

# REPRESENTATIONS OF INCLUSION STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE WRITTEN PRESS

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**Abstract:** *This article proposes a sociological approach to the integration of students with SEN as a social problem, with an emphasis on how it is reflected and re-signified in the online print media in Romania. In the first part of the article, we will deal with the operational definition of the concept of integration, special educational requirements and other emerging notions, and we will review a number of relevant theoretical models from the field of sociology, special psychopedagogy and social psychology. Later, in order to know how the issue of integration is represented in the written press, we analyzed a multitude of articles that focus on the issue. The results of the research bring to the fore the variables with which integration is correlated at the level of the media discourse, the most relevant of which are students from pre-university education.*

**Keywords:** sociality, integration, special educational requirements, print media.

## 1. Introduction

Reflections on the social nature of man date back to Antiquity. The Greek philosopher Aristotle is recognized for being the first thinker - at least the first whose writings have been preserved - who affirmed the "social animal" character of the human being, expressed by the famous phrase "zoon politikon". Starting with Aristotle, most philosophical conceptions of man - from the scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, Enlightenment and postmodernist currents - placed the human individual, explicitly or implicitly, in the space of interpersonal interaction. Obviously, the meanings and mechanisms of this interaction are deciphered differently by each individual philosophical system. One thing seems to be the consensus of the great systems of thought, from Antiquity to today: man can only exist in and through interaction with the other.

Theories about sociality develop and reach their peak in the perimeter of sociological thought. The "father" of sociology, Auguste Comte, theorized the two mechanisms of sociality - statics and social dynamics; Ferdinand Tönnies operates the qualitative distinction between community and society, while Emile Durkheim analyzes the social division of labor and the social phenomenon of suicide through the lens of social integration and solidarity. Max Weber and the exponents of the Chicago School lament the isolation of modern man, along with the expansion of industrialization and big cities, and in the second half of the last century it crystallizes and becomes

particularly popular with the current of symbolic interactionism. I have reviewed only a few of the already classic sociological perspectives that claim to study sociality and, implicitly, loneliness. In the field of psychology, Abraham Maslow, in his famous pyramid, places the need for belonging on the third level, after physiological and security needs. Despite the fact that, from a psychological perspective, loneliness is not treated as a clinical entity, Russell, Peplau and Cutrona (1980) advanced, 40 years ago, the idea that loneliness can be analyzed, in some cases, as a pathological phenomenon itself, not just as a symptom of

other mental disorders (depression, anxiety, avoidant personality disorder, etc.).

Estimates show that, on average, having a classmate with SEN in the classroom has a negative effect on the academic performance of students without SEN. However, these effects are small and decrease, or even disappear, once better inclusion policies are in place. These results suggest that the peer effect is almost completely nullified when more resources are provided and when appropriate treatment and support protocols are implemented.

## **2. Integration and special educational needs: conceptual boundaries and theoretical approaches**

In the thirteen years since the adoption of the Law on the Education of Persons with Disabilities (Law No. 448/2006), special education has grown in the number of students and the amount spent on services. Despite this growth, the academic performance of students with disabilities (SDS) remains alarmingly low compared to mainstream students. To some extent, these differences reflect persistent underlying impairments, but they may also reflect ineffective special education services.

Students are eligible for special education if they have delays in thinking and learning, understanding and using language, self-help skills, physical abilities, or behavior that affects their ability to perform academically. Parents, teachers, or other school personnel may refer students for special education upon entering school or any subsequent grade. Referred students undergo psychoeducational and physical examinations by psychologists, psychiatrists, or other relevant professionals to determine which services are appropriate. If the initial assessment determines that a student is eligible for special education, parents, teachers, and school staff develop an Individualized Intervention Program (IIP) and an Individualized Service Plan (ISP) that documents the student's impairment/disorder, identifies the supports that will be provided, setting the services in which the supports and academic objectives for the following year will be administered.

