

Issues of Special Education in Romanian Schools

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Abstract

School managers, teachers, students, as well as their parents are faced with increasingly frequent attempts to integrate the diversity of pupils as a result of integration policies at national and European level. Educational needs of impaired persons require special attention. It is necessary to make steps should be taken to ensure access to education for each category of disabled person as part of the education system. Legislative framework in the field of special education Romania takes into account the legislation created by the international bodies on the education of persons with special educational needs, to which Romania has adhered. This paper presents aspects regarding the organization of educational support services dedicated to children, students and young people with special educational needs in mainstream schools in accordance with Romanian law; it also underlines the international legal framework of reference. This paper is part of a wider project that focuses on teacher training to optimize the integration of SEN pupils into the mainstream school; we used data collection methods, such as social document study and focus-group. An integrated and tailored approach is needed for children with SEN (special educational needs); focus-groups organized with primary school and gymnasium children, as well as with support teachers, revealed a number of adaptation issues from both sides (pupils with SEN and students with no problems). On the other hand, the itinerant teachers are assaulted by a series organization problems and it becomes impossible to provide support and assistance to children with special needs who are growing in numbers. Training of teachers is one of the most important pillars in the integration of all those involved in education, it is the way to optimize service organizations. Teacher training must respond to the real and complex needs of the beneficiaries, based on exploratory learning. In the final, will be presented and analyzed the main important problems faced by both teachers and pupils in the current educational context.

Keywords: special education, educational needs, integration policies, children, teachers

Introduction

In any democratic society, every individual's right to education is unquestionable. However, there are categories of people who do not have open access to education. Moreover, this right is limited and difficult to obtain. This category includes children with disabilities, with special needs, children who, like typical children, have desires to learn and to achieve success in their lives.

The legislative framework in the field of special education in Romania takes into account the legislation created by the international bodies on the education of persons with special educational needs, to which Romania has adhered. Romania has produced several legislative documents in line with key international documents on the education of children with special needs since the mid-1990s.

In Romania, the right of these children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to integrate into mass school (Law on Social Work, No. 292/2011, Law on The Protection and Promotion of Disabled Persons Rights, No. 448/2006, Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of the Child, No 272/2004). These children are supported by teachers who are specially trained to work and adapt the curriculum to the skills of every disabled child. All students participating in the educational process, especially those with CES, should benefit from educational differentiation as they feature different abilities and different interests, they come from different social backgrounds and exhibit different affective behaviors (shyness, emotion), they have individual learning potential and different learning styles and methods.

The present article will describe a part of the PION project, (The itinerant-pawn teacher of integrating students with SENs into mainstream schools), a research project aimed at implementing a continuing professional training program for itinerant teachers. Such a training program was extremely welcomed by itinerant teachers, given that it was the first continuous training program, a pilot project for Brasov County.

We will describe the documentation for the training program, the research methods used in the initial evaluation and a part of the implementation of the training courses of the itinerant teachers.

Theoretical framework

Studies on disabilities distinguish the concepts of impairment, disability and handicap (WHO, 1980; Gherguț, 2001).

Thus, impairment means any loss, anomaly or disturbance of anatomical, physiological or psychiatric structure or function.

Disability means any lack, reduction or loss of ability to perform an activity under the conditions considered normal for a person.

Handicap means any disadvantage suffered by a person as a result of a deficiency or disability that prevents or limits the total or partial satisfaction of the tasks considered normal for a person (depending on age, gender and various social and cultural factors).

Some authors make a distinction between the terms according to the way of addressing the issue of people with special needs (Gherguț, 2001, p. 12). Therefore, from a medical point of view, we talk about impairment, according to the functional aspect we talk about disability, and from a social point of view, of handicap.

One of the changes in recent years is the transition from handicap, better understood in the medical sense, to disability, which has a more relevant social component. The notion of disability is broader and also includes the social role of the person with impairment or disability, being disadvantaged compared to other people in the concrete case of the person's interaction with his/her specific social and cultural environment.

Thus, WHO, in 2001, defined disability as a generic term for deficiencies, limitations of activity and participation restrictions and revealed the negative aspect of the interaction between individual and society.

