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THESIS ABSTRACT

***INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN REGULAR
SCHOOLS***

Scientific coordinator:
PhD. Prof. Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu

PhD:
Mihaela Ciobanu (married Grasu)

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Introduction

The PhD thesis entitled *The inclusion of children with special needs in regular schools* describes and analyzes the way in which the inclusion of children with SEN is carried out in inclusive schools in Iasi.

By the 1990s, the special school was the only “institutional response” to SEN in Romania. Aligning the Romanian education to international regulations imposed a special education reform. Thus, the question raised was that of inclusion of children with SEN in regular schools through the creation of complementary educational services and the introduction of new specialist schools: support teachers, psychopedagogues and school mediators.

In the context of the transformations of our current society, it is a special place is held by social policy of inclusion of various categories of disadvantaged people, including children with SEN.

The worldwide interest in finding solutions relevant to equalizing education opportunities has preoccupied several specialists, theoreticians and practitioners from various fields - politics, sociology, social psychology, pedagogy and special pedagogy.

There were two distinct moments of the research conducted on children with SEN in Romania. Before 1989, the research on SEN in terms of defectology had been prevalent. Since 1989, the research area has been extended to problems related to social policies adopted in respect to children at risk and people with disabilities or to finding the most effective strategies for integration into regular schools.

Objectives and research hypotheses

The inclusion of children with SEN in regular education is a topic that is mostly dealt with by pedagogy. By approaching it from the perspective of sociological concepts, I

have focused on aspects related to the social field and social effects. In this way, I have aimed at describing and analyzing the field of intervention in the case of children with SEN. I have sought to highlight the effects that professionals are facing, to highlight strategies and practices adopted by institutions and professionals, to highlight the game of competition and cooperation between them. I have also tried to suggest ways of optimizing the inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular schools.

The research hypotheses that I made they are:

1. Choosing a school for pupils with SEN is the result of several factors: individual, family and institutional factors.
2. The inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular schools is a source of conflict between education institutions and social assistance institutions; between the established status professions (teacher) and the newly introduced “specialisations” in the inclusive schools (support teacher, school counsellor, speech therapist, school mediator); the existence of pupils with SEN in regular class is experienced as a “double constraint” by the teachers.
3. The inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular schools involved mobilization of social actors.

Structure

In chapter 1, *From social exclusion to social inclusion*, I have presented the concepts of **social exclusion** and **social inclusion** and the relationships with other terms in the same conceptual area. Exclusion and inclusion are dynamic, subject to social change. The social exclusion involves issues such as poverty, marginalization phenomena, discrimination and segregation. Some groups, such as people with disabilities, are more prone to social exclusion, not being able to access community resources and services. Social inclusion aims at ensuring social justice and equality, at overcoming disorders and at preventing their appearance.

The delimitation of the “insiders” to the “outsiders” requires studying the **social borders** that are designed to organize and establish hierarchies. Highlighting the game of

competition and collaboration between different institutions and professions involved in the inclusion of children with SEN in regular schools has generated the concept of **social field** as the place in which competitions take place. The challenges generated by the reform in education of children with SEN have helped clarify the concept of **social risk**. Seen as an anticipation of possible threats induced by change, it leads to taking protective measures. For example, investing in the education of disadvantaged groups aims at preventing the risk of social exclusion.

Chapter 2, *Equal opportunities to education* analyzes the main causes that can lead to exclusion in education and on the main inclusion measures that have been taken. Thus, inequalities in education can be explained by factors related to the education system, but also by factors related to socio-economic background as well as by individual factors. For example, the education system discourages students coming from disadvantaged social groups and thus it reproduces social inequalities. On the other hand, the socio-economic level of the family, parents' poor linguistic luggage, the poor educational model offered by them, their limited involvement in school choice, etc. contribute to failure and even school dropout. Last but not least, individual factors such as CES limit the right of children to receive quality education through their segregation in special schools. Inclusion measures taken in education have aimed at preventing school dropout and at promoting inclusive education, implementation of policies of positive discrimination and school desegregation.

Chapter 3. **Research Methodology**

From the point of view of the empirical approach, this research belongs to the ethnographic or field investigation, defined as a data collection based on direct contact with the environment through participatory observation and interview accumulation and by a "snowball" sampling. The research approach is inductive and comprehensive. This

approach involves exploring, analyzing, understanding reality in terms of different social subjects, then backing away to “see” things more clearly.

