

INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS - A VISIBLE SOLUTION FOR ROMANIAN EDUCATION?

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Abstract: *Romanian education alignment of international regulations imposed inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. The paper aims to examine whether the measures were taken to Romania to adopt the policy of inclusion - creating complementary to educational services and introduction of new specialist schools - are proving effective. Difficulties of collaboration between the professionals who have a recognized status and the new specialists, "double constraint" experienced by teachers forced to choose between a focus on students with special educational needs who require individual support or the rest of the class, secondary adaptive mechanisms they use to accommodate inclusion policy (neglect, undifferentiated treatment of pupils with special educational needs to the rest of the class, use inappropriate methods of discipline etc.) are reasons that make inclusion of pupils with special educational needs to be a source of conflict in the Romanian education. In addition, it presents the phenomenon of institutional violence on students with special educational needs.*

Key words: *double constraint; institutional violence; politics of inclusion; secondary coping mechanisms; special educational needs.*

1. Introduction

Since 1990, the inclusion policy of all excluded and marginalized social categories has begun to be promoted worldwide. Organizations like UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank etc. have helped the economically less developed countries to be prepared to receive in regular schools students with disabilities or belonging to other marginalized social groups and to give them all opportunities and chances of success.

The alignment of Romanian education with international regulations involved an important transformation of the school institution because, during the communist regime, the special school was the only "institutional response" to the students' special educational needs (SED). The special schools, which developed the social work side, included both students with real disabilities and those with behavioural disorders, school dropout, etc. because they came from disadvantaged families.

The issue of including children with SED in regular schools necessitated the creation of complementary services to the educational ones. At the same

time, new specialists were introduced in schools: support teachers, psycho pedagogues and school mediators.

In practice, providing a proper education for children with SED in an inclusive context is a complex issue. Researchers identified several barriers to the inclusion process. For example, the elitist attitude of the Romanian educational system and the insufficient valorisation of inclusive practices in various institutional and staff assessments pose a challenge for many schools (Horga, Apostu, Balica, 2016: 6). The lack of human and material resources (Manea, 2016: 28, Horga et al 2016: 6, Gherguț, Ciobanu Grasu, 2012: 56) makes the inclusion difficult. The negative attitude of some school directors and teachers, and inadequate initial and continuing training, without focusing on inclusive teaching approaches (Manea, 2016: 31, Horga et al, 2016:6), are other barriers to inclusive education. In addition, the roles and responsibilities of some professionals are not sufficiently known and for this reason these are misunderstood (Mărgărițoiu, 2010: 85). In this situation, each specialist has his own goals when working with the child, and sometimes there is no continuity and complementarity between them (Gherguț, Ciobanu Grasu, 2012: 57).

2. Methodology of research

The paper aims to analyse the discrepancies between the right guaranteed by law and the practical access of children with SED to inclusive education. In order to highlight the various practices adopted in the field of inclusion and the ambivalence of the social actors in the reform of the education of children with SED, I used a qualitative research approach. I worked mainly on the semi-structured interview method. The interview guide aimed at obtaining information on: the main difficulties encountered and the solutions adopted, the ways of collaboration between professionals and parents, the main rewards for the inclusion of students with SED.

I conducted the field survey in Iași from May 2010 to December 2011 and I interviewed 68 different categories of social actors involved in the inclusion process:

- 54 professionals in the education system: teachers working in inclusive schools, inclusive school managers, support teachers, speech therapists, school counsellors, school mediators;

- 7 professionals from social work: specialists within the Complex Assessment Service of the Department for Social Work and Child Protection Iasi and specialists of NGOs;

- 7 beneficiaries: 2 pupils with SED and 5 parents.

I selected the subjects from 8 inclusive schools, 2 special education units, Department for Social Work and Child Protection Iasi and 4 NGOs. The sampling

method used was that of the snowball. The first interviewees were the support teachers, who recommended other people willing to participate in the research.