However, the most comprehensive definition, and perhaps closest to reality, was given by the United Nations in 2006 at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: disability is an evolving concept and it results from the interaction of people with disabilities and attitudinal and environmental barriers that prevent their full and effective participation in society at a level equal to other people.

Statistics show that around 10% of the world population is estimated to be dealing with disabilities (WHO, apud Yeo, 2001). However, at the level of Romania there are 742,353 (3.63%) adults with disabilities, including 63,300 children. Also, at the level of Brasov County, the rate of people with disabilities is 2.97%¹

One of the greatest risks that this population may face is poverty (Yeo, 2001), especially due to social discrimination and the inaccessibility of people with disabilities in education. Disability can lead to discrimination, marginalization and, ultimately, to social exclusion by being perceived in relation to social barriers which deny the opportunity of employment for people with disabilities (Burke, 2008). Moreover, people with disabilities are "considered to be one of the social categories at high risk of multiple social exclusion" (Lazăr, 2009, p. 206), with disastrous consequences at individual, family and societal level.

¹ (<http://anpd.gov.ro/web/transparența/statistici/trimestriale/>).

Studies conducted by UNESCO show that in developing countries only 1-2% of children with a certain deficiency receive education, boys being more often the beneficiaries of education compared to the female population.

However, in developed countries we see improvements in equality and in the removal of barriers of any kind meant to increase participation of people with disabilities in schools and society.

As stated before, when talking about disability, we have two ways of approaching this concept, accepted by specialists: the medical model and the social model. (Manea, 2006).

The medical model emphasizes individual loss or disability, due to a medical problem, considering that the difficulties of people with disabilities are due to their biological and psychological inferiority. According to the medical model, the problem of disability is related only to the person concerned, who is inactive due to his / her deficiencies and who needs medical interventions in order to recover the necessary skills to adapt to environmental requirements. One of the moral dilemmas that arises is that of other people's interventions, which are usually without disabilities, in the lives of people with disabilities. They can decide, for example, what school a disabled person should attend, what kind of support he or she should receive, where he or she has to live, whether or not he is allowed to reproduce (Campbel & Oliver , 1996).

On the other hand, the social model comes with a humanistic perspective in understanding disability, taking into account the social environment in which disability manifests itself. The model blames society when it comes to incapacity and disabilities of a person with a medical problem. Manea (2006) considers that "interventions focus on the environment, aiming at the elimination of restrictions, barriers that impede the participation of people with disabilities in various aspects of social life" (p.2).

Beyond the "treatments" proposed by the medical model, which focuses exclusively on impairment and disability, the social model takes into account the client system, with all the interactions between the person concerned and other people, organizations, and society.

The disability theories attempt to explain the phenomenon and to bring understanding in its approach by society. Thus, one of the most well-known theories in the area of disability is the social model of disability discrimination based on the disability paradigm (Pfeiffer, 2001; Barns & Oliver, 1993). This model suggests that the study of experience of people with disabilities focuses on several variables that have negative effects on disabilities and interact with each other as well as other human characteristics. In the field of disability studies there are at least nine interpretations or versions of the disability paradigm: the social constructionist version as found in the United States; the social model version as found in the United Kingdom; the impairment version; the oppressed minority (political) version; the

independent living version; the post-modern (post- structuralist, humanist, experiential, existential) version; the continuum version; the human variation version, and the discrimination version. (Pfeiffer, 2001, apud Pfeiffer, 2002).

Another explicative theory of the phenomenon of disability is symbolic interactionism, through Bordieu, who brings forth the concept of habitus and the understanding of the body as a bearer of value in society. The body and its social location are interdependent and body control is essential to obtaining status and distinction (Bourdieu, 2000).

In this theoretical and legislative context, there are several strategies for people with disabilities.

Thus, we have the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020¹ whose overall objective is to provide people with disabilities the opportunity to enjoy full rights and to participate in European social and economic life. To achieve this goal, eight main areas of action have been identified: accessibility, participation, equality, employment, education and training, social protection, health, and external action.

Another strategy was adopted in 2015, namely the national strategy "A barrier-free society for people with disabilities" (http://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/Proiecte_in_dezbatere/2015/2015-10-08-proiecthg-strateg-diz-anexa1.pdf) which aims at employment and accessibility of disabled people to an inclusive work environment, while ensuring access to support services to increase employability.

