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The Socio-Cultural Context of the Integration of Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Schools

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Abstract: *A frequently encountered speech at the level of educational policies is related to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. The expected results, for disabled children, would be related to the reduction of discrimination and prejudices, the chance to offer a better education, to develop their socialization, etc. but the benefits would also extend to the other children, through sensitization, more empathic and informational, nuance of perceptions. Despite these advantages, the integration takes place at a slow pace, with multiple oppositions and resistances from the interested factors, with a reduced compliance and a lack of synchronization of the action of the decision-makers; the most frequent reasons cited are: insufficient training of teaching staff for special education, the demand/rejection by the parents of majority children of the idea of inclusion that would alter their children's performance, the heterogeneity of the children's functioning rhythms which would overburden the teachers, absorbing part of educational energy etc. The current study aims to evaluate the attitudinal context of the future specialists (social workers and teaching staff) towards the integration problem, the degree of perceived educational efficiency, the responsibilities assigned by them to the decision-makers involved. The expected results are the externalization of responsibilities to the central decision-making factors (school inspectorate, NGOs), the overestimation of the role of teachers and parents and non-involvement of groups of children in integrative activities.*

Keywords: *integration, disability, attitude, social rejection.*

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Education for all presupposes, as a starting principle, personalized attention to the characteristics of each person, to his abilities and vulnerabilities, and then against the background of a generalized educational design, the inclusion of specific elements in the approach to training and information, the general meaning of any education being that of growth in all aspects of personality - cognitive, affective, autonomy, social, etc. - and self-development (Rodrigueza & Garro-Gila, 2015). In the case of children with disabilities, their analysis from a strictly biological and psychological perspective, with the neglect of other coordinates/ potentials/ needs, generates a negative social construct of disability, with the implicit reduction of the chances of self-development, with developments towards exclusion and social isolation.

According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), psychological - cognitive, moral, social development (also valid for people with disabilities) is the result of dynamic and natural interactions of some environmental factors/social factors, structured on five levels in permanent mutual interaction. The differences between these levels relate to the proximity of the interaction and assumed responsibilities, the degree of generality and stability of the social environments involved, ranked as follows: from direct influences - family, school, friends, neighbourhoods (elements of the microsystem), followed by the way in which the components of the microsystem interact with each other (the mesosystem) towards the social influences exerted on the previous levels by the social structures without direct contact with the individual - e.g. the characteristics of the workplace of the parents of a child with disabilities (the exosystem) to the distal influences – social customs, cultural norms, government policies that set the standards and imprint the way of functioning of the mentioned subsystems (the macrosystem) all bearing the mark of the time/era coordinate in which the individual is located (chronosystem).

The efficiency of the integration of a disabled person largely depends on the degree of articulation, synchronization and coherence of the attitudes and actions of these levels. The present work proposes an analysis of the coherence of social subsystems as a premise for building a socio-cultural environment with a high degree of inclusiveness with the capture of points of discontinuity that need to be compensated for facilitating inclusion.

1. Analysis of the school integration of children with disabilities from the perspective of the chronosystem level

a. The current state of affairs – statistics on the incidence of disabilities.

The number of people with disabilities has increased dramatically, with over a billion people having some form of disability (World Health Organisation, 2021). Of these, 87 million people with disabilities live in Europe (European Commission, 2021a, p. 4). Persons with disabilities "include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (United Nations, 2006, pp. 4). These persons face "considerable barriers in access to healthcare, education, employment, recreation activities, as well as in participation in political life" (European Commission, 2021a, p. 4).

According to Carpenter (2005), "approximately 800 million young children worldwide are affected by biological, environmental and psychosocial conditions that can limit their cognitive development". The estimated number of children with special educational needs (SEN) in Europe raised at 15 million (European Commission, 2012, p. 1).

Special needs in education are defined differently in Europe, in the absence of a harmonized system among the member states for the classification of individual learning needs. This is the reason why there are no comparable national data at the European level to substantiate policy positions in ensuring an inclusive education. In their absence, the policies focused on the protection of human rights.