In recent years, inclusive education and the effects of diverse classrooms on students have attracted increasing interest in the economics literature (e.g. Angrist and Lang, 2004; Raitano and Vona, 2013). However, quantitative studies analyzing the integration of students with special educational needs (SEN) in regular classrooms<sup>1</sup> are rare and mostly incipient (e.g. Jordan et al., 2009; Keslair et al., 2012; Ruijs, 2017; Gottfried and Kirksey, 2019). The lack of available evidence is probably due to the limited amount of adequate information and the natural difficulties associated with identifying comparable groups. (Dante Contreras, 2020)

It is open to debate whether including students with SEN in the mainstream education system is desirable (see, for example, Ruijs and Peetsma, 2009; Gottfried et al., 2016; Stiefel et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2019; ). The arguments in favor of their inclusion are that students with SEN would develop to their full potential in an integrated classroom and students without SEN would develop skills such as tolerance and patience. The argument against is that inclusion may have a negative impact on students without SEN because they would be distracted or receive less attention from teachers due to the presence of SEN students. (Dante Contreras, 2020)

Integration of children with special educational needs in school has been a key theme in special education for the past 25 years. More recently, however, the term "inclusion," which embodies a whole range of assumptions about the purpose and meaning of schools (Kliwer, 1998), has come to replace "integration" in the vocabulary of special educators. Integration depends on the external agency; children are offered places in the "least restrictive environment" and integration becomes a matter of "placement decisions" (Fish, 1985). Such placement decisions are seen as a failure for some children, as mainstreaming may not meet the specific needs of children with significant disabilities. This is because integration as a process does not involve restructuring the educational environment to accommodate the needs of a

small number of children with significant disabilities (Thomas, 1997) (Elias Avramidis, 2000)

In contrast, inclusion involves such a restructuring of the mainstream school that every school can accommodate every child regardless of disability (accommodation rather than assimilation) and ensures that all students belong to a community. Such an argument places the discussion within a social-ethical discourse that is strongly value-focused. The concept of inclusion

thus becomes part of a broader human rights agenda that argues that all forms of segregation are morally wrong. (Elias Avramidis, 2000)

Inclusion of students with special needs special education (CES) in education classrooms common is a controversial issue in many countries and the subject of one of the most heated debates in educational policy. While inclusive education<sup>1</sup> was supported by 92 countries in the UNESCO Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) 20 years ago, the empirical evidence in favor of inclusion is still weak Ruijs and Peetsma. (Nienke Ruijs, 2009)

Proponents of inclusive education often argue from a human rights perspective, arguing that it is the right of all students to be educated in mainstream schools (Ainscow and César, 2006, Farrell, 2000). One of the main concerns of opponents, on the other hand, is that inclusion may have a negative impact on students without special educational needs (hereafter referred to as "regular" students). The argument is that regular students are distracted by the behavior of SEN students and that SEN students need more teacher attention than regular students. The additional support that is available in inclusive classrooms, however, could also benefit mainstream students. Therefore, this paper investigates the impact of inclusive education on the academic performance of mainstream students (Ruijs, 2017)

Recent studies support the concerns of critics of inclusive education, finding that disruptive peers have a negative impact on student achievement. These studies, however, do not focus on students with diagnosed special educational needs. Figlio (2007) uses an IV strategy that exploits the inappropriate behavior of boys with girls' names, Carrell and Hoekstra (2010) study peers of students who are exposed to domestic violence, and Neidell and Waldfogel (2010) use teacher ratings of problems with outsourcing. Students with diagnosed CES generally have more severe problems. At the same time, their special education eligibility also brings additional resources and support (Ruijs, 2017)

Although the movement for "inclusive education" is part of a broad human rights agenda, many teachers have serious reservations about supporting the widespread placement of SEN students in mainstream schools (Florian, 1998)

Other attitudinal studies have suggested that general educators/teachers have not developed an empathetic understanding of disabling conditions (Berryman, 1989; Horne and Ricciardo, 1988), nor do they seem prepared to accept students with special needs (Barton, 1992; Hayes and Gunn, 1988). This can be explained by the fact that integration was often carried out in an ad hoc manner, without systematic changes to the organization of a school, taking into account the educational expertise of teachers or any guarantee of a continuous supply of resources (see the example Italy where integration was radical in the 1980s) (Berryman, 2016)

Center and Ward 's (1987) study of regular teachers indicated that their attitudes toward integration reflected a lack of confidence in both their own teaching abilities and the quality of available support staff. They were positive about integrating only those children whose disabling characteristics were not likely to require additional instructional or management skills on the part of the teacher (Elias Avramidis, 2000)

