
- Until now, only a limited number of mainstream schools have integrated children with special needs. Romania does not yet have inclusive schools in the real sense of the term, as support services are incomplete and the change in mentality has not reached a level that allows the inclusion of any child in any school.
- For children with severe and profound disabilities, including those in institutions for residential protection, there are no formal education programs and a national curriculum for this class of beneficiaries; however, some special schools have started to develop remedial programs for this category of children.
- Insufficient concern of the public authorities for practical solutions to real learning problems of children, young people and adults with disabilities (for example, difficulties for teachers in accessing of the sign language for deaf students, Braille language for blind students, and access ramps for disabled students’ locomotion).
- Lack of programs and procedures for the identification and early diagnosis of disability; lack of monitoring programs for school integration of pupils with disabilities; and low involvement of family in decisions and educational programs concerning children with disabilities.
- The relationship between professionals and family is still artificial and based on authority; parents cannot make the right decision for their child with disability because they do not have the necessary information and advice to this effect.
- Taking into account, on the one hand, the progress in the special education field in the last couple of decades, especially the effort for the growth of remedial services and, on the other hand, acknowledging the gaps, various understandings of concepts, and the system differences between Romania and developed countries, we consider that inclusive education can be applied in Romania. However, the system is not well prepared, especially when it comes to students with moderate and severe disabilities (Walker, 2009).

4. Conclusions:

The analysis presented in this paper begins by reviewing overall international trends in special needs education, emphasizing the range of different practices that exist and the main issues that have arisen in recent years. One view sees the ‘problem’ of disability as not something that is wrong with the child but rather something that is wrong with the organization of schools. This ‘inclusive’ approach to special needs education argues that schools should be made sufficiently flexible to accommodate diversity, whether this stems from disability or any other source. Within the region under consideration, this argument strikes a particular chord, given what has been reported about the rigidity of the school systems inherited from the communist period (Daunt 1993, UNICEF 1998).

The educational process is moving slowly toward the integration of students with special needs and of minority students, but there are still many modifications and adaptations to be made until the current policies could be put into practice. The profound changes will take place gradually by consistently pairing the old with the new or facets of the old with aspects of the new, so that eventually, the new replaces the old. If we take a look at other European Union Member States that are continuously developing a diverse and complex network of special schools, thus proving the need for such institutions and also their usefulness, and to notice that their educational systems are still implementing residential systems based on integrated education while maintaining special schools, we can be more optimistic about the policies and practices in Romania.

In conclusion, in Romania, changes are necessary in several areas, such as the following (Walker, 2009; Ghergut, 2006):

- Legislative scope – improved or new laws must be drawn up according to the current Romanian reality, as well as in accordance with international legislations.
- Special education curriculum – a special curriculum for use in regular classrooms by students with disabilities must be developed.
- Teacher training has to be appropriate to the reality of educating individuals with special needs in regular settings, which may require training of professionals in other countries with a good tradition in educating students with disabilities.
- Financial incentive – a raise in salary as an incentive for attracting more future teachers interested in working with children with disabilities.
- Paraprofessional training – the creation of a course to provide them with basic knowledge in special education behavior modification principles, and with employment support upon graduation from this course.
- Refreshing university-level faculties by accepting new members among already renowned professors; preferably, these new members would be experienced teachers encouraged to go through a PhD program at a local university and scientists that earned their graduate degrees in other countries.
- Setting up new courses and departmental divisions where students can study global educational policies.
- Collaboration across scientific fields and among institutions responsible for educating learners with special needs, adults with disabilities, street children, ethnic minorities, orphaned minors, etc.
- Setting up programs for children with autism, severe and multiple disabilities, and other ignored disabilities within public schools.
- Access to up-to-date research and state-of-the-art standards in educating learners with special needs.
- More emphasis on human rights and an increase in disability advocacy movement, etc.

Finally, inclusive policies must be implemented to integrate students with special educational needs, in particular, the deployment of a system of action from different fields: psychology, pedagogy, sociology, social work, nursing, organizational, legal, political, and so forth. Measures shall be taken, from the individual to the social, seeking to ultimately transform society into a system capable of ensuring the integration of persons with special structures within it.

References