

Alina Simona Hoară, *Educația incluzivă. Importanța serviciilor suport oferite de CSEI [Inclusive Education. The Importance of Support Services Provided by Inclusive Education School Centers]*, București: Tritonic 2020, 330 p., ISBN 978-606-749-497-6

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In her book, the Romanian teacher Alina Simona Hoară examines a topic of major interest for those involved in education, considering that the new vision – one of inclusivity – in education requires not only the awareness of the need for this approach but also the identification of resources for its implementation, ensuring quality education for all. The author identifies inclusive education school centers as an important, even essential, resource in ensuring the necessary conditions for creating an inclusive school environment (p. 24; p. 56–58; p. 76–77). This environment must be able to address the needs of all children, regardless of their background or any special needs arising from different types of disabilities, because the level of “inclusivity” in education is determined by the school’s ability to adapt to the needs of the children (p. 50; 84; 98). The reader’s attention is drawn to aspects concerning the material infrastructure, but more importantly, to the network of specialists required in schools to ensure a multidisciplinary approach that addresses the support needs of children based on their specific situations. (p. 20–24; p. 55) Starting from the paradigm of schools’ openness to the community, the author advocates for the education of both children with and without disabilities, not only in mainstream schools but also in inclusive education school centers/special schools. (p. 46) The author’s perspective is original, especially since current legislation prioritizes directing children with special educational needs towards mainstream schools.¹

The work is structured into four chapters. The first three present theoretical considerations on the issue of inclusive education at both international and national levels, legislative provisions in the field of special education, the organization of pre-university education – with a focus on the network of inclusive education school centers – and factors that constitute barriers in the Romanian pre-university education system. The last chapter presents applied research aimed at bringing innovation. The

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¹ ORDIN-1985-1305-5805-2016-Metodologia-privind-evaluarea-si-orientarea-scolara.pdf, accessed 29.11.2024.

first chapter (p. 25–77) offers a sociological perspective on the Romanian pre-university educational system, focusing on the dynamics of the system's reconstruction through the transition from segregation to integration and then to inclusion. This shift is driven by the need to align Romanian education with the international vision (the “Salamanca Statement”) and the quality standards developed at the European level.² The second chapter (p. 79–129) highlights the obstacles in implementing inclusive practices, the dysfunctions and inequities within pre-university education, and the influences of various social actors on the dynamics of the process. The author presents inclusive education centers as “unwelcoming” because they are not open to educating children without disabilities (p. 76).

Meanwhile, mainstream schools – where children with special educational needs are directed following a comprehensive assessment (medical, psychological, social, and educational) by the School and Vocational Guidance Commission – do not possess the necessary infrastructure or educational resources for their inclusion, despite legislative provisions. The author also highlights the situation of children with special educational needs from rural areas who are institutionalized in order to access education in these centers (p. 98). Children with severe disabilities, though, face the highest risk of exclusion, with one of the main causes being the mindset that these individuals cannot be educated and are not capable of integration (p. 110). In this context, we consider it important to highlight a particular approach to ensuring access to education in Romania: For a period of time, the boarding schools of special education institutions (currently inclusive education centers) were transformed into placement centers to provide access to educational services for children from disadvantaged families, with or without disabilities.

Another identified issue is related to the ranking of educational institutions based on the results achieved by students: The presence of students with special educational needs leads to a decline in the ranking of schools that accept them, creating the risk that schools' openness to diversity remains merely a stated objective (p. 111). Opposing views regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools are found among teachers and parents. This opposition is fueled by confusion and distrust stemming from inadequate monitoring of the reform's effects, with its outcomes – whether positive or negative – not being communicated to all parents. Additionally, legislative changes that are not preceded

² Council of the European Union, 2009; Strategic Framework: Education and Training, 2020.

