

PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND THEIR INTEGRATION IN THE INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

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Rezumat. *La etapa actuală politică și practica educațională din numeroase țări ale lumii este orientată în direcția integrării preșcolărilor (copiilor) cu cerințe educative speciale (CES) în medii educaționale și de viață cât mai aproape de cele obișnuite, normale ale unei comunități. Unul dintre cele mai importante aspecte ale învățământului actual este nevoia sa de adaptare la necesitățile copiilor, oricare ar fi acele necesități și oricare ar fi copiii – fie că sunt copiii cu CES, fie că pur și simplu sunt copii cu un ritm mult mai încet de învățare.*

O nouă dimensiune care începe să se contureze în peisajul învățământului românesc este aceea de democratizare și egalizare a șanselor fiecărui copil în parte. În acest scop a fost înființată și comunitatea incluzivă – un răspuns la redimensionarea educației. Scopul acestei comunități este de a crea pentru toți copiii un cadru prielnic învățării, pornind de la premiza că diferențele dintre oameni sunt normale și ele trebuie acceptate. Un rol important în atribuim pedagogiei și învățării centrată pe copil, prin adaptarea curriculumului și metodelor de predare la capacitatea și nevoia fiecăruia în parte.

Cuvinte cheie: CES, educație, integrare, incluziune.

The contemporary educational policies and practices in many countries of the world are oriented towards the integration of preschoolers (children) with special educational needs (SEN) in educational and living environments as close as possible to the usual, normal ones of a community. This policy is widely carried out by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Council of Europe Recommendations for the Integration of Children with SEN (special educational needs), (1992), the World Conference Papers on Special Education (Salamanca, 1994), the World Conference Materials entitled "Education for All" (Dakar, 2000). The integration of children with SEN into the community becomes one of the most pressing psycho-pedagogical problems, always being the object of research of specialists from different branches of science.

Numerous investigations in different countries have covered various aspects of the problem of the integration of children with SEN into the community (D.V.Popovici, E. Verza, C. Păunescu, Gh. Radu, U. Șchiopu, M. Rosca, E. Vrăsmaș – Romania; A. Galland, T. Lambert, I. Tomas, J. Puissant – France; T. Vlasova, M. Pevzner – Russia; W. Wolfensberger, H. Grossman, B. Smith, R. Luckasson, T. Hejir – USA, et al.). Most authors demonstrate the priorities of integration, the conditions of organization, the negative and positive effects of this process, the possibilities of development.

The result of these investigations allowed practical actions to continuously develop the integrated education process and to optimise special education.

So one of the most important aspects of current education is its need to adapt to the needs of children, whatever those needs and whatever children – whether they are children with SEN or simply children with a much slower pace of learning.

One such method of adaptation is inclusive kindergarten, a community that focuses on the inclusion of those children (preschoolers) or even groups that have been previously marginalized and that involve parents, caregivers, educators and specialist counsellors in learning and decision-making.

It has been shown that the methods used in inclusive groups can significantly improve the performance of all these children. Inclusive school (as a general term of reference) whether it is kindergarten, primary or secondary school, therapy center constitutes an ideal training ground for their future integration into society[1, p.18]. Instead of isolating them and saying they are "difficult," "turbulent" or even "disabled," we might admit that these children could progress further in an ordinary community if we, the teachers, accepted that education is for all.

The most important thing to consider is that teaching within diversity involves teaching for each individual. Taking into account the interests of each preschooler, his experiences and goals we are actually taking an important step in their education and integration into society after completing their studies. Moreover, we can say that the differences between individuals are much more pronounced than those between groups. From this point of view, perhaps one of the greatest challenges a teacher faces is to adapt the teaching style to meet the needs of each child.

A new dimension that is beginning to take shape in the Romanian education landscape is that of democratizing and equalizing the opportunities of each child. To this end, the inclusive community was also established – a response to the resizing of education. The purpose of this community is to create a framework for all children for learning, on the premise that differences between people are normal and they must be accepted. An important role in assigning child-centred pedagogy and learning by adapting the curriculum and teaching methods to each individual's ability and need.

Teaching to high-needs pre-school students requires the same strategies and practices as teaching to any other type of class/group. In other words, a good method of teaching in general will be a good method of teaching for students with special needs. All students have the right to expect from education the best and most effective methods, and students with SEN do not make a difference.[2, p.23]

The inclusive community is a challenge, but it should not be seen as a threat to the performance of these schools or schools. Many of these institutions find it difficult to integrate children with special needs into ordinary groups. But this fear can be overcome through education, adequate teaching resources, support and not least the belief that inclusion is a moral and social right that cannot be denied to anyone.