For each category of interviewed people, I compiled a separate interview guide. In general, questions for professionals concerned information about: personal experience with students with SED; the main difficulties encountered; collaboration with parents and other specialists; the main satisfactions experienced with regard to the inclusion of students with SED; how the inclusion process of students with SED could be improved. In the case of parents of children with SED, the questions referred to: description of the child's problems and the moment when they were notified; to whom specialists have appealed and who has directed them to them; the main difficulties related to schooling the child; their expectations from teachers and from other school specialists; what support they want to receive in the future. The questions in the interview guide addressed to students concerned: preferred or rejected activity; objects with the best and lowest results; what do teachers appreciate for themselves and what they do not appreciate, who gets help at school or homework; what future projects they have.

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the subjects and then transcribed. For their interpretation, we used the thematic analysis method.

3. Results

The research allowed me to identify some difficulties of Romanian education as a result of implementing this new educational policy for students with SED. Among these, I mention the following: the difficulties of collaboration among professionals, the double constraint of the teachers and the secondary adaptation strategies.

3.1. Difficulties of collaboration between professionals

With the same subject - students with SED - professions with established status (teacher) and specialists recently introduced to inclusive schools (support teachers, school counsellors, school mediators) are forced to cooperate. The emergence of new professions leads to diminishing the status of teachers, who are thus recognized as unable to form the basic skills of certain children. The support teacher's attributions to attend classroom classes as an observer or to provide counselling determine the feeling of being controlled. The attitude of domination, the resolving of mistakes, the offering of "unexpected advice" adopted by some specialists distances the cooperation between the two professional categories. The "distance" coordination (Moatty, 1995, apud, Gheorghiu, Moatty, 2005: 18) that specialists receive either from the special school or from the psycho-pedagogical assistance centre does not

give them sufficient safety and professional authority. The survey allowed us to find forms of "forced co-operation" between these professional categories (Gheorghiu, Moatty, 2005: 9-12).

One of these forms of forced co-operation is the delegation of responsibility with SED students to specialists. The fact that few pupils with SED are able to progress to meet the minimum standard required in the national curriculum determines the teachers to consider "dirty-work" the activity they have to do with this class of students. Support teachers are the ones who develop and implement programs tailored for students with SED, reducing the information that these students have to assimilate based on their level of knowledge and their learning ability.

Another form of forced co-operation is the devaluation of the work of specialists because students with SED cannot get the minimum knowledge to pass the class or consider it a "re-doubling" of teachers: *they do the same thing as us, but they are successful because they deal with a smaller number of children* (teacher interview).

A third form of forced co-operation is the autonomous work of support teacher with students in the office. The classroom partnerships are difficult to achieve because they require teamwork, additional time for preparation and good management of the student team. On the other hand, isolated work generates feelings of frustration, because the results the child obtains are not noticed by colleagues and teachers.

3.2. Double bind

Another difficulty identified by the research is the double constraints experienced by the teachers in the classes where there are pupils with SED. Teachers have the feeling that they have to meet two opposing demands: on the one hand, to achieve performance with students, on the other hand they are required to adapt to individual needs. They have the feeling that by giving them attention to students with SED, it disadvantages the rest of the classroom students. The explanation is that in the Romanian educational system, besides regular schools, there are both "elite" high schools, which organize admission examinations or accept pupils with special results in school competitions, as well as special schools, for pupils with deficiencies. They act as "antagonistic and complementary forces" (Bourdieu, 1988: 64). In order to have students admitted to high school, teachers prefer to focus on preparing them. The centralization of the teacher's activity on the students capable of performing leads to the accumulation of symbolic capital, respectively, to the valorisation and social recognition of labour. Working with students with SED gives teachers personal and spiritual satisfaction to help a person in need.

3.3 Secondary Adaptation Strategies

In order to cope with the inclusion policy adopted in Romanian education, teachers use a series of secondary adaptation mechanisms. E. Goffman (2004, p. 168-275) defines secondary adaptations as practices and habits used by individuals to perform certain tasks that are required. They are considered to be undesirable patterns and are not authorized by the institution. Instead, individuals appeal to them to gain some personal benefits or to protect themselves.

Neglecting pupils with SED is one of these secondary adaptation mechanisms. It occurs when students with SED are enrolled in school but have the status of tolerated pupils. They are promoted, but teachers do not work with them being demobilized because of the low level of knowledge these pupils have (Manea, 2006: 45). In this way, purchases of SED students in inclusive schools are lower than if they had attended a special school.

