INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES IN THE ROMANIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract: *In recent decades, for a number of socio-economic, demographic and environmental reasons, there has been a steady increase in the number of children with disabilities in the mainstream education system. Students with disabilities at all levels of education (preschool, primary, middle school, high school, even adult education) are extremely vulnerable to exclusion and to have multiple barriers to accessing educational opportunities. And among those who drop out of school, they do not even finish primary education, most of them are children with disabilities. The article aims to achieve its own re-elective perspective through the systematic analysis of scientific literature, research studies in the field of educational inclusion and to propose directions for understanding the mechanisms of manifestation of the phenomenon of inclusion in the Romanian educational system. The research part involves identifying through the analysis of research studies already conducted the challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive educational policies, with emphasis on the role of teachers. The results of the analysis confirm that the resources and difficulties of this complex process of inclusion, its consequences on students, teachers, parents, community, but also on the functioning of society. The attitudes of all those involved in the process are the variables that determine the success or not of the process of integration and socio-educational inclusion. Negative attitudes, rejection, isolation and non-acceptance are the ones that lead to a decrease in the student's ability to integrate in school and later in society, emotionally destabilizing the entire context and making inefficient a number of mechanisms and processes.*

Keywords: *integration; inclusion; SEN students; inclusive educational policies.*

1. Introduction

A new societal trend aims to recognize the right of every human person to self-determination, uniqueness and variability. The recognition by the state of the value of social and educational integration also comes with a series of challenges: the need to create special technologies for the education, upbringing and socialization of children with disabilities. In recent decades, in the country as a whole, for a number of socio-economic, demographic and environmental reasons, there has been a steady upward trend in the number of children with disabilities (OECD, Education Policies for Students at Risk and with disabilities in South East Europe Romania, 2007). Students with disabilities at all levels of education (preschool, primary, middle school, high school, even adult education) are extremely vulnerable, according to the 2011 World Disability Report, to being excluded and having multiple barriers to accessing educational opportunities. The same report (2011) estimated a number between 93 and 150 million school-aged children with disabilities globally. And among those who drop out of school, they do not even finish primary education, most of them are children with disabilities. The relevance of the chosen research topic is due to the changes that have taken place and are currently taking place in the socio-educational systems in Romania. The integration of educational institutions is one of the internationally required fields

that will eventually contribute to a radical transformation at various levels of society. Inclusive education is a way to develop and humanize society.

2. Theoretical foundation. The phenomenon of educational inclusion in the international specialized literature.

The issue of education of children with special educational needs must be on the agenda of decision makers dealing with people with disabilities, specialists, researchers and educational stakeholders, but it cannot be discussed in the context of educational and social policies promoted in Romania (Otovescu and Cioacă, 2019). Effective integration and inclusion must be achieved at all levels of social and community life. The recovery-correctional activity, as a pedagogical and, at the same time, social system, should have an independent outlet in the social environment. The environment is the one that will verify and confirm the efficiency of the integration and social inclusion of students with special educational needs, if the objectives that Romanian society is committed to ensure: harmonious personality development, social adaptation and finality with strong economic impact – professional integration of the students. The issue to be discussed in the study conducted by this doctoral research aims to explore the triad (training, growth, development), but in the socio-educational context. The dissemination of the inclusion of children with special educational needs in educational institutions has been carried out for several years in Romania, especially through the efforts of international organizations (UNICEF, UN, UNESCO) or non-governmental organizations (RENINCO). However, there is a need for a series of actions, projects to ensure the full realization of children's rights to receive a quality education, regardless of social, cognitive, emotional difficulties, etc. Inclusive practice is oriented towards achieving and ensuring equal access to receive a certain type of education, by creating the necessary conditions for education.

