World Lumen Congress 2021 | May 26-30, 2021 |
Iasi, Romania

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<https://doi.org/10.18662/wlc2021/54>

How to cite: Onet, R. (2021). Perspectives on Socio-Educational Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs. In A. Sandu (vol. ed.), *Lumen Proceedings: Vol. 17 World Lumen Congress 2021* (pp. 533-541). Iasi, Romania: LUMEN Publishing House. <https://doi.org/10.18662/wlc2021/54>

Perspectives on Socio-Educational Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs

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Abstract

The socio-educational inclusion of children with special educational needs is an insufficiently explored topic in Romania, despite the fact that we are part of many international organizations that support human rights and an increasing number of nationally ratified conventions. This paper aims to capture the perception and attitude of teachers on the rights and possibilities of these children to integrate into mainstream education, identifying obstacles and possible solutions. The study was conducted through an opinion poll and a focus group with the participation of teachers from mainstream education units.

The main conclusions show that regular education will not be able to integrate children with special educational needs, in the absence of differentiated teaching/ learning, programs and assessments tailored to the specifics of each child, a thorough training of teachers and support of specialized staff, parents and community .

Keywords: *special educational needs, socio-educational integration, disability, children.*

1. Introduction

Special educational needs (SEN) encompass a wide range of conditions that include the physical, mental, cognitive factor and educational deficiencies. Children with SEN are defined as children who face learning difficulties or school integration, which prevents them from being able to benefit from the general education system without support or accommodation to their needs.

In general, children with special educational needs were segregated in separate educational settings, facing additional obstacles to integration into mainstream education related to discrimination, poverty and social exclusion, the lack of preparation of the mainstream education to ensure the educational inclusion of children with SEN.

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Considering the rights of all children to quality education, equal opportunities and educational inclusion, the paper is looking for answers to the following questions: what is the attitude towards children with SEN, rights versus marginalization, what are the reasons for choosing mainstream education instead of special education, what are the factors underlying learning difficulties, what are the possible solutions for schooling children with SEN?

The study aims to capture the perception and attitude of teachers on the rights and opportunities of children with special educational needs to integrate into mainstream education, also to investigate the obstacles faced by children with SEN in the mainstream education system and the possible alternatives for their socio-educational integration.

The methodology used in conducting this study includes the analysis of strategic documents, reports and statistical data available internationally and nationally, quantitative research through the application of a questionnaire, and qualitative research through the organization of a focus group. A questionnaire was used to collect the information, applied to a number of 42 teachers from mainstream education in Maramureș County, between December 2019 and March 2020. At the same time, a focus group was organized with the participation of 12 teachers from mainstream education, to capture qualitative issues regarding the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. The teachers involved in this research work in mainstream schools (secondary school and high school) from urban area, a percentage of 88% of them having in their class children with different special educational needs: learning disabilities (24%), mental or intellectual disabilities (22%), behavioral disorders (21%), physical or motor deficiencies (13%), sensory deficiencies (10%), accentuated language disorders (8%) and others.

2. General strategic framework

The inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education has received increasing support and an international dimension over the last 20 years. The UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) was the first international document calling for the recognition of the right to inclusive education, according to which mainstream schools should accommodate each child with his or her personal skills and learning needs, a principle enshrined in numerous international policy documents. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), established in 1996, considers an "inclusive framework" the education in which the student with SEN attends

school in mainstream classes alongside their peers for the largest part - 80% or more - of the school week (European Commission, 2018, pp 3).

At European level, inclusive education is promoted on the educational agenda, with an emphasis on accessibility, adapting the curriculum to the needs of students with disabilities or providing training to teachers in the field of inclusive education. EASNIE defined inclusive education as "the provision of high-quality education in schools that value the rights, equality, access and participation of all learners" (European Commission, 2018, pp 3).

In Romania, according to the National Education Law no. 1/2011 with subsequent amendments and completions, children / students / young people with SEN can be educated either in special education units, or by integrating them in mainstream education units, within special or individual education groups / classes.

According to national legislation, children, pupils and young people with special educational needs, integrated into mainstream education, benefit from educational support through support and itinerant teachers, on a case-by-case basis.

3. Poverty and social exclusion

According to Save the Children (2014), in Europe, almost 27 million children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Poverty and social exclusion among children with disabilities, including the SEN, must be addressed from the perspective of both the rights of the child and the rights of persons with disabilities. Education creates the premises for combating poverty and developing inclusive societies.