The lack of involvement of parents who do not take legal steps to certify their problems and the reduced number of school specialists are other reasons for neglecting students with SED and their exclusion from educational services. This is especially true in middle school, because support teachers take priority of primary school students. Even when enrolled in the support program, students with SED are given programs adapted only to Romanian and mathematics, leaving it to the specialists to adapt the matter to the other objects.

Another adaptation mechanism used by teachers is to treat students with SED as well as other classroom students. Thus, students with SED receive the same explanations for lessons, the same topics and evaluation tests. The tailor-made curriculum developed by the support teacher for these students is just formal because teachers who teach do not take it into account. In this situation, there is a risk that the little progress that these children will see is not highlighted in the classroom, which discourages them.

If students with SED are enrolled at a school, they are required to attend all the subjects. Some of them are beyond their power of understanding, especially because they are being developed programs adapted only to Romanian and mathematics. For them, it would be more useful to build social skills or to recapitulate some basic concepts.

Teachers recruit non-discriminatory treatment of SED students to ease their work. In order to involve students with SED, they should work differently, design the lesson in the light of their understanding, and have a wide range of teaching methods and materials. This requires extra preparation time and a material basis.

A third mechanism of secondary adaptation reported in the investigation is the use of inappropriate discipline methods. To maintain a learning atmosphere in the classroom where the level of student acquisition is different

requires good management skills. Children with SED are a challenge for teachers because they have low self-image, difficulty in understanding, attention disorders, hyperkinetic or internalized. For these reasons, not all teachers are able to discipline them using tact and appropriate pedagogical methods, but resort to insult, humiliation, even physical punishment, although they are forbidden in schools because they violate children's rights.

Another practice used by teachers is the rejection of students with SED, respectively the refusal to enroll in school, because teachers and teachers prefer to have in classroom disciplined students and who learns easily. The refusal to receive children with SED in regular schools is likely to change schools or to go to schools away from home. Secondary adaptation mechanisms used by teachers to include students with SED in regular education, such as neglecting students with SED, forcing them to reach other classroom students, using inappropriate disciplinary methods, refusing to accept them in class, generates institutional violence on students with SED. Institutional violence is seen as the act of compelling and forcing people who have authority over the vulnerable. The school institution empowers the teacher with authority to fulfill the purpose for which it is intended: training, education and formation of the younger generation. In practice, however, it is difficult to establish the boundary between legitimate authority and abuse of authority. For this reason, the most important risk that may occur for the SED pupil accepted at school is to become "excluded from the inside" (Bourdieu, Champagne, 1993: 597).

4. Conclusions

The analysis on the inclusion of children with SED in regular education in the city of Iași allows us to affirm that the introduction of this inclusion policy into the Romanian education system is a source of conflict and generates a series of risks. Their work with students with SED is a stress-generating factor for teachers because it requires a great deal of work, good psycho-pedagogical training, and the development of teamwork skills. Educational support services need to be better organized so that forms of "forced co-operation" between teachers and specialists are diminished. The results obtained from the research outline a series of intervention directions that will lead to the prevention of marginalization and exclusion situations in the field of education:

Intervention and therapy services - Creating ambulatory centres or mobile intervention teams to include children with SED in a recovery process from the earliest age prevents further serious problems. In addition, it is necessary to involve parents of children with SED in a counselling process to help them accept their problems and to support them in order to maximize their potential.

Creating an inclusive school environment - Ensuring schools with trained staff motivated and motivated so that they have an open attitude towards all children and a realistic vision about integration issues. Moreover, it is necessary for the teaching staff to be able to maintain a learning climate in the classroom by treating students individually, organizing the class on centres of interest, focusing on cooperative learning or extracurricular activities, etc.

The existence of a sufficient number of specialists who can include in the support program, speech therapy or psychological counselling all students who need it. This can also be done by engaging NGOs as well as by developing volunteering or partnerships with parents and attracting them to get involved in school life.

Existence of an optimal number of students in the classroom so that everyone is given the attention and support they need.

Designing another school valorisation system that focuses on individual progress made by children and not just on performance or on outstanding results at different school competitions.

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