Experience documented in a series of reports (Dyson & Squires, 2016) shows that some children abandon any rigid education system because the system is not prepared to adapt to their educational needs, and the most vulnerable of these are children with disabilities. Most of the time, children who drop out of school become isolated and excluded from the general social system, from society onwards. Inclusive education, in order to become effective and a reality, requires more than a normative consolidation and educational policies, but a whole series of major and complex changes in the entire social and educational system. Many of the world's education systems are in the transition period to an inclusive education system, and because the attitude of teachers towards inclusion and students with special educational needs is extremely important for the efficiency of the inclusion process. Numerous studies (Subban & Sharma, 2006; Avramidis et al., 2000; Van Reusen et al., 2001) have been conducted to identify the perception of teachers in general education institutions, the relationship between certain demographic factors and teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and their concerns. The tools used in the research (Subban & Sharma, 2006) were: ATIES, Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale (Wilczenski, 1992) and CIES, Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale (Sharma & Desai, 2002), aimed at determining the participants' attitude and level of concern about the inclusion of students with special educational needs in general education. Another study (Ka Lam Sam et al., 2015) argues that teacher perception influences their acceptance behaviours of students with educational learning requirements. This study examines

three dimensions (attitude, concern, and commitment) of perception that have been identified and tested. One implication resulting from this study is to provide a valid tool in measuring the teacher's attitude, concern and commitment. A number of researches (Newton et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; O'Toole et al., 2013) were conducted, and the results revealed contradictory perceptions of inclusive education in primary and secondary education. At the primary level, the participants were very honest, most teachers (60%) showed negative attitudes about the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools, some teachers (30%) showed mixed feelings about the practice, and one teacher (10%) strongly supports the practice of inclusive education.

3. The phenomenon of educational inclusion in the Romanian specialized literature.

The article aims to portray an overview of the moments of school inclusion of children with disabilities in Romania, but also of the impact of projects and programmes of socio-educational inclusion. The first studies and research on the integration and socio-educational inclusion of children with special educational needs were conducted under the auspices of the RENINCO association, studies largely funded by UNESCO and UNICEF. The research activities were initiated and intensified after 1992, following the International Conference "Education and Disability" held with the support of UNESCO and UNICEF. Several such programmes have been implemented through the PHARE Access to Education programme for disadvantaged groups, which aimed to facilitate access to quality education for all children, regardless of ethnicity, mother tongue, socio-economic or psychological differences; SNAC – National Strategy for Community Action – programme that mobilized an impressive number of volunteers; I learn as much as I can and what I like, a pilot project, carried out to support eleven special schools for organizing educational activities on centres of interest; Phare Twinning Light Project Access to education for disadvantaged groups – focusing on children with special educational needs, which conducted an assessment of the situation of special education in Romania; the national programme Together, in the same school that has resulted in the development of national policies to support schools to provide diverse and flexible educational services in such a way that they can meet the educational requirements of each child, diversified and efficient able to meet special educational requirements (Policies in education for students at risk and for those with disabilities in South East Europe Romania, OECD, 2007).

At the Babeş-Bolyai University, a series of doctoral researches were conducted that explored ways to improve educational services in Romania from the perspective of inclusive education (Cioloca, 2012), studies that confirm the importance of educational inclusion as a first step in social inclusion. The impact of teacher training from the perspective of inclusive education was researched at the University of Bucharest (Cercel, 2009) which shows the need to invest in human resources, a quality education cannot be without adequate training of human resources in the inclusive approach to education. Studies have been conducted (Dămean & Todea, 2011; Dumitru, 2018) that aimed to identify factors that could have an impact on the process of socio-educational inclusion of children from vulnerable groups, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds. Following the research, the authors developed a set of tools to support the process of measuring how school inclusion of students with special needs, students with social disadvantages, takes place. The tools developed have made

