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Education of Children with Special Needs in Romania; Attitudes and Experiences

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Abstract

Policy, research and practice in special education and inclusion of children with disabilities in the mainstream school system and social life are one of the most important priorities in Romanian educational policies. The basic premise of the integration/inclusion movement is that principles of anti-discrimination, equity, social justice, and basic human rights make it imperative that students with disabilities and special needs should enjoy the same access as all other students to a regular school environment and to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum. Another hand, inclusion and integration remain a controversial concept in education and many discussions about inclusion or integration should address several important questions for educators and specialists in education. Also, in inclusive school communities, responding to and supporting learner diversity should be a shared responsibility of teachers, support providers, families, peers and community members, which necessitates expanding traditional roles. In this paper we have presented attitudes and experiences about special education reforms strategies in Romanian educational system, in last twenty years. Research methods are based on documents studies and cases studies about changes in social and educational policies for children with disabilities and/or special needs who are included in Romanian schools. Conclusions are that only a small proportion of the children with special needs have the opportunity to attend a regular community school with their non-disabled peers; most of them must attend a segregated school. There is growing evidence that children with disabilities learn better when they are allowed to go to a public school within their neighborhood. Examples of good practice exist, but the models need to be strengthened and made more systemic.

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1. Introduction

The economic and social transition in Romania, after communist regime, has had mixed implications for the education of children seen as having special needs. On the one hand, more open attitudes to new teaching methods and concerns to build a more humane society have led to moves towards the integration of children with disabilities in mainstreaming schools. On the other hand, a greater emphasis on academic competition and on selectivity into elite schools, coupled with a tradition of rigid curricula and pedagogy, creates an atmosphere that is not favorable

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towards children who experience difficulties of any kind. Clearly this has not helped the integration of children with disabilities, still less any moves towards a more “inclusive” approach. Reduced national incomes have also hindered moves towards integration, given the set-up costs of training teachers and support staff, and of adapting buildings. And where children have remained firmly in separate special schools, economic downturn has threatened the quality of teaching and care provided.

Romania takes account about international bodies recommendations and created the legislation on the education of persons with special educational needs, in according whit international documents which was joined: *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990)*, *The Jomtien Statement on Education for All (1990)*, *The Standard Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for People with Disabilities (1993)* and *The Salamanca Statement (1994)*. Education of children and adolescents with special educational needs enrolled in the pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary or high school is organized under Article 58 of the *Romanian Constitution*, Chapters VI and VII of the Education Law (no. 84/1995) and the Law No 128/1997 on Teaching Staff. Also, the rules of organization and operation of undergraduate education units (Ministerial Order no. 4747/2001) in Chapter VIII of special education refers to the issue of integration of children/students with mild mental disabilities in the public school (Vrasmas & Daunt, 1997).

2. Developing of inclusion on Romanian educational system

For a better understanding of the evolution in Romanian special education practices, we need to do a brief presentation of principal moments and events which have marked reform process in the last 20 years:

- Since 1993 the Ministry of Education in Romania, with support from UNICEF, has carried out a series of initiatives in order to explore ways of encouraging the development of more inclusive practices; these have included a project based on the UNESCO teacher education resource pack “Special Needs in the Classroom”. These materials, which have been distributed in over 50 countries, are intended to prepare and support teachers in regular schools to facilitate the participation and learning of children who might otherwise be excluded, particularly those with disabilities. The Romanian initiative has included a programme of awareness-raising involving teachers, inspectors and teacher trainers from around the country. More recently, intensive action research has been undertaken in a small number of schools. This has demonstrated the relevance of the overall approach and, at the same time, drawn attention to how it can be used in the context of Romanian schools (Ainscow, 1997). In addition, these experiences are leading to the development of further training materials arising from local efforts and the identification of personnel who will be available to lead dissemination efforts.
- The Salamanca Conference on Special Needs Education from 1994 came in a ripped time for Romania - one year after the two pilot projects have started – focusing on integration. It was an important moment in the educational reform. The concept of inclusive education was launched inside the two pilot projects and in the RENINCO (National Network of Information and Cooperation for Integration into the Community of Children with Special Needs) activities, starting with the autumn of 1994².
- Other teacher education initiatives, such as the Tempus Programs, since 1995, which fund collaborative partnerships between Western universities and East European teachers and their trainers, have taken steps towards developing the understanding of leaders in this field about how to manage and support the process of change. From Romania was involved in this program the most important four public universities (Bucuresti, Cluj, Iasi and Timisoara) and schools of counties around of these universities.
- The Education Law from 1995 has included an implicit inclusive approach: all Romanian citizens have an equal right to education, at all levels and in all forms, regardless of gender, race, nationality, religious, or political affiliation and social or economical status; also, the state is ensuring the principles of democratically education, and guarantees the right to differentiated education, on the basis of educational pluralism.