I have chosen to use a qualitative research approach because the data thus obtained have strong explanatory power and are connected to the experience of subjects. Thus, I reconstructed the main moments of inclusive education in Iasi and got opinions and representations about the topic inclusion of children with SEN. Besides the various practices adopted for inclusion, I could capture subjects’ ambivalence towards the education reform regarding SEN children.

I worked mainly with the interview method, defined as obtaining information from other people on the basis of indicative guiding questions. I sought answers people provide more precise and nuanced questions put. I interviewed these people in their usual work environment. Thus, the semi-structured interview could be completed by participant observation, which was designed to test the reality and logic of speech. In addition, I could obtain a more complete picture of the subjects, their behaviour and the relationship between them. The data collected in the field were supplemented by document analysis. This involved studying legislation, reports on the state of education or different institutions websites, etc.

The fact that I conducted a field survey in Iasi and one in France allowed me to identify several elements of comparison between the interventional institutional field and the professional field in the two countries, as well as some aspects of teamwork, partnership with parents and inter-institutional collaboration. The research field was uneven: the investigation carried out in Romania was broad and restricted to the city, while in France I identified a limited number of subjects who were dispersed in several areas.

Subjects investigated

In the field survey conducted in Iasi I investigated subjects of the school inclusion process in three categories:

54 professionals from the education system: 11 “experts”, 20 “specialists” and 22 teachers working in inclusive schools;

- 7 social care professionals: 3 SEC inspectors and 4 NGO representatives;
- 7 beneficiaries: 2 students with SEN and 5 parents.

They were part of 6 inclusive schools, two special schools, a regular school, the Department of Child Protection, 3 NGOs and the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University.

For the field survey conducted in France I identified a total of 15 specialists working in schools, in the medical field and in social care.

In describing the samples I considered a number of variables such as schooling, age, seniority in the profession, training. For each category of subjects an interview guide was designed. Asking questions did not follow a strict order; they were adjusted to how the interviewee answered the previous questions.

An important stage of research was the organization of field work which involved approval from the institutions’ management, as well as the consent of the people to be interviewed. The interviews conducted lasted between 25 and 120 minutes, and most of them were conducted in the workplace of the interviewees, thus allowing the opportunity of making observations. The interviews were audio-recorded, with the subjects’ consent. If they refused this, their responses were written down. The interviews were transcribed and the data were synthesized using thematic grids.

Chapter 4. **Intervention field for SEN**

In Romania, the SEN intervention field include educational, medical and social care institutions. Their role has varied over time. Thus, the communist regime promoted caring for children with SEN in special institutions. These institutions were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health.

After 2000, a dominant place is held by the social system. This one took over the responsibility of protecting and evaluating these children, while schools remained responsible for the education of children with SEN; the medical system is responsible for their screening and evaluation.

Social care has contributed to improving living conditions in the institutions where there were children with SEN, to diversifying services and to substantiating assessment based on scientific criteria. Yet, it produced a double stigma on this category of children, taking measures of protection in a foster home.

During the communist period in Romania, the education of children with SEN took place in only special schools; now, they have the chance to be integrated into regular education. From a total of 37,423 students enrolled in the 170 special schools in the academic year 1998-1999, the value reached 16,308 students in the academic year 2009-2010. These students were included in regular schools. The number of pupils with SEN in regular schools has increased by 10 times over 2 years, and from 1,076 in the academic year 1999-2000 it decreased to 10,779 in 2001-2002.

In order to equalize opportunities for children with SEN attending regular schools a range of complementary services have been developed:

- *School counselling offices* deal with pupils with behavioural problems and school adjustment difficulties, who are at risk or in a crisis but also involve families and teachers in counselling. These offices are coordinated by the County Centre for pedagogical support.
- *Services through support teacher* are intended to remedy, compensate or correct learning difficulties faced by pupils with SEN. He is working in a special school but he also offers services to an inclusive school.
- *School mediation services* are provided in schools where dropout rates are high and school attendance rates are low, where student achievement is unsatisfactory, where there are many students belonging to several ethnic groups, especially Roma.

These services have joined *speech and language service*, which have existed since 1961 in the Romanian education and which were designed to assist children with language and communication disorders in regular schools.

The County Centre of Resources and Educational Assistance is an institution that was created in 2010-2011 for these additional services to have only one vision. Until then, each service had had its own coordination decided by the institution to which it belonged.