According to the European Parliament (2017, pp. 7-8), "inclusive education aims to promote citizenship and the common values of human rights, freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education". This means equal opportunities in accessing education, without discrimination or social exclusion. Educational inclusion in mainstream education "increases employment opportunities and allows for better community participation and closer personal relationships than segregated settings (Newman et al., 2009)". Through personalized approaches and innovative practices, the education of people with disabilities requires an inclusion model that designs efficient and fair educational systems, able to respond to the diverse needs of students without labelling or dividing them into categories.

b. Data on educational inclusion

According to World Health Organization (2011, pp. 206-208), children with disabilities have lower rates of school participation and remain fewer years in education compared to children without disabilities. Also, "enrolment rates also differ according to impairment type, with children with physical impairment generally faring better than those with intellectual or sensory impairments". The same report shows that in Eastern Europe, the enrolment rates of children with disabilities aged between 7 and 15 years are: "81% in Bulgaria, 58% in the Republic of Moldova, and 59% in Romania, on when children without disabilities were 96%, 97%, respectively 93%".

In Romania, there are several forms of education addressed to children with special educational needs or disabilities (Law no. 1/2011, article 49). Special education is organized in special education units. Integrated special education is organized in mainstream education, by including every preschooler and student with disabilities or special educational requirements in groups, classes or study formations in mainstream education. By exception, special groups/classes with students with disabilities can be organized in mainstream education, with the approval of the county school inspectorate. Other forms include schooling in groups or classes in the health unit for hospitalized children or at home.

The statistics of the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity from the year 2021 show that in Romania there were 78.190 non-institutionalized children with disabilities, of which: 45.272 grade 1 (severe), 10.745 grade 2 (accentuated), 20.041 grade 3 (medium) and 2.132 grade 4 (easy). Depending on the share of children by type of disability, the data show that they have disabilities: 6.8% physical, 23% somatic, 2.5% auditory, 4.25% visual, 13% mental, 23% psychic, 24% associated, 2.5% rare diseases, 0.25% HIV/AIDS and less than 1% deafness.

The Ministry of Education (2021, pp. 17) specifies that students with special educational requirements and/or with disabilities are included in special education and, a part of them, in mainstream education. They can be found at all levels of education and represent 1.8% of the school population included in mainstream education (53,205 students). The distribution by categories is as follows: 43063 students with SEN; 9268 students with disability certificate; 46 students educated in the hospital; 828 home schooled students.

The legal framework for the establishment of support structures/services created by the Ministry of Education (2021, pp. 141-142)

include both the psycho-pedagogical support of the support/itinerant teacher and other services and structures such as: psycho-pedagogical assistance and school and professional guidance services; speech therapy services; assessment services, orientation/reorientation from the special school to the mainstream school and vice versa; school mediation services; consulting services for inclusive education; training services; information and counselling services for teachers, children, parents, as well as for other members of the community; counselling services and prevention of juvenile delinquency and pre delinquency.

In the 2019-2020 school year, 1.429 support teachers, 2.196 school counsellors and 601 speech therapists were employed at the national level, for a number of 43.910 students with SEN and/or disabilities integrated in mainstream education units. Also, in 221 special education units, in the 2019-2020 school year, 24.922 preschoolers and students with various types of disabilities were included (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 86). There are no data on the dropout rate in primary and secondary education for students with SEN, only data on students enrolled in special education (17.2 thousand students at the end of the 2018/2019 school year, of which 98.2% have were declared passed and 1.8% repeaters).

c. The informational and application context related to the integration.

The evolution of special education in the twentieth century gradually makes the transition from exclusion, segregation, integration and, after the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the acceleration of the approach to the process of inclusion in mainstream schools, this being only a stage of transition towards participation in a wide range of future social structures.

Despite the declarative consensus of intention, the rhythms of practical application of inclusion are variable in different educational systems, there are specific resistances to the development of this process, there is a lack of skills to manage many concrete problems, prejudices are manifested in many levels of intervention, there is a disproportion between the emphasis on the cognitive aspect of inclusion (as objectives, methods, efficiency) and the steps implemented for training, etc. Scientifically, the accumulated informational surplus, although consistent, is still in a stage of fragmentation – there are terminological ambiguities and arbitrary uses of the meanings of specialized terms, deficiencies in the holistic approach to the phenomenon of inclusion, the great heterogeneity of case studies makes it difficult to generalize the results obtained, etc..