We must note that all the strategies lead to one common goal: the education and social integration through education of people with disabilities.

Studies point out that people with disabilities are disadvantaged and marginalized in the labor market in all European countries, a fact which is reflected by lower participation rates, higher levels of unemployment and lower levels of education than the rest of the population (Greve , 2009).

Inclusive education is defined as the type of education open for all children, starting from kindergartens, schools, training centers to universities and other educational systems.

The education of children with special educational needs should be in line with their development needs by properly assessing the learning / development potential and by ensuring rehabilitation - recovery and compensation for learning deficiencies, disorders or difficulties. Inclusive education involves individualized learning, which means selecting those strategies and learning tasks that facilitate the student's learning progress, also enhancing individual resources, depending on age, individual needs, pace of development, learning style and type of intelligence.

¹ (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52010DC0636&from=LV>)

Inclusive education is an alternative to special education, which allows child support services to provide real opportunities for recovery and reintegration for children who would have otherwise been targeted by special schools. For school and social integration of children with SEN, holistic, multi-level action should be taken, at the biological, psychological, and social levels. Also, it should not be forgotten that inclusive education is a circular relationship between school, family and community.

Methodological framework

This paper is a part of a broader project that is centered on the theme of the itinerant teacher-pawn integration of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools and it presents aspects regarding the organization of educational support services for children, students and young people with special educational needs in mainstream schools in accordance with the Romanian law.

Our project meets the needs of the local community, taking into account that managers, teachers, pupils and parents, all are increasingly confronted with the diversity of the types of integrated pupils as a result of national integration policies.

The training of teachers is one of the most important pillars in the integration of all those involved in education, being a way to optimize service organizations. Teacher training must respond to the real and complex needs of the beneficiaries, based on exploratory learning.

The overall objective is to develop a training program involving exploratory itinerant teachers, coherent policies for national and European social development in order to optimize the integration of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools.

The specific objectives are: to identify the perceptions and attitudes of school managers, teachers, students, parents and various local community representatives on the integration of children with SEN in the mainstream school.

Designing a training program for itinerant teachers; impact analysis and monitoring itinerant teacher training program.

School managers, teachers, students, as well as their parents are faced with increasingly frequent attempts to integrate a diversity of pupils as a result of integration policies at national and European level. Educational needs of disabled people require special attention. It is necessary to take steps to ensure access to education for each category of disabled person as part of the education system.

Regarding the methodology, we used data collection methods, such as social document study and focus groups, on the one hand with specialists like the itinerant teachers, but also with indirect beneficiaries, pupils aged between 10 and 14 years.

An integrated and tailored approach is needed for children with SEN (special educational needs). Focus groups organized with primary school and gymnasium children, as well as with support teachers, revealed a number of adaptation issues

from both sides (pupils with SEN and normal students). On the other hand, itinerant teachers are assaulted by a series of organizational problems and it becomes impossible to provide support and assistance to children with special needs who are growing in number.

In the following, we will present the results of the SWOT analysis of the Itinerant Teacher Training Program, developed following the analysis of the qualitative data described in the methodology.

Findings and discussions

Related to our project we had a workshop attended by a large number of itinerant teachers (about 30). The participants worked in teams and conducted some SWOT analyses on the socio-educational system of children with SEN in Romanian schools.

The discussions proved to be amazing and lead to some very interesting conclusions.

The SWOT analysis revealed that the teachers unanimously appreciate the existence of a well-established legal framework regarding the access of children with SENs to mainstream schools in mass school. By integrating children with SENs, they have models, they copy the behaviors from other children and thus gradually learn to behave and adapt to everyday life.

Itinerant teachers consider that the existing Romanian legislation is in accordance with the needs of children with SENs, thus benefiting from financial support.

They also consider that there is a specialized human resource, even if there are not enough itinerant teachers, but the professors unanimously stated that working with these special pupils is a very rewarding experience.

The professors appreciate the existence of a curriculum and an evaluation method adapted for pupils with SENs.

The discussions revealed that itinerant teachers working with children with SEN built a long-lasting relationship both with them, and with their parents.

The participant at the focus-groups acknowledged that there are many Romanian NGOs which support children with SENs.

The itinerant teachers consider that the existing Romanian legislation is in accordance with the needs of children with SENs.