In the regular schools of Iasi, the inclusion of children with SEN was introduced gradually. Some isolated initiatives of integration occurred during the communist period. The beginning of the “official integration” in regular schools took place between 1996 and 1999, when special secondary school graduates were professionalized in regular education. The first teacher support worked in Iasi in the academic year 2000-2001. At first, he worked in several schools in order to have a sufficient number of students. The appearance of the first 5 positions of support teacher in 2001-2002 allowed the shift to “integration at a city level”. Since 2004, teacher support networks have expanded, peaking in the academic year 2008-2009, when there were 38 support teachers in the county of Iasi. The increased number of support teachers, along with the introduction of other specialists in schools, has enabled the creation of inclusive schools. The economic crisis that started in 2009 has reduced the number of support teachers to 32.

In the field of intervention on children with SEN in France, a dominant role is played by social care institutions. They involve multidisciplinary teams that work with children presenting delayed psycho-social development, educational maladjustment or disabilities. They support the inclusion of pupils with SEN in schools. In contrast, the social care institutions in France, such as PMI, have a preventive role. They contribute to the early detection of disabilities and then guide the subjects to the appropriate services.

For the education of children with SEN in France, there are special classes in regular schools, thus avoiding the status of student belonging to a special institution. In addition,

there is the advantage that pupils with SEN and ordinary people can easily join in group activities. The institutions that are most similar to special schools in Romania in terms of organization are the IME. They offer specialized education and therapy for children and adolescents with a declared degree of disability, who are aged between 6-20 years.

RASED work in the schools situated in the priority education zones in France, namely those located in neighbourhoods inhabited mainly by immigrant families; RASED support students with school adjustment difficulties.

In France, for pupils with SEN individually integrated into regular classes, the position of AVS is provided during the entire school programme. Although these employees are not sufficiently specialized to meet the needs of children with SEN, the advantage is that they meet the basic needs and facilitate teachers' work who can handle the other students in the class. In addition, "part-time schooling" is possible in France, allowing pupils with SEN to participate only in those subjects listed in their curriculum and which are useful to them. This approach has practical advantages but, on the other hand, it can cause a feeling of exclusion from the group.

Chapter 5. Challenges arising from the inclusion of pupils with SEN

This chapter presents the effects on professionals generated by the policy of including pupils with SEN. Thus, social care professionals have difficulty in working with other institutions in order to assess and offer educational and vocational guidance for children with SEN.

In France, the collaboration between institutions has become a habit. Specialists in medical and social centres in schools often go to schools to explain the difficulties to the child, to describe how he is helped, to propose ways of working, to answer teachers' questions and to see how the child behaves at school and which are the problems he

faces. Partnership agreements that have set clear goals and rules provide a legal framework for communication.

Teachers in inclusive schools are under pressure. On the one hand, they are required to be efficient, on the other hand, they are required to adapt to the individual needs of the pupils with SEN. New professionals working in inclusive schools face problems of professional identity. Their work is not widely known, it is sometimes underestimated, and sometimes other teachers leave them the entire responsibility of working with pupils with SEN. Their lack of authority also derives from the fact that they are “remotely” coordinated by the centre to which each specialist belongs. In the absence of a school manager to organize additional services or a specialist school with professional authority and relational skills to attract the whole team into working with students with SEN, isolated labour becomes prevalent.

In France, the teams of specialists are directly coordinated by a manager. Direct supervision of specialists from France has the advantage of easy control and organization and coordination and offers more security than “remote” coordination received by the CDS, special education teachers, speech therapists from the centres to which they belong. In addition, team meetings often take place in these institutions in France; they are ways of “organized cooperation” between team members. They are a means of clarifying their views on the situation of children, of ensuring continuity or integration approach or of deciding if a case should or should not be admitted in the system. Moreover, they can discharge negative emotions accumulated in time which may help prevent or solve conflicts among team members.

Working with family is a challenge for all professionals; they want to work with families who are aware of the problems of their children and who support them in their recovery. In reality, the professionals’ perception is that these families have a low socioeconomic status, they are unable to provide the minimum living conditions to their children or they are simply uninterested in education. In addition, there are parents who refuse to acknowledge the problems that their children have and are reluctant to any suggestion

provided by specialists.

In France, providing services to children under a contract clarifies the rights and the obligations of the parties and strengthens the idea that parents are partners. Also, regularly informing parents about children's progress helps increase their confidence in experts.

Chapter 6: Adapting strategies for the inclusion of pupils with SEN

This section discusses the practices and coping strategies of parents and professionals for the inclusion of SEN children in regular education. Some of the ways teachers use are models of good practice, while others serve as “secondary coping mechanisms”.

Parents who are aware of the importance of education and social integration aimed at increasing the chances of the child refuse the option of special schools. They call for different strategies in order for their SEN children to be accepted in a regular school; for instance, they deliberately use their accumulated social capital to hide the problems of their children or to adopt attitudes of domination. Some of them invest in their children's education to help them acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to graduate.