² One year after, in 1995 three important documents for the promotion of inclusive education were translated and published in Romania, due to UNICEF support: *The Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (1994)*, *The Standard Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for People with disabilities UN, 1993 (very important the Rule 6, on education,)* and *The UNESCO Resource pack for teachers (1993) entitled Special Needs in the Classroom.*

- After 1997 has extended the development of partnerships between schools and national and relevant international organizations in the field (RENINCO, UNICEF, UNESCO, etc.), developing training programs about integration for teachers in regular schools and special schools, developing local projects for inclusion, developing partnerships between professionals, parents and volunteers.
- The isolation in special schools has been slightly stopped in 2001, when 18.000 children with disabilities from special schools were transferred to ordinary schools. Unfortunately this decision has generated many convulsions and resistances to change from schools and parents because the conditions needed here were not enough developed (for example, adapted curriculum, training of teachers and the development of a supportive attitude in schools).
- Between June 2002 - December 2003 was developed National Program *A School for All* launched by the MEC in partnership with UNICEF Romania, National Authority for Child Protection and Adoption (NACP) and the RENINCO, which has sought information, awareness and preparation of school and community to integrate children and youth with special educational needs;
- Between 2004-2007 was applied *Develop National Action Plan on Education for Children with Special Educational Needs* with 3 directions: develop and implement ongoing training programs for teaching staff in schools; schools, families and communities awareness on the importance and positive effects of socialization process and social integration of children with disabilities; acceptance of human diversity as a natural fact necessary in society.
- A Government Decree, 1251 from 2005 has introduced a new concept – *integrated special education* – not clearly defined. The terms *inclusion*, *inclusive education* and *inclusive school* have been also introduced in this recent piece of legislation, but under the umbrella of *integrated special education*. The definition of *inclusion* in the Decree from 2005 is the following: “*Inclusive education means an ongoing process of upgrading the school institution, with the aim of exploiting (valuing) the existing resources, particularly human resources, in order to support the participation in learning of all pupils from inside a community.*” It has taken 10 years since the inclusive concept already launched in the scientific and practical work in Romania to be included in a piece of legislation.
- Legislation has been supplemented by rules, methodologies and regulations developed and approved by order of minister by Ministry of Education (MEC): Order by Minister no. 4378/7.09.1999 regarding the approval of the program: “*Measures for the organization of special education*”; Order by Minister no. 3634/12.04.2000 to maintain the approving the national program: *The integration and rehabilitation of children with disabilities in/by community*; Order Minister of Education and Research, no. 5379/25.11.2004 on methodology of organization and operation of educational services by teachers support/peripatetic teacher for children with special educational needs in mainstreaming education; Order MEC no. 3662/27.03.2003 approving the Methodology for establishing and functioning of the Commission of Internal Continuous Assessment of children with special needs; Government Decision 1251/2005, which has structure, organization, forms and types of institutions and personnel in special schools and especially integrated Government Decision no. nr.1251 / 2005 on the organization of special education; Order Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, no.1529/18.07.2007 diversity on development issues in the national curriculum; Order of Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation, no. 3414 of 16.03.2009 on approval of the Framework Plan for special education school.

Gradually and in differing degrees, schools continued 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, developing cooperative partnerships with special schools and accessing sources of information and advice and continuous training of teachers to meet specific requirements and challenges of inclusive schools (Ghergut, 2006).

3. Positive aspects, negative aspects and priorities of action

To better understand the distance between theory and practice in Romanian 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 chapter for positive aspects can include:

- 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, coordinated by the Ministry of Education;
- Have begun to develop partnerships between NGOs and the authorities or schools to diversify and approach special education (Increasing the number of institutional structures, developed with the help of NGOs, that provide educational services in schools);
- Change attitudes and focusing on individualization, flexible and diversify activities in the classroom which integrated children with special needs;
- Diversification of educational services that allow access to school for children and adolescents with disabilities, without separating from their families;
- Making schools inclusive (open to all categories of children) with extension services provided by special schools and mainstream schools;
- Organizing a resource center to be able to manage teaching and methodological changes in order of regular schools, become inclusive;
- Developing and expanding programs for teachers training;
- Improve the identification of special educational needs in order to efficiently psychology service recovery, compensation and educational support.