### **3. Research methodology**

We start, in the investigative approach, from the premise that there is no social problem that has escaped the media's scrutiny. Consequently, if we accept the idea that the

integration and inclusion of students with CES is a social problem, it follows the need for a perspective to approach this problem specific to the media space. Obviously, the logic of the media is not the same as the logic of the scientific approach, as the logic of common sense often detaches itself from the explanatory models promoted by the media. *How is the inclusion of students with special educational needs represented in the online print media in Romania?* This is the research question from which we started our approach.

**The general goal or objective** is to know how the inclusion of students with SEN is represented, as a social and psychological problem, in the online print media in Romania.

The general objective is subsumed by two **specific objectives** :

- knowledge of the attitude (positive or negative) towards the inclusion of students with SEN promoted in the online print media;

- identifying the variables that are correlated with the inclusion of students with CES at the level of the media discourse

Regarding the research hypotheses, we will assume that:

1. Most people support the inclusion process of children with CES.

2. Most people empathize with the integration process of children with CES.

3. The main barrier to the inclusion of students with SEN are the poorly trained teachers in mainstream schools .

Considering the relatively small number of online sources that will be consulted, I preferred formulating the hypotheses in descriptive terms, of plausible expectations with a provisional character, in favor of conjectural statements about the relationships between the variables. From these considerations, the main **limitation** of the research results - the quasi-quantitative character

, which does not allow extrapolations and does not exhaust everything that means the approach to the inclusion of students with CES in the mass media.

**The method** used is content analysis. **The unit of analysis** is the article published online, in a publication that appears or not and in print format, and the **research corpus** includes 25 such articles. They were identified using the Google search engine, following the keywords "CES", "integration", "inclusion". In the selection of sources, two criteria were taken into account: actuality (the most recent results) and popularity (the most accessed results).

#### 4. Research results

1) The attitude towards the inclusion of students with SEN, conveyed through online print media, is almost always positive. The discourse analysis carried out on several articles demonstrates the co-occurrence of terms such as: "support", "service assurance", "need for support".

2) The main variables with which the inclusion of students with SEN in the online print media is correlated are the following:

- *the reluctance of colleagues who have a class with a student with SEN*
  - *the reluctance of teachers who have a student with SEN in their class*
  - *the reluctance of parents whose children have a student with SEN in their class*
- 3) The first research hypothesis - *The majority of people support the process of inclusion of children with CES* - **is refuted** .

After analyzing the data, we can define 3 large categories of people who oppose the interactive process of students with SEN: colleagues who have a student with SEN in their class, teachers who have a student with SEN in their class, parents whose children have a student with SEN in their class .

4) The second research hypothesis - *Most people empathize with the integration process of children with CES* . - **is partially confirmed** .

After analyzing the data, we can say that at a macro level, Romanians empathize with the current integration phenomenon. Although most articles promote productive integration techniques and ways and new laws that support this process, we can find articles in the written press that bring to the surface situations of verbal and emotional abuse by classmates or teachers in mainstream schools.

- 5) The third research hypothesis - *The main barrier to the inclusion of students with SEN is poorly trained teachers in the mainstream school.* - is partially confirmed . The confirmation is only partial, considering the Aesopian character of the media language, which does not clearly distinguish what are the barriers of this process of inclusion in mass education and other emerging concepts. This fact makes it impossible to clearly delimit these conceptual categories in order to test the hypothesis. However, in most cases, the emphasis is also on the lack of materials adapted for students with CES, the lack of programs adapted according to the diagnosis and the potential for development and learning, the reluctance of teachers to facilitate students with CES all the measures by them.

### 5. Conclusions

The inclusion of students with SEN is a complex, multidimensional concept, distinct from the concept of integration. Unlike integration, which refers to the inclusion of an individual in an environment that does not need structural changes; inclusion aims to change the way the environment acts to include an individual. The inclusion of students with SEN is becoming a topic of interest, increasingly addressed in the media discourse of the Romanian press. Most of the studied articles have a positive attitude towards this phenomenon, promoting innovations and new changes in this field.

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