it possible to identify these children more effectively, who have various barriers to integration, so that they can be supported more effectively, as early as possible, in order to reduce the negative consequences of integration difficulties. Another study (Ghergut, 2010) that explores the initiatives of Romanian schools to adapt their educational offer in relation to the new directions of change of educational activities, as a consequence of inclusive educational programmes. Another study (Borca, 2010) conducted an analysis of educational policies, the steps to follow in implementing an inclusive educational process. The Romanian inclusive system also attracted the attention of foreign researchers, so we identified an analysis (Walker, 2009) of inclusive educational practices and policies in Romania, conducted by G. Walker. The article makes an analysis of the practices and policies of inclusive education in Romania, and the author acknowledges the insufficiency of systematic studies on this topic. G. Walker (2009) argues that the direction of the Romanian education system is towards integration and inclusion, and in this process, it is based on democratic principles, and the socio-educational stakeholders seek to identify strategies to adapt educational services to the educational requirements of students.

4. Research methodology:
According to these needs – exploring the process of integration and socio-educational inclusion of students – was the main purpose of the article. We studied the phenomenon of integration and socio-educational inclusion in the school, an approach we initiated with the study of specialized literature, the experience of other states with a tradition in socio-educational inclusion, but also the results of major research in this field. We identified the resources and difficulties of this complex process of inclusion, its consequences on students, teachers, parents, community, but also on the functioning of society.
The research objectives pursued in this study were the following:
- Carrying out a comparative analysis of internal and external approaches to the development of inclusive education, including the development and implementation of socio-educational policies; legal and regulatory framework; content, forms and methods of teaching and learning and educational management;
- Identifying at an international level some efficient educational policies, some good practices that could represent a model in the development of inclusive Romanian educational policies.
- Development of a resource package on scientific, methodological and training support for the development of inclusive education, taking into account domestic and international experience, including a regulatory and legal framework, analysis of key practices and issues of inclusive education and social integration;
The research methodology that coordinated the research approach involved a three-step linear approach to a systematic review, amid current international debates on inclusive education as a strategy to eliminate exclusion and promote education as a basic human right in inclusive school communities. The research methods were of comparative and critical analysis of the current relevant international and national specialized literature, using online databases, which tried to answer some research questions.
RQ1: What are the attitudes of society towards inclusive education

RQ2: What is the interest of the teachers to have an inclusive approach in the classroom and to improve to provide a quality inclusive education

RQ3: What is the current stage of development and implementation of inclusive educational policies.

At a later stage, relevant research studies and research reports on the adoption of inclusive education policies at national level were analysed to identify both the challenges and good practices in the field of inclusive education. The criteria for selecting these studies and reports included the relevance of the research and studies conducted, the impact of the results, the soundness of the methodology conducted, relevant conclusions.

5. Results and discussions.

In the analysis of the main international legislative documents (because they are quite numerous, we made an analysis of them and identified the most relevant to the field we are dealing with) we caught a series of values and basic beliefs inherent in inclusive education:

-Everyone has the right to education.

-All children can learn.

-Everyone may face learning difficulties at certain times or in certain subjects.

-Everyone needs help in the learning process.

-The school, the teacher, the family and the community have the main responsibility for facilitating learning and not only for the children.

-The differences are natural, valuable and enrich society.

- Discriminatory attitudes and behaviour must be removed.

Normative acts approved by the competent authorities contain clear provisions that ensure the availability of quality universal education for all children, regardless of gender, social, ethnic origin, religious and cultural affiliation and mother tongue, special educational needs. The main directions of inclusive education worldwide are based on strengthening policies on the promotion and development of social and integrated services for socially vulnerable families and children at risk. An essential element in the development of more positive attitudes towards inclusion has proved to be the result of training programmes in the field of special education (Sharma & Desai, 2002; Dumitru Tăbăcaru, 2019b). Experienced teachers have lower levels of anxiety about implementing inclusive education. In addition, participants with a family member with disabilities and those with some legislative knowledge showed more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities and felt more confident in their roles as inclusive educators. In addition, lack of training in inclusive or special education may lead to less positive attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream settings (Menlove et al., 2001; Mullen, 2001; Agran et al., 2002) while increased training has been associated with more positive attitudes in this regard (Agran et al., 2002; Sharma & Desai, 2002).

