Qualitative analysis about inclusion in Romanian regular schools

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Abstract

The modernization of Romanian education and alignment with international regulations required the adoption of a series of reform measures for inclusion the children with SEN in regular school. Our research, based on a qualitative investigation, aims to identify the main obstacles arising from the implementation of these educational policies. Another objective of the research was focused on identifying the solutions applied at the school or by professionals in order to establish a prevention and intervention strategy for inclusion of SEN children in mainstream schools.

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1. Introduction

In an attempt to align with international regulations, the Romanian education began to become open to the idea of inclusion. This implies that the mainstream structures to be integrated children with special education needs (SEN), concerned with sensory, physical, intellectual, or language, disadvantaged socio-economic and cultural, psycho-emotional and behavioral disorders (Cozma & Ghergut, 2000).

Teachers have the main role in the integration of children with SEN in mainstream schools. They must design teaching strategy and organize the class so that all pupils acquire basic knowledge. In order to equalize educational opportunities, pupils with SEN who attend regular school should be given additional educational assistance (Vrasmas, 2010): support educational services by support teachers, which consist of curriculum adaptation and differentiation depending on the abilities and needs of the child; speech

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therapy to correct disorders of language, made by speech-therapist; psycho-educational assessment for both children at risk and crisis and their families through school counselor.

Regarding the assessment of SEN children in Romania, there is a „dual system“ (idem), split between child protection and education. The decision to grant the degree of disability and school orientation is taken by the Commission for Child Protection, based on a file drawn up by the Complex Evaluation Service (CES) within the Department of Child Protection (DCP). In addition to children recognized as having SEN, there are children who have difficulties, but are not officially registered in this category, because parents refuse to be assessed by the CES for the fear of being labeled or special school-oriented. The purpose of this study is to identify the main obstacles encountered and the main solutions that have made schools and education professionals to implement this policy. The research questions are as follows: What are the difficulties faced by teachers and managers in inclusive schools? What are the difficulties arising from the involvement of several institutions and professionals of various categories of children with SEN inclusion? How does cooperation between professionals and parents of children with SEN? What is the attitude of inclusive schools teachers towards children with SEN?

It was used a qualitative research approach because it provides multiple possibilities for analysis, given that reality is multifaceted (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 2003). Main data collection techniques were semi-structured interview, based on an interview guide and observation related. Fieldwork took place in Iasi, from May to December 2010. 62 people were interviewed from three different groups of actors in the process of inclusive school: 46 people working in education: academics, managers of inclusive school, teachers in inclusive schools, support teachers, speech therapists, teachers in special education and school counselors etc.; 9 social care professionals: CES inspectors of the DCP and NGO representatives; 7 parents of pupils with SEN. Subjects interviewed were selected from a regular school, 8 inclusive schools, two special schools, DCP and 4 NGOs in Iasi. As the sampling method there was used the “snowball” method, that is we started the interviews with teachers support and they advised us to talk to others. We stopped looking for new people when information became redundant, and nothing new or significant has appeared any more (Moscovici & Buschini, 2007). Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis.

2. Results and discussion

The following barriers were identified in the process of inclusion: an insufficient budget allocation, difficulties of cooperation between educational support services in schools and among DCP and inclusive schools, inappropriate attitudes from teachers, difficulties of collaboration between teachers or other professionals with parents.

2.1. The budget for inclusion

Inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools involves the existence of funds to help paying professionals involved in education and therapy for children with SEN and equipping the special spaces with necessary materials. In reality, the budget for a school to integrate the pupils with SEN is very low. Thus there are no funds to purchase the necessary materials: *It takes a lot of work sheets for these children every day, and integration has not entered into any budget* (inclusive school manager interview). The number of specialists is insufficient compared to the number of children with SEN. Thus some students, especially in secondary school, do not receive support program any longer: *I could not deal with secondary school students, because in primary school there were children with more serious problems and when you are sure that at least he knows to write and read, then you can say that you have done your duty in a way* (support teacher interview). Most teachers working in classrooms with children with SEN
consider that they pursue a hard work which is not appreciated. They believe that there should be a financial incentive system for their colleagues who work in the classroom with children with SEN as a point (...) in addition to the evaluation form is not very much (inclusive school teacher interview).

2.2. Cooperation between professionals and between institutions

Cooperation between specialists and the institutions involved is a key element for achieving educational inclusion of children with SEN. There must be a continuity of work and for this, it is necessary that the aims should be similar or mutually agreed.

The fieldwork carried out revealed a lack of consistency and communication with the child and his family because each specialist belongs to another institution, each specialist writes the child’s file and evaluation sheets separately, and there is no formal structure for us to really collaborate (support teacher interview). Although the action plan or adapted curriculum should be designed by the specialists’ team, in reality there are cases in which each specialist sets his own objectives when working with the child, and sometimes there is no agreement, consistency or continuity between them: each had his own plan with the child. The support teacher was working with the child in her/his office and (...) the child was working something else in the classroom (inclusive school manager interview).

The selection of children with SEN included in support educational services should be made with the CCA agreement, following a discussion of cases, so that they would have chosen children most in need of support. However, reality shows that in many cases the specialist selects the children who she/he will work with: I received a list of 40 children to be evaluated because they had various difficulties (...) and I had to remain with 12 (...) I did not know exactly whom to choose, all were severely affected. (support teacher interview). In such situations there is a risk of withdrawal of specialists working with children with SEN, because their work focuses on other categories of students: I have identified several children with emotional problems and I reported these cases to the school counselor. He said that he had already formed some groups of students and could not take the others too (support teacher interview).

