Analysis of inclusive education in Romania
Results from a survey conducted among teachers

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Abstract

In the last decades more and more countries have encouraged the idea of an inclusive society, a society open and flexible to the phenomenon of human diversity. In this context, the implementation of inclusive policies to integrate students with special educational needs in schools calls for actions from different fields: legal, political, organizational, from the field of psychology, pedagogy, sociology, social work, nursing etc. 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 needs in community structures. Romanian schools are trying to adapt the educational offer in relation to the new directions of change in educational activities, as a consequence of inclusive educational programs. This study emphasizes the teachers’ attitudes and perceptions about inclusive education in the Romanian education system. Conclusions are optimistic, but, at the same time, educational services must be changed and adapted to be more flexible and open to the diversity of children that live in the respective communities.

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1. Introduction

One of the priority objectives for action in the social system in Romania, after the reform measures in the 1990’s, was to prevent and combat marginalization and social exclusion by improving access to education for disadvantaged groups, so there were created the necessary mechanisms in order to increase participation of disadvantaged groups to education students in regular schools and to improve their school performance by:

- improvement of preschool education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or people with different types of disabilities;
- providing support services and fostering children with special educational needs to successfully face compulsory education and improve school success rate;
- encouraging inclusion in programs for a second chance at the primary and secondary level (early correction).
The measures of Romania's Adherence to the European Union and the harmonization of Romanian legislation with the European Community have also taken into consideration the need to improve access to education for disadvantaged groups, the change of philosophy on special education, reorganization of institutions of assistance and care, continuing the process begun in 2001 of integrating children with special education needs in regular schools and at the same time preventing undue input into the system, whenever other forms of education that meet the special needs of child development were available. At the same time, alternative recovery programs and education for children with disabilities have been promoted, in order to encourage their integration into society, taking as a first step their integration into regular schools and kindergartens, etc.\(^3\)

In order to ensure the success of the reform measures of some system, an accurate knowledge of reality is necessary from the start, above all, this condition being even more important if we consider a series of transformations in the educational system; here the impact and its effects have greater resonance for both the quality of the teaching activities and the attitudes and behaviours of the actors involved in the teaching process (teachers, pupils, parents, etc.) (Ainscow, 1999).

2. The purpose and research plan

Starting with the assertion stated above, we considered of high importance to know the views and attitudes of teachers towards large-scale introduction of integrated education in the educational system in our country. For this purpose we choose, randomly, a batch of 768 teachers from primary and secondary education operating in 12 counties; they filled out a questionnaire gathering information from observations and conversations made during the teaching activities or teacher meetings for the exchange of experience during the debating sessions for each discipline etc.

The distribution of the subjects was according to three basic criteria: gender, social environment in which they operate, length of teaching activity can be followed in Table 1:

| The criterion of distribution of the total number of subjects | Sex | The social environment in which they operate | Length of teaching activity |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Number of subjects                                            | M   | F                                           | Urban | Rural | 0-5 years | 6-10 years | 11-15 years | 16-25 years | over 25 years |
| N = 768                                                        | 256 | 512                                         | 480   | 288   | 168       | 160        | 160         | 152         | 128          |

The distribution of the total number of subjects according to the three criteria attempted to fulfill to a large extent the requirements of representativeness of the lot under investigation. Arguments supporting this choice may be summarized as follows:

- according to statistics, the number of female teachers is higher than that of male teachers in the Romanian educational system, and in primary schools the report number is clearly in favor of the ladies. Consequently, the structure of the lot includes a number of 512 female teachers and 256 male teachers;
- inclusion opportunities (related to the number of special institutions of education and care and the number of children in these institutions) are, at least theoretically, bigger in urban areas (where most special institutions are) than in rural areas. Hence, according to the investigation in our group, the number of teachers operating in urban areas is bigger than their number in rural areas. In addition to that, it is known that in rural areas, under the current circumstances in our country, there is a serious shortage of specialist teachers, fact which does not, favor, at least for the time being, the promotion of inclusive education through substitutes or other categories of persons or university graduates but lacking a minimum of specialized pedagogical training. However, there are views supporting the idea that an inclusive approach adopted in country-side schools would be beneficial for some categories of children with special educational needs. The arguments which support these views are

\[^{3}\text{National action plan on education for children with special educational needs 2004-2007.}\]
related to the specific conditions of the rural environment. The fact is that currently, the inclusion of children with special educational needs in schools is in a higher proportion in urban than in rural areas, which also justifies the different proportion of the number of questioned subjects (480 teachers working in urban schools and 288 in rural schools);

- in terms of teaching activity/experience the numerical balance is clearly in favor of teachers with experience from 0 to 20/25 years (the distribution by age range was made according with dates from Table 1).

