

Practical Aspects regarding the School and Social Integration of Children with Special Educational Needs. Difficulties and Pedagogical Solutions

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Abstract: The social integration of people with special needs is a complex and ever-present process, and school plays a key role in this. In practice, the social integration process is facilitated by the inclusion of children with special educational needs in school, given the micro-society structure of the school. Adapted communication, awareness of differences but also of potential, training and practice of social skills contribute to the development of adaptive capacity, to the identification and exploitation of means of integration into society. From this perspective, the role of teachers is multifaceted, with some of them facing difficulties, as shown in the research presented in this article. In mainstream education, school inclusion activities may be perceived with varying degrees of difficulty, but pedagogical solutions are benchmarks in their management.

Keywords: School inclusion; social integration; differentiation; individualization; communication

1. Introduction. The issue of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream education

In a competitive world, where performance is often associated with overachievement, the efforts of students with additional needs, or of the teachers who work with these children, can seem academically irrelevant. Special educational needs, reflected in a wide range of needs arising either from certain disabilities or from the developmental effects of disadvantaged social backgrounds, require equally diverse, adapted and individualised teaching and communication approaches. In mainstream education, teachers need to apply their information, skills and vocation in the most productive way possible to the inclusion of pupils with SEN in school. This is not always easy, as there are many factors that contribute to success, from differentiated teaching strategies, curriculum processing, to the psychosocial climate in the classroom and communication with families. The results are sometimes slow, progress is made in small steps, which can demotivate both teachers and students. The social pressure of achievement, understood as a result quantified in high grades or

participation in scientific competitions, can also be an inhibiting factor for school motivation for students with SEN.

In reality, in many cases, the efforts to make the small steps forward that are so important for children's development are very significant. School success is far from being a simple measure of what is generically referred to as achievement, i.e. a result that propels the student into an elite world. The factors that contribute to the perception of success at school can be very different from one situation to another, but all include a certain amount of subjectivity, centred around a few general benchmarks: the definition of success as a favourable outcome of an action, correlated with social recognition and appreciation confirming value; the imprint of a certain type of collective mentality, according to which success can only mean an outcome specific to the population capable of achievement to high standards; the level of aspiration (individual, family). Success at school must therefore be related to individual potential and previous results, because for some children with SEN, achievement means any acquisition with added value, any skill gained for better social integration.

For practising social skills and realistic perception of the world, the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education is a very appropriate way. Moreover, European and national policies support this approach. Both children with disabilities and typical children discover from an early age that differences between people exist, but that this reality harms no one, and that normal children can better appreciate the real potential of children with special needs (Gherguț, 2018, p. 113). Difficulties arise because the integration of these children is a multifactorial process, targeting the following three levels: biological, with reference to physical, morphological and biochemical maturation; psychological, by stimulating continuous, ascending, progressive, dynamic functionalities; social, with emphasis on behaviours according to the pedagogical, professional and civic standards of the community in which they are (Taraș, 2020). Educational practice in an inclusive school means that it must change, adapting to the needs of the students, not making them observe predefined demands, expectations and standards. Although many years have passed since the Salamanca Statement and both research and practice in the field have multiplied and evolved, the issue of student with special educational needs in mainstream education is still topical in Romania, for at least three reasons: the social perception of the idea of success, the diversity of nuances and manifestations of disabilities or maladaptive behaviours, difficult to manage in large classes, and the difficulties of some schools in identifying, processing and harnessing resources to become truly inclusive. Teachers may therefore feel discouraged in a society that is, in principle, open to diversity but,

somewhat paradoxically, less willing to accept that success can also belong to those who do not perform above average. The prospect of more difficult social integration, based on the question: what will happen to these young people after they graduate from compulsory education, is daunting. Despite inclusion-oriented policies and the progress seen in recent years at societal level, integration efforts are certainly greater for people with special needs. On the other hand, differentiation and individualisation of learning, as teaching mechanisms designed to meet additional educational needs, are difficult to implement in the teaching process if teachers do not have all the necessary levers, if they do not feel supported with resources of time, training and specialists. Therefore, it is necessary to consider organizational, scientific and methodological issues of involvement in inclusive education, develop measures for training and professional development of specialists (Sadikovna et al., 2023).

In terms of activities that support school inclusion, some of the professional competences of teachers are: didactic communication, management of behavioural problems, differentiation and/or individualisation of the educational process, curricular adaptation, collaboration with people from the students' home environment and other specialists involved in the remedial-therapeutic process, as appropriate. This highlights the complex issue of children with SEN in mainstream education, which is not always easy to address in the context of the need and efforts for inclusion.

2. Research methodology, purpose and objectives

The hypothesis that prompted me to carry out this observational study was that, given the complexity of the problems faced by children with SEN in mainstream education, teachers face difficulties and need practical psycho-pedagogical guidelines. My aim was to investigate teachers' perceptions of the accessibility of school inclusion for students with SEN. The objectives of the research, derived from this aim, were, on the one hand, to measure the level of difficulty perceived by teachers for a series of activities with a role in school inclusion and, on the other hand, to synthesize pedagogical solutions that can be adapted and applied in mainstream education in order to provide educational support for children with additional needs.

Using the questionnaire survey method, we conducted the research in June 2023 on a sample of 70 teachers who either had children with special educational needs in their classrooms at the time of the research or had worked with students in this category in the past. The questionnaire was structured on the basis of a single item: *Rate the degree of difficulty of the following activities that you have to carry out in order to include students with*

SEN in school, which, however, concerned five types of activities associated with the professional competences mentioned in the introduction: didactic communication adapted to the needs and understanding capacity, managing behavioural problems of some students, differentiation and/or individualisation of the teaching-learning-assessment process, adaptation of the curriculum to the development potential of the student with SEN and collaboration with people in the student's home environment (biological family, foster family, etc. Each activity was rated in terms of difficulty on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - not at all difficult, 5 - very difficult).