The topics most frequently accessed in the study of this field are those related to the definition of the concept of inclusion and its coordinates, the effectiveness of inclusion, the social aspects of inclusion (the specific attitudes of the factors involved - teachers, parents, colleagues - the costs it entails (Nilholm, 2021), the skills necessary for teachers, co-teaching, the identification of effective teaching practices for all, etc. However, many topics with a direct impact on inclusion remain insufficiently addressed:

- the necessary educational interventions beyond the strict compensation of their disability (the solutions found are still Manichaean, carried out in terms of either inclusion in mainstream schools or in special schools) as well as interventions that do not strictly address the cognitive register

- assessment of the degree of inclusivity required for each child; the characteristics of a truly inclusive educational environment are little studied,

- there are almost no studies on the dynamics existing in the micro-environments of inclusion contiguity - the relationships between the families of children without disabilities - the students of the class (taken individually or as a group) - the disabled - his family - teaching staff.

2) Integration analysis from the perspective of the macro system

Educational integration policies for children with disabilities

The approaches on the inclusion of children with disabilities focus in the main policy documents on human rights, respectively the rights of children and of people with disabilities. The right to education of all people was defined for the first time in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), then included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It concerns the right of children and young people with disabilities to access educational opportunities under equal conditions with other children, without any discrimination based on disability criteria, or other criteria related to ethnicity, gender, etc. Accessibility is an important principle (United Nations, 2006, p.5) and refers to the accessibility of the physical and built environment, the removal of environmental barriers to participation in general education. Ensuring a quality education and support in an inclusive framework is considered as offering opportunities to people with disabilities to be included in mainstream education.

The Salamanca Declaration (1994, pp. viii) and its action plan proclaimed in articles 1-2 that "every child has the fundamental right to

education" and access to the regular education system, "using pedagogical methods centered on the child", according to the "characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs". Also, "the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning" is sustained by European Commission (2017).

According to European Commission (2021b, p. 16-18), there are gaps in ensuring equal opportunities and treatment in education. Many young people with disabilities leave school early (20.3%, compared to 9.8% of young people without disabilities), and very few graduate from university (29.4%, compared to 43.8% of people without disabilities). Many children and young persons with disabilities "are enrolled in special schools which do not always offer effective bridges to the mainstream education system". The strategy stipulates to ensure equal rights of people with disabilities to be present in all educational forms and levels.

Inclusive education systems aim "to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers" (EASNE, 2020, pp.3). Legislation regarding inclusive educational systems will have to contain the "commitment to ensuring every learner's right to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities" as a common obligation of all educators, leaders and decision-makers.

According to EASNE (2020, pp. 4), it is necessary to raise "personal, social and academic attainments" for learners, in accordance with their needs and interests, to develop a student-centered curriculum and assessment framework. The involvement of interested parties in dialogue contributes to "high-quality, accessible educational opportunities". It is important to ensure "flexible training and continuous professional development opportunities for all educators, school leaders and decision-makers; and coherent governance processes at all system levels".

Institutions in the field of education and relevant legislation "must provide conditions for an inclusive approach" (European Commission, 2021b, pp. 18). Teachers can have a substantial contribution, but "a significant number of teachers express the need to develop their competences for students with special educational needs" (European Commission, 2020, pp. 10-19). Also, the educational system at all levels will ensure assisted learning in general contexts favourable to inclusion. Governments, together with stakeholders, should "foster inclusive education across all sectors of education and training, in accordance with the commitments of Member States and the EU to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities".

In order to increase the chances of educational integration, it is necessary to provide support and services to people with disabilities and their families. They have the right to "quality, accessible, person-centred and affordable, community- and family-based services comprising personal assistance, medical care and interventions by social workers, thereby facilitating everyday activities and providing choice to persons with disabilities and their families" (European Commission, 2021, p.11). UNCRC show that "a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community" (United Nations, 1989).

The main social actors involved in the educational inclusion of children with disabilities

According to the EASNE (2003, pp. 13), educational "inclusion largely depends on teachers' attitudes towards pupils with special needs", regarded as class values, rather than as problems to be overcome. Teachers need specific training, appropriate materials and methods, adaptation of the standard curriculum to teach children with SEN in mainstream classes. Also, they can encourage social interactions between students with and without disabilities at the class level.

Regarding the support given to the classroom teacher, it can come from support and itinerant teaching staff, school counselling and orientation centers (psychologists, school counsellors, speech therapists), other schools or specialists (Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, 2011). Coordination between the school principal, school inspectorates, communities and government is crucial. The county school inspectorates apply Ministry of Education's policies and strategies at the county level, and ensure the schooling of students.