As there are many opportunities for continuing professional development relevant to inclusive education and working with children with special educational needs, it is essential to provide a solid tool for verifying the training needs of teachers and developing these training programmes that are in line with their training needs. These types of studies have implications for professional development in terms of inclusion, and confirm the need to provide high quality development opportunities to

facilitate the socio-educational inclusion of students with special educational needs. Regarding the possible factors that influence the teachers' perception of inclusive education, the teachers recalled: misconceptions and inadequate information about inclusion, lack of teacher training, insufficient resources, limited administrative support, teachers' attitudes, large number of children in the classroom and poor infrastructure. Certain studies (Zachary et al., 2018, Muffih et al., 2011; Dumitru Tăbăcaru, 2019a) explored the views of secondary school teachers from seven selected schools involved in a pilot inclusive education programme and the results show that most teachers who still prefer separate special education institutions to inclusive ones are usually teachers without some training to teach students with special educational needs, while more experienced and well-trained teachers are more inclined to support inclusive education. Thus, resistance to inclusion is linked to inadequate or complete lack of teacher training. Younger and less experienced teachers with no training in special education have shown less enthusiasm for the benefits of inclusion, their ability to manage integrated classrooms and to teach students with disabilities. The implication of these results must be essential for future research, institutional support systems, institutional policies and the overall management of training.

An interesting report (Blackie, 2010) was produced in order to identify the educators' perceptions of inclusive education, barriers to learning, skills needed to achieve quality inclusion, support structures and effective training programmes in a performing inclusive system. The negative perceptions of inclusion involved lack of training, unrealistic expectations, material resources, class time and size. Based on the results of this study, it appears that educators do not feel adequately trained to take on the responsibilities of inclusive education. The educators who report that they have received adequate training perceive training programmes as effective and successful in improving their knowledge and skills. The report highlighted the areas needed to be found in the training programmes include learning difficulties, inclusion strategies, support services, curricular adaptation and psychological training to improve the educators' communication skills and ways to deal with emotional barriers in learning, confirmed in other studies (Dumitru Tăbăcaru, 2019a; 2019b¬).

 Su Qiong & Xu Cooper (2020) explores how mass education teachers with experience in inclusive education perceive individual differences among students in general education classrooms. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and used semi-structured sampling and interviews, where it was found that teachers tended to conceptualize individual differences among students according to five categories: students' perceived ability; students' perceived behaviour and motivation; the personal attributes of the perceived students; perceived family factors and observed learning outcomes. The particular concerns of teachers about individual differences were also revealed and discussed. This research is relevant because it allows a deeper exploration of the perceptions and attitudes that teachers have towards students with special educational needs, requirements that represent individual differences. Saloviita (2020) conducted a study to explore the teachers' attitudes and their impact on the inclusion of children with special educational needs. According to the results obtained, for the efficiency of the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education, the positive attitude of teachers is very important. According to research, about 20% of teachers strongly opposed inclusion.

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion have not been shown to be strongly associated with any of the demographic variables studied so far. In the present study, the sex and age of teachers gave comparable results to most previous studies: female teachers were somewhat more positive than male teachers (Avramidis et al., 2000), and younger teachers slightly more positive than the older ones (Ahmmed et al., 2014). The attitudinal variables controlled here included work orientation and self-efficacy. The professional orientation of teachers did not show a remarkable association with their attitudes towards inclusion. The inclusive education has been criticized as causing additional work for teachers (Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Despite the slightly negative general atmosphere, just over half of the teachers agreed that the education of children with special educational needs could be effectively supported in regular classrooms.