According to the report of the National Institute of Statistics (2019), the relative poverty rate in Romania was 23.8% in 2019, estimated based on the total disposable income, excluding the value of consumption from the household's own resources. The highest incidence of poverty was recorded between 2016-2019 among young people aged 18-24 and children up to 18 years, about 3 out of 10 of them were below the poverty line, well above the levels corresponding to adults. Poverty is more common among people living in households with dependent children (in 2019 it reached 26.4%), than in the case of those living in households without children (20.4% in 2019). All children aged 0-17 are considered dependent children.

According to Save the Children (2014), children growing up in poverty can be negatively affected throughout their lives. The phenomenon refers not only to the non-fulfillment of basic needs, but also to the lack of

access to quality care services, as well as to the exclusion felt in relationships with other children of similar ages. The future chances of children growing up in poverty can be severely affected.

In families with a child with disabilities, the risk of poverty is higher. Children with disabilities are put in difficulty by the complexity of the problems they face, being in danger of social exclusion. Thus, they encounter difficulties related to health status, accessibility to services, school and social integration, discrimination.

People with disabilities, young or old, have equal rights to be included in the community. According to European Commission (2021), at European level 28.4% of people with disabilities are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, compared to 18.4% of people without disabilities.

In Romania, according to the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoptions (2020), out of the total number of people with disabilities, a percentage of 8.47% are children aged 0-17 years. The number of children with disabilities in the family (uninstitutionalized) on 31.12.2020 amounts to 73,274 children. As of December 31, 2020, the rate of people with disabilities in Romania's population was 3.87%, with the highest values in the regions: South-West Oltenia 4.98%, South Muntenia 4.36% and North-West 4.23 %. The number of persons with disabilities as of December 31, 2020 in the North West Region was 119,649 persons, of which 9,013 children, higher values being registered in Maramures counties with 20,361 persons, of which 2,381 children; Cluj with 28,808 people, of which 2,334 children; Bihor with 20,830 people, of which 1,375 children.

In Maramures county, in 2020 there were registered, depending on the degree of disability: 53 - mild, 2,236- medium, 2,020- severe, 385- accentuated; with a school orientation certificate -739 children were included in the records of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection Maramures (2020).

4. The educational system for SEN

Many young people with disabilities leave school early and few complete a university degree. Many children and young people with disabilities are enrolled in special schools, which do not always provide effective bridges to the mainstream education system, continued training, or the labor market (European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, pp 18).

According to Carpenter (2005), approximately 800 million children and young people worldwide are affected by biological, environmental and psychosocial conditions that can limit their cognitive development. Recent estimates in Europe show that the number of children with SEN amounts to 15 million, according to the European Commission (2012).

The number of students with SEN integrated in mainstream education in the 2018-2019 school year was 35,667 people, increasing compared to the previous school year, according to data from the Ministry of Education and Research (2019). The same data specify that, in Maramures County, the number of students with SEN in the 2017-2018 school year was 1,144 children, with a number of 25 support teachers, while in the 2018-2019 school year there were 525 children, with 29 teachers support.

Data of the Maramures County Resource and Educational Assistance Center (2020) shows that in the school year 2019-2020 there are a number of 784 children for whom certificates of school and professional orientation were issued, of which 77.4% were in mainstream education and 22.6% in special education. Of the 607 children with SEN in mainstream education, 557 children received educational support services, 10 children were educated at home and 40 children were kept in kindergarten over the legal age. Of the 177 children with SEN in special education, only 13 were educated at home / hospital. In the county there are 5 mass education units for children with SEN, of which 4 inclusive education centers and 1 general school. In the official report for 2020, the data provided indicates the number of support teachers is insufficient at the county level.

5. The main difficulties of socio-educational integration and possible alternatives

Research participants believe that the families of children with SEN enroll their child in regular education in order to respect their right to an equal opportunity with other children (37%). According to the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (2021), people with disabilities have the right to participate in all levels and forms of education, including education and early care on an equal basis with others.