The public administration authorities have the obligation to support the cooperation between the educational units with the family and the community in order to meet the individual educational needs of everyone. Parents must also have an active role in relation to the school and act as a link between the school, other support organizations and various specialists.

The public authorities will ensure the access of children with disabilities to the physical, informational and communicational environment, providing educational support services, school textbooks and courses in an accessible format, the provision of adapted technical equipment, the use of assistive equipment and software, the adaptation of buildings and furniture (Law no. 448/2006 republished). They also have the responsibility to develop social services for this category of people, intervening through

specialists such as social workers, psychologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapy instructors, recovery pedagogues, speech therapists, psycho pedagogues, educators, etc.

3) Proximity factors - elements of the micro meso and exo system - involved in the integration of children with disabilities in normal schools

Access and active involvement of children with disabilities in groups and social activities as varied as possible, including mainstream schools, are the most effective ways of long-term development and integration (Lam et al., 2010), source of self-knowledge and increasing self-esteem (Khusheim, 2022), conditions of personal resilience. For a good inclusivity, however, not only the quantitative aspects of social access are significant - the number and types of social structures accessed or the density of social connections established between them; much more important is the quality of relationships and this depends on much more discrete aspects of the actors involved directly or indirectly - attitudes, previous personal experiences, perceptions of a type of disability, expectations, assignment of responsibilities, etc. The present study focuses on some direct determinants of the proximity environments of children with disabilities with an impact on the quality of their integration in mainstream schools: t*he perception of the educational efficiency* of children with types (sensory, motor, cognitive, emotional) (Thota et al., 2022) and different degrees of disability (mild, medium and severe), *expectations* related to the areas in which progress will be recorded - cognitive, social, vocational, personal identity - for children with disabilities included in mainstream schools (Kristiana, Widayanti, 2017) and *assignments of responsibilities for integration*. The analyzed factors have as a common denominator high motivational valence, strongly predictive for pro-inclusive behaviors The analysis was carried out on a group of 72 subjects aged between 18-54 years, (m=26.3) 60 women/12 men, students and employees in the field of social assistance and pedagogy (42 social assistance, 30 pedagogy), with and without having cases of persons with disabilities close family members. The instruments used were 7-step Likert scales (1 point = low level. 7 points = very high level).

As shown in table 1, the perception of educational effectiveness is strongly influenced by the type of disability and its severity; sensory, motor, and emotional disabilities, in their mild forms, are perceived to be educationally modifiable, while cognitive disabilities, even in mild forms, as with all types of disabilities analysed, in their severe form, induce the drastic decrease of perceived educational effectiveness. It is worth noting that any

type of student disability is perceived to diminish educational effectiveness below the top third. This perception negatively influences the motivation to involve future specialists in the inclusive effort.

Perceived educational effectiveness	**mild**	**medium**	**severe**	**T test**
Sensory disabilities	5,53	5,03	3,70	$t_{mild\text{-}medium}$=3,750; p=0,000 $t_{mild\text{-}severes}$=8,639; p=0,000 $t_{medium\text{-}severe}$=8,718; p=0,000
Motor disabilities	5,57	5,08	3,88	$t_{umild\text{-}medium}$=4,215; p=0,000 $t_{mild\text{-}severe}$=9,424; p=0,000 $t_{medium\text{-}severe}$=8,812; p=0,000
Cognitive disabilities	4,78	4	3,11	$t_{mild\text{-}medium}$=5,290; p=0,000 $t_{mild\text{-}severe}$=8,833; p=0,000 $t_{medium=severe}$=6,733; p=0,000
Emotional disabilities /autism	5,65		3,78	$t_{mild\text{-}severe}$=8,584: p=0,000

Table no1 Perceived educational effectiveness for integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools
Source: Author's own conception

As areas of progress expected following integration in mainstream schools (table 2), it is observed that those with motor and sensory disabilities have the highest rates for all areas of progress, while for cognitive, emotional and autism disabilities the expectations of progress decrease significantly (statistically significant differences for p=0.000 between all analysed categories), the greatest benefits being recorded for the progress of personal identity. Consistent with previous results, expectations for progress for all types of disability, for all areas of progress are below the top third.