3. Results and discussion. Pedagogical solutions

The results obtained following the administration of the questionnaire confirmed with statistical data, in the sample investigated, the hypothesis from which we started. Certainly, the teachers face certain obstacles, but the percentages also reflect an adaptation of some of them to the problems of students with SEN, as well as an experience of working with children in this category. The perceived level of difficulty for each category of activities is as follows:

Results

Table 1

Activity	Rate of difficulty				
	1	2	3	4	5
Didactic communication tailored to needs and comprehension skills	2,9%	12,9%	40%	37,1%	7,1%
Managing behavioural problems of some students	1,4%	5,7%	34,3%	37,1%	21,4%
Differentiation and/or individualisation of the teaching-learning-assessment process	7,1%	14,3%	34,3%	32,9%	11,4%
Adapting the curriculum to the developmental potential of students with SEN	4,3%	20%	28,6%	35,7%	11,4%
Working with the people in the student's home environment (biological family, foster family, etc.)	5,7%	22,9%	38,6%	24,3%	8,6%

We found that the teachers participating in the study believe that the greatest degree of difficulty lies in managing the behavioural problems of some students with SEN, and that the most accessible activity is the one that does not actually involve direct interaction with the students, but with their families. Also, of note are the significant percentages of choice for

level 4 out of 5 of difficulty, which means that teachers may generally need support and resources in the approaches they take. The percentages illustrating the absence of difficulties, although low, nevertheless demonstrate the existence of skills and experiences that favour the inclusion process without major obstacles. We also found that activities that are part of the core professional responsibilities, namely educational communication, differentiation of instruction and curricular adaptation, were rated in higher percentages as not difficult at all, compared to managing behavioural problems that often require additional skills, support and collaboration with specialists. One explanation, confirmed in educational practice, for the high level of difficulty perceived by respondents is the difficult adaptation to the multitude of behavioural characteristics, individualities and learning styles in a class, especially where the group includes students with SEN. In fact, teachers often try to make the same subject interesting for different students, are willing to talk to parents, but are caught between a rigid educational process and a variety of human beings (Senge et al., 2016, p. 55).

Given these findings, we summarise some general pedagogical solutions to support teachers in schools that are or need to become inclusive. Of course, they are not universally binding, as special needs are unique to each individual and the educational process must be based on a set of characteristics, functionalities, limitations and potentials of each child. First of all, the teaching approach requires adaptation to the learning profile, i.e. to the totality of abilities and limitations that characterise the student's potential. Some of these can be ascertained from the teacher's direct observations and assessments, while others are identified in the results of specific assessments carried out by other specialists: psychopedagogues, psychologists, doctors, etc. However, a functional assessment of the behaviour of a child with SEN has a high degree of complexity and includes both a complete description based on multiple observations, at different times and in different environments, the effects of these behaviours and the possible resources in the child's behaviour and acquisitions, which can be subsequently exploited (Gherguț, 2011, p. 17). Focusing on the learner, through differentiation and individualization, is effective if it is adapted to the characteristics of the learning profile. Although successful experiences and best practices are always useful for teachers who want to improve, they are rarely equally appropriate in every classroom situation. So, adaptation is the key term and action for successful activities. Differentiation of instruction can be achieved, depending on the child's needs, abilities, and limitations, through process, content, product, and learning environment (Tomlinson, 2017), each of which using varying

ways of approach. Learner-centredness does not necessarily mean directing the teacher's attention solely to the student with SEN during a lesson sequence or lesson. If the teaching strategy ensures that elements of the learning profile can be used for several students in the class, or even for the whole class, the conditions for student-centredness are created. Another important aspect of educational intervention is motivation for learning, given that for most children with SEN this can be low, difficult to train in intrinsic resorts. Some of them do not have or are not aware that they have cognitive interests, as various explorations (formal and non-formal) are needed in order to identify gaps that can trigger the will to learn. Moreover, for children with special educational needs, the satisfaction of autonomy is less important than the satisfaction of competence and the relationship with the teacher (Loopers et al., 2023). In these circumstances, triggering and sustaining motivation to learn depends on valuing preferences and mistakes, on trusting the teacher, rather than on excessive preoccupation with assimilation of learning achievements and avoiding underachievement. If the idea of school success is associated with individual progress and not with certain socially assimilated standards, motivational strategies are optimised. It should be noted that appropriate motivation, followed by satisfactory results, can help to reduce the behavioural problems that some students with SEN display.

4. Conclusions

School inclusion is an important process for achieving the broader goal of social inclusion, but it is not always easy for teachers. The difficulties they encounter in teaching students with special educational needs can be overcome with considerable effort, as the problems of these children are complex and each situation is unique. As teachers in mainstream education are not therapists, can only work towards school inclusion at an educational level, by adapting communication and teaching strategies to the student's learning profile. In some cases, they are part of a team of specialists working together to support and help the child's recovery, and mutual support becomes very important. The fact that there are also teachers who find school inclusion activities not at all difficult or not very difficult indicates that there are successful experiences which should be disseminated and built on through new adaptation approaches. As inclusive schools are characterised by flexibility and adaptability, the development of teachers' professional skills to optimise activities for students with SEN remains a current target, open to new research and approaches. Each step forward (individual success) contributes to facilitating the social adaptation of people with special needs, a very important factor for an autonomous and satisfying life.

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