A report (Horga, 2017) made with the support of UNICEF aimed at a deep understanding of the phenomenon of participation in education, engaging in the educational activity, is a crucial element in reforming the Romanian education system. The research made a set of recommendations for reforming the education system to support the creation of a positive, inclusive environment, but also a set of indicators to increase the quality of socio-educational services offered in Romania for all levels of education (primary, middle school, high school and higher). An analysis (Manea, 2016) of access to education for young people with disabilities in Romania, focusing on upper secondary, vocational and university education was conducted following an empirical research, and the results were collected following the collection of experiences of subjects with various disabilities in the educational, general or special route. The most important things were the identification of barriers that prevent the integration and socio-educational inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education. Among the most frequently cited obstacles listed by respondents with disabilities were: negative attitudes, instructional-educational means not adapted to special educational requirements, the use of rigid methods that do not meet the needs of beneficiaries of these educational services, lack of adequate support services (socio-emotional support, intervention and recovery programmes, counselling, school and professional guidance, etc.), insufficient financial resources and others. The report also identifies a number of legislative inconsistencies, which hinder the practical implementation of inclusive education, and the main factor of social exclusion is found in the educational sphere. The results of the study state that for the success of the subsequent social integration of people with disabilities, access to education is necessary and crucial, associated with parental support. The study concludes with the collection of recommendations to support and facilitate access to socio-educational activities of people with disabilities and reduce barriers to participation in educational experiences in the context in which children grow and develop, in inclusive and non-segregated contexts. The recommendation that was noted and that will be a starting point for the research initiated by us was the need to invest in teacher training, in their professional development, in empowering with knowledge and skills to work in inclusive environments, in acquire responses to the diversity of students with special educational needs, ways of working that facilitate socio-educational inclusion.
In 2018, through the POCA programme, a comparative study was conducted (Angi, 2016) on inclusive educational policies for children with special educational needs, which resulted in the development of a set of recommendations on facilitating socio-

educational inclusion, based on a rigorous analysis of European education systems and a transfer of good practice. The study proposes that the change in the education system be supported by improved education policies, the decentralization of the education system, the support for inclusive education with a series of working tools that focus on student education, flexibility of the curriculum and teaching methods. We find again the need to adequately train teachers, to be better prepared to work with children with special educational needs.

We believe that an educational system will be inclusive and will be effective if it approaches this process from the perspective of social support of all the stakeholders involved in this process, it is important to involve society, community in this process, because ultimately students with social educational needs are the future members of the community and they must develop from school in an environment as close as possible to the real society. For this reason, we conducted an analysis of studies regarding the involvement and impact of social services on supporting inclusive education. A report made by the World Bank (Stănculescu, 2016) conducted in 2016 a comprehensive research prior to actions to reform child protection services in Romania. The progress made by the Romanian government in the years after 1989 is listed, regarding the reduction of the institutionalization of children and the finding of ways to raise children in positive, healthy environments, in the family and as close as possible to the family. The report identifies and offers a number of proposals to support the substantial improvement of child protection services. Also, a paper was conducted that aimed to identify the direct relationships between disabilities and a person's socioeconomic status, and the research results helped to shape the elements that define disability and the costs involved in a Romanian social system, which is appreciated as precarious and unstable. At the same time, the author emphasizes the important role that disability plays in the process of social integration and the frequent interdependence between disability and poverty.

6. Conclusions

The field of social inclusion and inclusion is still insufficiently studied, there is an acute need for research programmes to assess the impact of inclusive education, ways to support the socio-educational inclusion of children with special educational needs and to identify effective strategies to support social-educational inclusion. The analysis of research and the studies conducted to assess the impact of the process of educational integration of students with special educational needs is useful for formulating and structuring quantitative and qualitative indicators, depending on the main dimensions of actions to be taken to implement disability reforms, would measure the impact of the reform. At the same time, the results obtained from data collection, with the use of those indicators, would allow the recovery of disability reform and the development of new actions to increase the social inclusion of people with disabilities.

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