The itinerant teachers have underlined that a strong point is also the fact that there are training programs to specialize them in the specific problems of children with SENs.

The WEAKNESSES mentioned by the itinerant professors were as follows:

The reality shows a high number of children with SENs and on the other hand an insufficient number of teachers who have limited time (just one hour) to deal/counsel one child per week.

Even though there are a lot of itinerant professors enrolled in working with children with SEN, there is however a general lack of human resources, for instance, a lack of specialists in speech therapy, physiotherapy and so on. The professors believed that the reduced number is due to the low number of candidates on the one hand, but also due to the low interest in working as a teacher (the salary being quite small in the budgetary Romanian system).

Another important aspect stressed by the itinerant teachers is the necessity of a better involvement of the team of specialists in the evaluation process of the children with SEN for a correct framing (and not by IQ tests).

Unfortunately in the Romanian mainstream school there are still teachers in mass schools that do not understand the importance of working differently with children with SENs and they ask for the same demands and common evaluations with the other pupils from the mass class; still, those professors see the SEN pupils as "a burden" for the entire educational system.

Another weak point would be the need for curricular adaptation depending on the level of children's ESCs, having regard that at present teachers have to explain what they teach in mass schools and do not have a separate curriculum; in other words, the purpose of the education should be focusing on the perception of children with SEN.

It is obvious that at the Romanian national level, there are no subjects adapted to pupils with ESCs, for example, at the Baccalaureate exams, pupils with SEN extra time to solve the problems and they have the possibility to be supported in writing if they have vision problems.

The focus-groups revealed that there is a lack of equipment and material resources especially in schools in small towns and also a lack of training for school principals as well as for teachers in mass schools for them to better understand the particularities of pupils with SEN and to better integrate them.

The SWOT analysis pointed out some opportunities such as services free of charge for children with SEN and the emphasis on the individualistic strategies which is in the benefit of children with SEN. During that past few years, many projects have been registered and NGOs came to meet and integrate children with SEN while also offering complementary services. The itinerant teachers appreciate the importance of workshops, training courses and conferences dedicated to these children with issues, although they seldom take place in Romania.

Over the last decade, Romania harmonized internal regulations and now there is a comprehensive legal framework in matters related to the European legislation, but also international legislation which protects the rights of these special children.

Finally, the main important threats resulted from those focus-groups are as follows: Many pupils with SEN drop out of the school and hence, there are little chances of adaptation and integration into society of those in the next future. On the other hand, because of these children's drop-out, future adults can become a real danger to society.

The reality shows that the special education system in Romania isn't focused on the products of the activity. Frequently, children with SENs have to repeat the classes because they cannot even read or write and eventually they abandon school.

The itinerant professors admitted that some repeated transfers between schools have been registered because these pupils with SEN are not accepted by the pupils in the mainstream schools or by the teachers. They cannot integrate themselves and they do not feel comfortable thus, dropping out of mainstream schools.

The same itinerant professors recognized that there is some confusion among teachers about the role of the itinerant teachers (for example, curricular adaptation), their job description.

Another vulnerability is related to the reduced professional integration of these children with SEN at the end of the school, usually, employers avoid to hire them because of the less level of performance in the companies, although they may have some substantial tax breaks.

Conclusions

As we previously mentioned in the theoretical framework, the approach to inclusive education must be an integrated and holistic one that embraces the individual, one's family, one's community, and society.

We notice that the educational system for children with disabilities is still in development. If at the legislative and institutional level, things seem to evolve and work, we cannot say the same about applying inclusive education. There are still barriers, regarding the individual, families, communities, as well as organizational barriers.

Unfortunately, nowadays in Romania, pupils with SENs have a "tolerated status" they do not fully benefit from the idea of inclusion in its true meaning.

Teachers we have spoken to stressed that the change should occur primarily among teachers in their thinking and approach, so the prospects can be positive in terms of inclusion of these extraordinary children.

Family, parents have an extremely important role and they should be given the emotional support, besides the material one, that is not always so important.

Aside from the fact that these systems that need to work together in order to truly achieve inclusive education, there is a need for more training programs for itinerant teachers. The program described in the article is the first one in Brasov County. The

need for training for itinerant teachers is high and it is necessary to develop continuous training programs for them so that they can truly provide an inclusive education to children with SENs.

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