3. The presentation and interpretation of results

Analyzing the distribution of results to the significant items we can make the following observations:

- There is an overall favorable attitude among the staff on the promotion and support of inclusive education; 544 teachers, or 70.8% of those questioned expressed total agreement (268 of subjects) or a partial agreement (276 of the subjects) on the possibility of promoting wide inclusion of children with special educational needs in mass higher structures. However, when the respondents were asked to express their opinion on the implementation of inclusion programs in their school (thus increasing their involvement and responsibility in issues of inclusion), the number of subjects who consented to it was 388 (50.5%) of whom only 176 (22.9%) fully support the program of inclusion in their schools. However, out of the 380 subjects who expressed disagreement with the statement referred to, only 92 of them totally reject the idea of inclusive education in their school, while 288 subjects (37.5%) only partially reject this idea. Comparing the results for item 2 (The current national system of education in our country is conducive to promoting inclusion education), where the issue of inclusion is presented with a higher level of generalization, to the results obtained in item 7 (It is appropriate to apply the inclusion program for children with special educational needs in the school in which I operate), where the same problem is presented in a custom shape and with a specific involvement of the respondents, there is a dilution of the degree of agreement, while the number of those who reject the whole idea of inclusive education is relatively constant. Explanations can be attributed either to psychosocial factors (some resistance to change, fear of a little-known situation, preserving a degree of comfort at work, etc.) or to conditions specific to educational activities (the need for implementation of new strategies and ways of working with students and adaptation of learning content that requires an extra effort from teachers, the lack of confidence in their forces in conjunction with the absence of special education, preparation of recovery activities and educating children with special needs, etc.).

- According to the vast majority of those questioned, successful implementation of inclusive education in our country would depend on the one hand, on a selection of teachers to work with classes that are promoting the inclusion - 348 subjects (45.3%) expressed total agreement on this, and 324 of the subjects (42.1%), partial agreement - and, on the other hand, on a review of the curriculum (especially regarding the content) and of the teaching strategies in classes where children with special needs are integrated in education - 424 subjects (55.2%) fully agree with the measure and 320 subjects (41.6%), partially agree with it. These positions are determined by the natural feelings of most teachers confronted with the increasing heterogeneity of the group of students in the class, the lack of homogeneity concerning the students’ intellectual potencies and abilities, and the learning limits of each student. Moreover, networking with certain categories of pupils with special educational needs requires also a certain kind of emotional availability from the educators, items that should be part of their personality structure and are essential in teacher-student relationship in terms of inclusive education.

- Analyzing the distribution of results to items as how to structure the total lot of subjects in relation to the three criteria listed in Table 1 (sex, social environment, length of activity) there were no significant differences between groups so formed. The numerical proportions and percentages (relative to the number of subjects in each group) are, in most cases, relatively similar in the overall number of subjects. However, some small differences in our results can, at best, only suggest the following: a. inclusive education in rural areas is more readily accepted and supported by teachers. This may be also because in the country-side schools that spirit of competition artificially created so far, does not manifest so acutely as in the urban area, where it has led to the establishment of a hierarchical evaluation of schools, imposing hierarchy and certain standards of training of the students. Therefore, it is more difficult to accept the idea of inclusive education in elite schools than in schools situated in the middle or at bottom of that hierarchy; b. female teachers are more receptive to accepting the promotion and support of the principles of inclusive education than male teachers; c. younger/less experienced teachers are more open to accept the inclusive education conditions than older teachers.
Responses to the item 8 (If you could intervene in developing a program to integrate children with special educational needs in structures of mass education, which is the main proposals that you would make?) can be summarized and ranked according to importance given by the subjects questioned issues as:

- learning content accessibility and increasing individualization of the training program in the classroom so that every child should be given information and knowledge according to their own needs and learning opportunities (view shared by 368 of the subjects interviewed).
- assessment of students' strategies and increasing cooperation between students of the class at the expense of the state of competition that has characterized and still characterizes the work in schools (176 subjects). Not infrequently, in Romanian education, especially primary education is artificially and subjectively stimulating competition to praise some students (usually first place winners) and embarrass others who failed to live up to standards (by what criteria?) set by the class teacher. The outcome is that intolerable situations, such as an artificial separation of the pupils, due to the marking criterion usually appear: this leads to minimizing one of the fundamental roles of primary school education- socialization and capacity for cooperation between students in the class through various activities included in the training in the classroom (learning activities, games, practical activities, etc.).
- participation in the classroom, in some cases, of the support teacher with a special pedagogical training, who are working with form teacher (even during business hours) and working together with it, but integrated with disabled children in class in order to help them understand the content taught and performing specific tasks required by the lessons depending on their level of skills and capabilities (152 subjects).
- possibility for use of school facilities (including some kind of simple and easy to handle school furniture) that would favour changing the ambiance of this class depending on the type of lessons conducted at a time (112 subjects). For example, reading or arithmetic lessons can take place in one kind of setting (with furniture and other equipment located in a given formula), while music lessons, crafts, design and, in some cases, classes of communication or foreign language learning can be conducted in a more relaxed atmosphere, compared to the previous one, without restricting the student’s freedom of expression (within certain limits which do not affect the normal development of lesson).
- decrease the number of students in classes to enhance a high degree of efficiency and comfort for educational activities (104 subjects); there is a significant difference between working with a class composed of 30 students, including 2-3 students with special needs and a class composed of 20 students where 1-2 students with special educational needs are included.
- stimulation of various ways of setting up and supporting various ways of alternative education (private schools, religious schools, schools based on alternative pedagogies) providing a choice between public schools (most often dependent on the national budget) and private schools whose material and financial opportunities are much better and can respect all the principles and requirements of inclusive education (56 subjects).