Expectations	***Sensory Disabilities***	***Motor disabilities***	***Cognitive disabilities***	***Emotional disabilities***	***Autism***
Cognitive progress	5,03	5,19	4,01	4,5	4,03
Social progress	5,04	5	4,38	4,4	4,04
Vocational progress	5,19	4,89	4,13	4,61	3,97
Personal identity	5,05	5	4,35	4,6	4,15

Table no2. Expectations of the progress of disabled children following the mainstream schools
Source: Author's own conception

The analysis of the attributions of integration responsibilities (table 3) indicates an agglomeration of responsibility quotas over a relatively narrow range (average values between 4.92 and 6.49) on a scale from 1 to 7, homogeneous quotas for all types of disabilities, which could be interpreted as a lack of nuances on the one hand, but also as a diffuse perception of responsibilities and insufficient clarity in assigning roles. In this range of variation, a tendency to group the quotas into two relatively homogeneous categories is observed: the invested factors with the greatest responsibility for inclusion (with averages above 6) are, in hierarchical order, support teachers, parents of children with disabilities, policies educational, classroom teachers, therapists and another category (means between 4.92-6) of factors with indirect tangent (of the meso- and exo-system) for the educational act. For the first analysed category, it is observed that the direct responsibility related to the proximity levels is distributed between 3-4 people, of which only half (the therapist and probably the support teacher) have the appropriate qualification for recovery, the others, even if we start from the premise of good beliefs, they only have as a secondary role the facilitation of inclusion and specific skills for its realization. These results are congruent with the results of many specialist studies that indicate the willingness and positive attitudes of teachers to facilitate integration in parallel with the reserve of their lack of professional skills and an organized structure in which roles and purposes are clearly established (Balla, 2015).

The factors responsible for the integration of children with disabilities in schools	sensory disabilities	motor disabilities	cognitive disabilities	autism
Educational policies	**6,19**	**6.18**	**6.21**	**6.29**
The school inspectorate	**5,68**	**5.76**	**5.93**	**6.03**
Social assistance system/Child protection	**5,84**	**5.82**	**5.89**	**5.99**
County Center for Educational Resources and Assistance (CJRAE)	**5.82**	**5.85**	**5.86**	**6.04**
The class teachers	**6.18**	**6.17**	**6.20**	**6.24**
Social workers	**5.85**	**5.76**	**5.93**	**6.03**
Therapists/doctors	**6.03**	**6.05**	**6.10**	**6.35**
Support teachers	**6.34**	**6.24**	**6.34**	**6.47**
Parents of children with disabilities	**6.29**	**6.22**	**6.37**	**6.35**
The parents of the other children in the class	**4.96**	**5.09**	**4.92**	**5.00**
Colleagues (without disabilities) in the class	**5.66**	**5.55**	**5.43**	**5.33**

Table 3 Factors perceived to be responsible for the integration of disabled children in normal schools
Source: Author's own conception

The results contained in table 3 indicate the existence of two proximity intervention factors that are under-invested by reference to the first category of quotas – classmates (peer group) and parents of children without vulnerability. It is a paradox that the similarity group, the one in which the disabled must integrate as a priority, is not sufficiently invested with responsibility, in the view of the respondents, especially since the specialized literature promotes the idea of the educational valences of which the peer-group could benefit by engaging in the inclusion of others. In another vein, the parents of these children are given less responsibility compared to the analyzed categories, but the specialized literature indicates them as major pressure and resistance factors that oppose inclusivity.

Conclusions

The analysis of the involvement of each level of social influence in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model indicates the existence of many significant advances: theoretical acquisitions with conceptual refinements, articulations of specific policies, the establishment of social structures responsible for this objective, changes in availability, attitudes and behaviours in the concrete plan of professional interactions with the

disabled. However, the inclusive approach is often incoherent and fragmented, giving the impression of a lack of coherence. The research results point to several major vulnerabilities: the diminished specificity of policies and measures for each category and degree of disability, the lack of specialized intervention contexts in mainstream schools, in which the roles, responsibilities, educational purposes are clearly specified, there are insufficient results with regarding the educational effectiveness of some types of interventions from which to derive standards of integrative actions, the promotion and teacher training programs for disability-specific educational interventions are very diluted, which leads to reluctance and false perceptions of the capabilities of the disabled, there is a lack of interventions for the formation of the necessary skills for an inclusive peer group, and for the roles of influencers of other factors (parents, students, etc.). The gradual closing of the bridges of connection between the levels of the system and their functional articulation has great chances to increase the level of inclusiveness of schools and the programs promoted by them and to increase the resilience of students with disabilities.

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