The inclusion of pupils with SEN also calls for increased mobilization, cohesion and solidarity from the part of teachers to work in teams, as well as attracting foreign funding, collaboration with NGOs, valuing other characteristics of students with SEN in order to increase their self-esteem, and, finally, using “resource-people” to help them during the classes or to continue their work. Also, attending SEN courses of information helps teachers acquire more knowledge to better understand the needs of these children

The fieldwork I made showed the fact that a number of secondary coping mechanisms used by teachers for the inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular schools, such as neglecting the pupils with SEN, forcing them to reach the other students' level in the

class, using inappropriate methods of discipline or the refusal of accepting them in the class give rise to the phenomenon of institutional violence

Conclusions

The paper highlights the effects of the inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular schools on professionals and answers questions about the challenges they have to face, strategies and practices they use.

The findings confirm the initial assumptions. Thus, inclusion as a form of school choice for children with SEN is the result of several factors. In addition to objective criteria such as the degree of deficiency of a child, there are also the socio-economic factors, such as family involvement and the inclusion policy of the school. Family support is needed to continue and support the efforts of the school. Also, it is useful to supplement the services that are necessary for the child, but the school cannot provide aid such as physical therapy. The chances of inclusion of pupils with SEN increase if the school has experience in this area, if it has a teaching staff ready to work with diverse learners and can provide services complementary to education. When the family is deprived of education and uninterested in working with the school, special schools are preferred to the collaboration with a regular school, even if the child does not justify that diagnosis. The reason is that the school has developed special social components and can fill in the role of parents. When the school in the neighbourhood does not have socio-educational support services, most often the child is oriented to a special school to receive care and education appropriate for his or her needs.

Also, the inclusion of pupils with SEN is a source of conflict between educational institutions and social care institutions. Education professionals expect that only students with mild, possibly moderate disabilities should be oriented to inclusive schools. In turn, social work professionals who propose the schooling option for pupils with SEN, believe

that the teaching staff do not provide complete information so that the cases can be properly evaluated and do not guide students with school adjustment difficulties on time.

In addition, between teachers in inclusive schools and newly hired specialists various forms of “forced cooperation” appear which is an impediment to teamwork. Delegating responsibility in working with pupils with SEN to CDS, devaluing their work because the progress of pupils with SEN is not visible are some examples.

Moreover, teachers perceive the inclusive work experience as a “double constraint”, having to choose between paying attention to pupils with SEN or to other students in the class. Some teachers put more emphasis on the affective dimension and greater availability of mind to help students with SEN. They feel valued when students and their parents express their gratitude. For other teachers, the intellectual dimension is paramount. Thus, they focus on preparing students to achieve performance. This causes the accumulation of symbolic capital, which makes their work recognized and valued socially.

The inclusion of pupils with SEN involves mobilizing action from the manager of the school, teachers, professionals and parents. Thus, it is necessary for the school to provide students with support services through CDS therapy, speech therapy, psycho-pedagogical assistance or mediation, to support the educational approach. It also requires the school manager or CDS to have authority or good relational skills in order to mobilize staff in working with students with SEN. In addition, further resources are needed, which can be obtained by attracting foreign funding or collaboration with other institutions in the community. Moreover, parents should have a proactive approach, such as mobilizing capital to accept the child into a regular school. Parents need to develop the behaviour of an “investor” in education and not just that of a “consumer” of the services offered by the school in order to maintain children with SEN in regular schools. In addition to the assumptions set initially, the field survey showed that the inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular schools gives rise to the phenomenon of institutional violence. The teaching staff’s use of “secondary coping mechanisms” such as neglect, treating

them like the other students in the class, using inappropriate methods of discipline etc. generates more subtle forms of exclusion. Thus, students with SEN are “the excluded insiders” because the school keeps to itself the things that were visibly excluded before.

The novelty of the thesis is the study of the inclusion of children with SEN from two perspectives which are complementary. The field research shapes the real image of inclusive schools, while the socio-historical perspective explains the difficulties generated by transforming the education policy.

The paper highlights a number of solutions for improving the inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular schools based on models of good practice. Also, it draws attention upon secondary coping mechanisms that must be avoided by differential treatment of pupils. The results of this paper open **new research directions**. One of them could be considered the inclusion of pupils with SEN from within, or from their perspective: showing how they relate to academic difficulties in relationships with peers, teachers, professionals, how they perceive the phenomenon of stigmatization. Another direction could be to identify strategies of addressing disadvantaged families in order to increase their involvement in their children's school life.

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