Analyzing the results of item 10 (If you had the opportunity to make a class operate on condition that children with special needs in education are integrated would you accept this new situation?) we can emphasize the following conclusions: for 348 of the subjects (45.3%) the class/category of students they work with doesn’t matter. Analyzing these results on the whole, we can see that the vast majority of teachers have a higher dose or less are much less reserved at the prospect of educational activities under the rigors imposed by inclusive education. This finding justifies to some extent the idea that including children with special needs in mass education in our country is an open issue that, in a more or less remote future will be found a solution acceptable by most teachers for the benefit of those children.

Analyzing the distribution of results to item 12 (Which is the essential factor contributing to the success of the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mass education classes?) one may note that for 204 of the subjects (26.5%) successful inclusion is attributed to the flexibility and reorganization of the education system, 196 subjects (25.5%) consider human and material resources as the main factors responsible for successful inclusion, 172 subjects (22.3%) believe that the existence of school counselors and curriculum issues in such schools is essential, 128 of the subjects consider that laws governing the conduct of inclusive education (currently weak and ambiguous) are a key factor, and 68 of the subjects consider that successful inclusion would depend primarily on the quality of educators in terms of professional ethics and the skills needed in the field of social networking. We also noted that successful inclusion depends on reform measures within our educational system: the relaxation and reorganization of the system, the improving of legislation, the need for support offered by school counselors, etc.
4. Conclusion

With regard to the results obtained the views along the survey, it can be said that the optimum application of inclusive education in the Romanian educational system requires a series of changes in the operation and upgrading the system components according to the new standards emerging in many countries promoting and supporting an educational policy that focuses on inclusion and full valuation of the individual in the community/society. To this end measures should be focused on clear strategies for policy clarification on the short, medium and long term in education in our country; it is also important to establish the legal framework necessary for the motivation and active involvement of all those responsible for protecting and educating children with special needs, to reform and modernize the regulatory framework governing the activities of schools and teachers, to change their attitudes regarding the relationships with students, parents and other persons directly or indirectly involved in the educational activity and to improve material facilities necessary to support modern teaching and diversified forms (Cooper, 1993; Biklen, 1992). For the fulfillment of these conditions is necessary to improve public awareness through a broad and sustained information campaign on life, education, behavior and social chances and professional interests of children with special needs (Ghergut, 2005, 2007).

Another conclusion concerns the need for restructuring and resizing of learning content to meet the best educational requirements of each student based on the premise of optimal recovery of the student's intellectual potential and skills, while respecting the democratic right of every individual to education, according to the resources and opportunities it provides and the willingness to participate in the education act. Along with the reform there should be a reconsideration of content adaptation and diversification of learning methods and means of increasing individualization in terms of teaching and radical changes in the assessment strategies necessary for objective assessment, positive motivation and stimulation of each student without affecting their self-esteem and dignity in front of their colleagues by setting an artificial and subjective class hierarchy or by reference to a number of standards without a realistic and objective contents (Ghergut, 2006; Stainback S., Stainback W., Forest M., 1998).

All these measures can be motivated by the need to update and adapt the curriculum according to the new requirements and trends in the field of science education in many countries, being aware of the importance and necessity of education under the current circumstances and the levels of development reached by humanity in all fields of social, economic, cultural, moral, civic and community. Last, but not least, a very important point, highlighted throughout our investigation, is the need for training trainers in the spirit of the principles and values required by inclusive education, the need for staff availability to relate with students in an open and honest way, to create a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere in the class, and not to allow some arbitrary prejudices to interfere and also the need to master the techniques and methods for specific work activities with students with some intellectual, sensory, somatic/motor or language disabilities, which causes special learning requirements (Vrasmas, 2001).

Finally we can say that the prognosis on the chances of implementing inclusive education in our country is a favorable one despite the results of our survey which showed that there are some difficulties in carrying out the implementation and support of such education. Some of these difficulties are inherent to any change or transformation in the education system but, hopefully, as time passes, the maturation of new components in the system will lead to obtaining the results expected and desired by all who believe in the chance of children with special needs for social integration.

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