There are certain steps to be followed in the schooling of children with CES, among which, in the first phase, is the acceptance of the idea that such children exist, the recognition of their right to education, their gradual integration. Thus, as these children grow up, and make the transition from kindergarten to primary school, from primary school to secondary school and then to high school, they will become adults and will probably have their own children, inclusion will already be an accepted fact and a natural measure in education. Children educated in the inclusive community will be better prepared to interact with various individuals as well as with various real-world situations.

Within the inclusive community, educators and teachers must work with different education specialists, such as psychologists, counsellors, therapists and other specialists, because only together will they be able to achieve the best results. The consultant teacher for CES is probably the one who will work the most with each teacher, he is also the one who will participate most of the classes.

The inclusive community involves improving the education system for all students. It involves changes in the curriculum, in the way teachers teach, in the way students learn, as well as changes in the way children with SEN interact with their peers and vice versa. A change is needed to more successfully meet the diversity of students' needs. Inclusive education is a process of facilitating the learning process for all students, even those who were previously excluded.

Among the advantages, children with SEN are treated as an integral part of society, modelled to the rest of their colleagues who have no problems, both children with SEN and their mates develop their communicative skills, become more creative, accept diversity, etc. Educators and teachers adopt various teaching-learning methods that benefit all students, not just those with SEN. Socialization between students and the development of friendships between colleagues is quite important in the development of the learning process, due to the constant exchange of information.

As far as inclusive school teachers are concerned, they should be encouraged to adopt modern practices in school hours, to constantly improve themselves with regard to children with SEN. Another important role that teachers have is to make children without problems to accept and help their colleagues with SEN, without ridiculing them, or excluding them.

It should also be noted that together with teachers and classmates, an important role in ensuring the success of children with SEN is attributed to the family and parents of these children. It has been shown, moreover, that in those cases where parents and family in general have been actively involved in the learning process, children with SEN have had much more effective results. This active family involvement creates, in fact, an inclusive community that will help children with SEN to integrate more quickly and more successfully into society after completing their studies.

Therefore, the need to resize education in order to set educational standards and to make schools accountable for student outcomes requires a great deal of effort and dedication, both collectively and individually. For this we must believe that each individual child can learn and succeed, that diversity is useful to all of us, and that students exposed to different risks can overcome them through attention and involvement from teachers and the community in general.

As this resizing of education comes into play, inclusion will no longer be seen as an isolated, distinctive action, but will become a natural, simultaneous action.

The problem of integrating children with disabilities and/or behavioural disorders into mainstream education is less favourable, and moreover, it is a situation that would make the learning process difficult and create situations of professional stress for the teachers involved in this process. We are therefore faced with a difficult problem to overcome, which involves further training of teachers to change their optics from this point of view.

As the current schooling dynamics of the mentally deficient child indicate, it is likely that for future generations of mentally deficient children, in the absence of adequate policies and in the absence of compliance with these policies, there will be an increase in the number of

unschooled persons or those whose right to equal opportunities has been violated. This may have a negative projection of the benefits that the school could provide in the future, both individually and at the level of society.

Prejudice towards mentally deficient children and those with disorderly behaviour of some teachers leads to the failure of an effective inclusion process.

While the existence of schools intended exclusively for deficient children is recognised, it is considered imperative to intervene on the reduction of the gaps between the special and public schools, but in particular on the change of the current institutional arrangement.

The social distance separating the "non-deficient" population from the deficient population is enhanced by the existing educational gaps, but also by a series of prejudices and stereotypes perpetuated over time vis-à-vis this category of people, disadvantaged in the current context.

The current system's effort to adapt its legislation on the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education forms according to European standards is well known. It is necessary, however, that this effort does not stop only at the level of cosmetization of the law, but to become a natural way of behaving and acting at all levels that are tangential to the problem of the integration of children with disabilities in the forms of mainstream education, who have a connection with the social integration of this category of children, who have a bearing on the recognition and respect of the right to equal opportunities for all children, excluding any form of discrimination based on sex, age, ethnicity, religion, citizenship, school/professional training, etc.

These subtle or less subtle deviations from the natural norms mentioned in this text constitute strong barriers that prevent the process of integration into mainstream education of children with mental impairments and/or behavioural disorders. In this situation, it is necessary to renounce, as soon as possible, the inertia installed in the educational, cultural and social activity in which both children with disabilities and their families are trained.

Like any other person, the mentally deficient child must enjoy all the rights enshrined in international documents, although the primary is both the political will of the state to take necessary measures to overcome the current state, and especially the factors responsible for the problems of integration.

Another problem is the theoretical perspective of "labelling" through which I have tried to demonstrate that this label that it applies to the mentally deficient child both the school institution and society in general leads to the internalization of the label in the self-image, i.e. to a behavior according to it.