On the other hand, in chapter with negative aspects, we can include:

- Existence of many bureaucratic barriers and ineffective cooperation in programs of common interest to institutions and administrative and executive responsibility for the problems of people with special needs;
- With all reform measures implemented at national level is unknown number of children and adults who should benefit from them (many children with disabilities are still outside the school system);
- School model cultivates intellectual skills, knowledge of competition and promote the individual success; In many cases the school can not respond to appropriate academic and basic educational needs of all children, including those with disabilities;
- For children with severe disabilities there is not yet a national curriculum for this class of beneficiaries, however, some special schools have started identify the role to receive this category of children;
- Insufficient concern of the Ministry of Education for practical solutions to real problems learning of children, young people and adults with disabilities (eg: the deaf sign language as requiring training for professionals who are working in schools for the deaf);
- Lack of programs and procedures for the identification and early diagnosis of disability, lack of monitoring programs for school integration of pupils with disabilities. The voice of disabled student, located in an educational program, is still not sufficiently heard and taken into account;
- Low family involvement in decisions and educational programs concerning children with disabilities.
- Insufficient information to the parents, professionals and society as a whole on disability, human value and possibilities of recovery;
- Precarious democratic relations of cooperation and effective communication between beneficiaries and providers of educational services;

Priorities for future developments:

- Raising the general awareness about equity and non-discrimination in schools (for directors, parents, pupils, teachers, all staff);
- Understanding and developing policies for inclusive education at the school level;
- School based training of all teachers on how to deal with diversity in their classrooms;
- Support for the development of a school culture to be more responsive to diversity;
- Support for the individual progress of pupils in schools (teachers, pupils, parents and community members);
- Raising awareness and providing basic knowledge about SEN and other marginalized children for teachers in the secondary schools – starting with the lower level, part of the compulsory education in Romania;
- Encouraging the needed partnership school-families-community to be addressed;
- Using the parent's opinions to build and foster schools policies;

- Listening more to the voices of the children in school.

4. Conclusion

The obstacles in promoting inclusive education are important and complex. Pilot projects and training activities are very important but sustainability is a key issue. The balance and tension between integrated and inclusive education was (and still is) obvious in the terminology used during the training and other activities mentioned here. There is still mixed and confusing terminology on these two key approaches, but also in the disability field. At this moment, after 20 years reform measures in educational system, one of the biggest challenges ahead is the vision on the school, particularly when talking about the comprehensive (elementary) school. Concretely, educational policies and national strategies in inclusion must have answers for some important questions:

- Is the school a place for all children, different but equal (having equal needs) or a place for selection and fostering elitism?
- Is the school a place for social interaction and social development or only a place for theoretical learning?
- Is the school a place for learning and practicing equity and democracy through collaboration or a place for competition and exclusion of some pupils?

The answers of these questions could give us the priorities for future directions of work on many levels. At the national level - the need for a *National Strategy of Inclusive Education*, which have to cover all areas of education, all levels and school ages; this should bring a shared vision of an inclusive curriculum for all learners, of a more flexible school organization and teaching-learning strategies and methods; this strategy must bring a more clear terminology – particularly to make the necessary distinctions between integration and inclusion in education; also, this strategy should cover also particular domains regarding vulnerable (children at risk) groups (children with disabilities and other special needs, children from poor and isolated areas, street children etc). At the university and other training institutions level (the initial and ongoing/in-service training for all teachers) have to be included in their curriculum a component on inclusive education (education for understanding and addressing diversity in schools). At the school level there is a lot to do, so we can create an open, friendly, democratic and supportive learning environment for all pupils, to prevent and avoid as much as possible discrimination, marginalisation and/or exclusion of some learners (Vrasmas & Vrasmas, 2007).

Pilot projects that demonstrate the way in which schools can be developed in order to reach out to learners with different characteristics have been found to be useful in encouraging innovations and, at the same time, can help in preparing personnel who may then be used to lead implementation efforts. It is helpful if such initiatives take as their starting point examples of local good practice. The aim is overall school improvement that can benefit all children, thus connecting the ideas of equity and excellence in the way suggested by the Salamanca Statement. Here, it may also be sensible to link the responses for children who have disabilities to other groups that are disadvantaged within existing arrangements, not least children from the various minority groups.

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