Another reason invoked by the research participants for the enrollment by the family of the child with SEN in the regular school is the chance to have increased possibilities of integration in society (34% of respondents), given that their inclusion in mainstream education can maximize their learning experiences, assimilate the daily life model and establish appropriate interpersonal relationships. The *Convention on the Rights*

of Persons with Disabilities recognizes their right to live in the community as equal citizens, presenting a "social model of disability", which emphasizes the role of attitudinal and environmental barriers in preventing the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in society on an equal basis with others.

From a historical point of view, the attitude towards people with disabilities has been one of segregation, isolation and exclusion from society. In the perception of the participants in the present research, the society shows towards children with SEN the tendency of isolation (22% of the respondents), ignorance (20% of the respondents) and social rejection (9% of the respondents). According to European Network on Independent Living (2017), awareness-raising activities are needed to address negative stereotypes and discrimination against people with disabilities, in order to promote an understanding of disability from a human rights perspective.

In contrast, positive attitudes towards children with SEN, such as acceptance, tolerance and support are present in most teachers participating in the study. A large proportion of teachers (80%) believe that although children with special educational needs have the right to learn in a regular school, there are a number of factors that underlie learning difficulties, such as their limited intellectual potential. important (20%) and very important (30%). In order to keep children with SEN in education, it is necessary to allocate specialists to support the teacher in the classroom, such as support staff or a psychologist.

From the perspective of teachers, an aspect considered important (28%) and very important (24%), which affects the school integration of children with SEN, is the lack of individualized teaching / learning in mainstream education.

Other obstacles encountered by children with SEN, considered important (30%) and very important (30%) from the perspective of respondents, are the lack of interest of parents towards them. In this context, the school's collaboration with the families of children with special educational needs becomes very important, in the opinion of 88% of those surveyed.

Teachers consider that the degree of success of a child with special educational needs in mainstream schools is medium and low, identifying as the possible cause of their marginalization or exclusion in mainstream school the inability to cope with school requirements and various forms of school failure. It is worth mentioning aspects related to the reduced understanding of the needs of these children, due to the lack of experience of the teachers.

In the opinion of most of the surveyed teachers, the main solution for the schooling of children with special educational needs is their

placement in special classes in regular schools (33%). However, some of the respondents (28%) had a more nuanced approach, considering that, depending on each case and specific educational needs, their integration can be done either in special schools or in regular schools. In lower percentages, some teachers were in favor of special education (24%) or mass education (15%).

In addition to the above-mentioned aspects, the teachers stated in the focus group the fact that students with special needs should have in the mainstream schools the possibility of an adapted, specific school program, along with a differentiated teaching/ learning and an individualized evaluation, depending on the particularities of each child. At the same time, they considered that in addition to the teacher / class teacher, in order to help the student with SEN, a support teacher and psychologist would be needed. Their proposals included the training/ specialization of teachers, the adaptation of the school curriculum, the elimination of the examination of these students in their current form, the change of educational policies.

Others have opined that when we want to integrate a child into mainstream education we must not minimize the special requirements of the student and we must not ask the teacher to lower the level of requirements for that class for a child. The current learning system does not physically allow the teacher to allocate differentiated learning and teaching time to some subjects and profiles.

On the other hand, there were teachers who considered that, in order to have a chance, children with special educational needs should be directed to special schools and educated by specialized and trained staff, as in ordinary schools teachers do not have this training.

It was concluded that the inclusion, social integration and education of these children with special needs requires solidarity between institutions and people, compassion, unconditional respect for the human person and non-discrimination.

6. Conclusions

From the perspective of teachers participating in research, in Romania the education system is not prepared for the implementation of inclusive education, due to lack of experience in managing the needs of children with SEN, lack of specialized training, lack of an adapted program and differentiated teaching and evaluation of children with SEN, lack of support from specialists such as support teachers and psychologists. Many

respondents advocated for the education of children with SEN in segregated classrooms.

The development of an inclusive educational environment is likely to provide equal opportunities in education for each child, regardless of his or her learning, participation and development opportunities. It seems necessary to adapt the education system to the level of each child and to implement student-centered education, as a principle that presupposes that each child is unique, with his specific and particular needs.

The elements that can ensure the implementation of this principle are ensuring a specific training of teachers and specialized staff for children with special educational needs enrolled in mainstream schools, specialized family assistance, services provided by the community. At the same time, it is important to spread the principle of non-discrimination among teachers, students, the community in general and the involvement of parents, institutions and the community in supporting and socio-educational integration of children with special educational needs.

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