The integration of early schoolers with deficiency in mainstream school is a particularly complex process. In order to limit the failure of integration, but especially to prevent school failure, a number of requirements must be met.

School (non) success is the product of the intervention of several factors in different relationships of dynamic interaction [3, p.58]: biological factors (general health and resistance of the student to fatigue); psychological factors (intellectual factors: mental processes, affective-emotional factors: feelings, interests, character factors: orientation and self-regulation of personality), social factors (family, socio-educational climate and socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions; class of students: number, microgroups formed, influential leaders, educational climate, degree of cohesion of the collective, local educational community outside school and family: group of friends on the street), psychosocial factors of the personality of the

teacher (structure of the teacher's personality; , to the pupil, to the parents; the teacher's pedagogical ability, the real social pedagogical prestige), pedagogical factors (the teacher's ability to organize the training process, the efficient design of the school activity, the ability to combine the teaching theories with personal experience). An important role is played by the psychosocial factors of the teacher's personality related to general socio-cultural intelligence and verbal intelligence. In the category of these factors are included a number of other personality factors that act alongside those mentioned: motivation, interest, affective and character attitude, willpower, perseverance, etc. School failure expresses a heightened discord between pedagogical efforts and instructional-educational requirements and the mental and psychophysiological needs and possibilities of the student. The causes of school failure are multiple expressed in various forms, representing an expression and a result of a double situation of maladjustment:

- the student's inadequacy in the learning activity carried out in the school and extra-curricular environment;
- the school's (teacher's) inadequacy to internal (biological, psychological) and external (socioeconomic, socio-cultural) factors that confer the individuality of the student's personality).

The given configuration is the result of the intersection and interaction of the following causal factors:

- school immaturity, school intelligence below the limit;
- psychoaffective instability;
- instrumental disorders;
- behavioural disorders.

The highly diversified and specific combination of these causal factors can generate equally varied forms of maladjustment and school failure, which evolve from simple to complex, from easy or relatively easy to correct situations to serious and even extremely serious situations.

Thus, the start of integration into ordinary school institutions for children with special educational requirements must be very well designed and planned. Integration planning mainly involves defining as clearly as possible the objectives of the inclusion of children with SEN in integrated school structures, identifying the motivation of the factors responsible for achieving integration, as well as analysing those factors that enhance the success of integration, as well as those of risk.

School integration should be started at a young age, pre-school and school level, with children with mild learning and development disabilities in particular [4, p.58]

Another measure that can prevent integration failure is related to monitoring the basic conditions necessary for its success. This issue requires and involves the following aspects, from the very first planning stage:

- Availability of employment in the integration experience of the parents of the children concerned, school management, kindergarten and teachers who will work directly with the children;
- Systematic and rigorous preparation of ordinary school institutions in which integrated special education structures are to be established. This training refers to human resources and material resources.

A particularly important role in the success of integration is the adequacy of the psycho-pedagogical evaluation of children with integrated CES and the decision of school and

professional orientation. This is achieved by the appropriate qualification of teachers who intervene in the integrated school curriculum according to the school plans and programmes that apply, but also in the problems of special psychopedagogy. It is also important to have a regular visit to the school or to a psycho-pedagogical teacher with experience in special education, who will provide the necessary expert advice and intervention, in accordance with the schedule established in advance and in agreement with the school unit.

The adaptation of legal norms and school procedures, achievable during the time necessary to bring schooling closer to normal life and to maintain in an integrated school structure, is another subpoint of psycho-pedagogical evaluation of children with integrated SEN. At the same time, consideration is given to the possibility of granting legal rights to a child with a disability, corresponding to the legislation in force and the wishes of the family.[5, p.108]

Ensuring conditions complementary to the direct intervention of the ordinary school through access to the necessary rehabilitation/recovery services and interventions is another preventive measure to limit failure. This measure results in the existence of possibilities for collaboration with a special school or inter-school logopedic centre, systematically maintaining the link with the special school.

Equally important is the positive professional assessment by the competent authorities, of the activities of the teaching, auxiliary and management staff, engaged in the organisation and functioning of integrated education.[6, p.19]

Initiation and cooperation between the special school and the regular schools can be a fruitful course of action along the lines of school inclusion.

Integrated education is possible, but in order to avoid failures and reduce risks, it is necessary to carefully plan, prepare and monitor all such experiences. [7, *Introduction*]

The application of cooperative learning methods is an important source in mutual support for solving problems or exploring new themes. This fosters mutual knowledge between students, mutual understanding and acceptance, as well as preventing the failure of the integration of children with special educational requirements into the mass school staff.

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