As far as the inter-institutional cooperation is concerned, there has been frequently noted the information block at an institution. For example, when a teacher notices the situation of a child who has trouble adjusting school, he reports the problems to the children’s parents, and she/he directs them to the CES and to other specialists in school. In contrast, when parents refuse to go with the child for evaluation, the teacher does not appeal to DPC. Thus many cases of school failure or mismatch remain unclear, which is detrimental to children. Also there is no cooperation between institutions based on partnership to bring clarity and precision, so recourse to communication based on personal relationships.

2.3. Collaboration with parents

Partnership between schools and parents is fundamental because it supports the work of teachers, improving school children’s skills, creating a positive school climate and forming educational skills to parent (Agabrian, Millea, 2005).

Working with parents is a challenge for all specialists. This is because most students with SEN are neglected by family: child is neglected and your work with him is not observed (inclusive school teacher interview); 80% of children and the family have problems ... I had no family support (inclusive school teacher interview). Other parents delegate school everything related to child education: this is all I can do for him; from now on, it is your job (inclusive school manager interview). In other cases, specialists are confronted with resistance of parents, but also with a lack of legal means to compel them to do an assessment to discover the child’s difficulties of school adapting: Many parents refuse to accept that they have a child with problems (...) they feel forced into unfavorable social situation and use denial as a
defense mechanism: the child has nothing (support teacher interview); We have cases where we have been trying for years to make parents ask for a certificate for their child (...). They are simple, uneducated people, they have a narrow universe of knowledge ... they are difficult to be convinced (school counselor interview); For parents it’s easy not to go (...), because they must go to a psychologist, a psychiatrist, social inquiry at home (support teacher interview).

2.4. Teacher attitudes towards pupils with SEN

The inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools involves the shaping of positive attitudes such as: acceptance of diversity, non-discrimination, flexibility, respect for the relationship of partnership, empathy, responsibility (Vrasmas, 2007). This research shows that these attitudes are difficult to acquire and that negative attitudes persist.

The most serious form of negative attitude towards children with SEN which was found was the rejection of the children in their schools: Parents tell us that children are not received at kindergarten or school and we tell them to go to the principal and ask for a reason for not receiving the child (CES specialist interview). Quite often it was reported that parents are required to transfer the child where there are children with the same level. One of the explanations for which there are still kind of rejection would be that during the communist emphasis has been laid for a long time on segregated special education and the students with disabilities or those with social or behavior problems and who did not adapt to regular schools were directed towards special schools (Manea, 2006).

Another negative attitude that appears is the neglect of SEN children by teachers: to geography (...) my daughter receives nothing to do and she is sitting one hour as the other children have a test (parent interview); during class hours you can not take care of them, you can not penalize a whole class for two integrated children (inclusive school teacher interview). Educational neglect occurs due to the belief that pupils with SEN have reduced capacities to learn and are unable to progress. In addition there is a pressure for performance from other parents who have high expectations from children.

A third form of negative attitude is unrealistic expectations as to these children. Thus, although they have programs tailored to their needs, approved by the inspectorate, they receive the same tasks as other children. This does not help them to progress, on the contrary produce discourage either between students or the teachers: When she is not assigned special homework (...) she had to do it like the other children and it takes a lot of time. She often tells me: I am tired of school. I don’t want to go to school any longer (parent interview).

In other cases children with SEN are punished, even physical, although physical punishment is prohibited in schools. This happens because teachers do not find effective ways to establish order in the classroom and learning atmosphere: My daughter was punished heavily by the kindergarten teacher because she was very restless, she did not speak, she also aroused the other children and the teacher punished her (parent interview).

3. Solutions

Analysis of the interviews led to the identification of the following solutions applied within inclusive schools: collaboration with various NGOs, the involvement of all school professionals in working with children with SEN, inter-institutional collaboration protocols, staff training and partnership with parents.

- To obtain further support, schools work with different NGOs or seek funding from extra-budgetary sources: We have done many projects to support children and their families, we had school remedial programs, courses for parents (inclusive school manager interview);
Involving the entire team of specialists who work at schools for children with SEN leads to an increase in effective interventions: We decide together the children who are enrolled in the program of inclusion. Those who have certificates, for example, have priority, then children who have serious problems (speech therapist interview); I also involved in assessing the children’s school counselor and he helped me to discover the higher intellectual potential of children (support teacher interview). Adopting an open attitude towards teamwork and improving relationships are also important.

Inter-institutional communication, clarification of opinions on the situation of children is significant: when we have different points of view, we try to make a case conference to come to an agreement. We explain our point of view and try to reach an agreement to be the best for the child (CES specialist interview). We consider that the existence of a single institution which has the role of controlling and organizing will improve the quality of these services and will bring a unified vision of them.

Parent’s involvement in work done with the child is to continue and strengthen the work of specialists: I call on parents to attend the activities, to see how it’s done to help their children at home (interview with teacher support). Counseling sessions with parents will contribute to a better understanding of the possibilities and needs of the child: I convinced the parents to come to talk, to better understand the children, to try to give them more attention (school counselor interview).

Increasing knowledge of special needs issues through participation in specialized courses and exchanges of experience: in 1999 I attended a course of 100 hours (...) a very serious training (...) after that I felt ready to receive children with SEN (inclusive school teacher interview); exchanges experience with other institutions have favored the dissemination of good practice: in 2003 I went (...) with an exchange program and from there we came up with other news (support teacher interview).

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