by public consultations and a politicized education system contribute to this opposition (p. 108–12). An accurate picture of the dynamics and results of the educational reform can only be provided through research within educational institutions focused on critical issues, the needs of all involved stakeholders, and the outcomes. Scientific research is the only way to truly understand the results and the only method for identifying solutions for achieving genuine inclusion; otherwise, there is a risk that schools may be unprepared to provide quality education (p. 114). In this regard, the third chapter presents the main issues of pace and direction that Romania faces in implementing the European-level targets concerning educational reform (p. 131–82):

- as of 2018, official reports from the European Commission highlight disparities between urban and rural areas regarding educational equity, vocational training, inclusion of students with special educational needs, and school dropout rates (p. 132);
- in 2019, the European Commission recommended that Romania increase financial allocations to ensure inclusion, provide qualification and retraining courses aligned with the labor market, and redesign the teacher training system to improve educational services and ensure equity (p. 132);
- although the number of children integrated into the pre-university education system has shown an upward trend, according to the organization “Save the Children”, the number of support teachers relative to the number of students with special educational needs is insufficient (p. 135);
- educational institutions are not prepared to ensure the inclusion of all children: outdated infrastructure, inadequately trained personnel, lack of predictability in reforms and implemented measures, and inertia result in an inequitable, non-competitive education system at the European level, with a high school dropout rate (p. 137).

Enrolling and physically accommodating children with special educational needs in mainstream schools does not equate to genuine participation or real inclusion. Instead, it represents *forced inclusion*, resulting from the struggle of parents with an educational system that aspires to be inclusive but is inadequately prepared. (p. 13–14; p. 40; p. 135–36). This likely explains why the two branches – mainstream education and special/integrated special education – continue to coexist. Mainstream schools face a shortage of specialists who can provide children with disabilities with

specialized services for compensation, empowerment, and rehabilitation, aimed at optimizing each child's potential, regardless of developmental specifics, type of disability, or background. Specific therapies continue to be provided by inclusive education centers for children with severe disabilities or in other public or private centers. Another shortcoming of mainstream education is the lack of social work offices in mainstream schools; these are only found in inclusive education centers, at the administrative territorial units, within general directorates of social assistance, and at the county centers for resources and educational assistance (p. 138–40). An argument in favor of having a social worker in mainstream schools is that issues faced by students and their families cannot be thoroughly understood from outside the educational institution. Without a social worker on-site, prompt support cannot be provided, families cannot be adequately accompanied, and the psycho-pedagogical climate of each classroom remains unknown. The success or failure of inclusion is influenced by the composition and functionality of the multidisciplinary team within the educational institution, where the social worker plays a crucial role (p. 138–50). The social worker has important responsibilities, including conducting social investigations, providing support to families at risk of exclusion, facilitating access to services, fostering the school-family-community relationship, and offering counseling to aid students school adaptation. The author views the school social worker as a case manager and believes that this role could facilitate inter-institutional collaboration by ensuring that students with disabilities receive the necessary support both within and outside the educational institution (p. 146). Regarding institutional collaboration models between inclusive education centers and mainstream schools, the following are highlighted (p. 153–54): the existence of special classes within mainstream schools, the involvement of support teachers in mainstream schools, and the model of cooperation where teachers from both types of educational institutions learn from each other. Inclusive education centers can be valuable resources for educational institutions that enroll students with special educational needs, given their extensive experience with this category of students and the fact that legislation has provided for the inclusion of specialists within these centers who form the multidisciplinary team (p. 149; p. 155; p. 177). This chapter also presents differentiated and individualized strategies recommended for the teaching and learning process, as well as co-teaching models, advocating for inter-institutional collaboration in their implementation (p. 157; p. 161–63).

The fourth chapter begins by presenting the inclusive education centers in Sibiu County, including a brief history, types of beneficiaries, infrastructure, services provided, and specialized services offered by non-governmental organizations (p. 183–306). It then provides data on the research conducted in Sibiu County 2014–2020. Using research methods specific to the field of sociology, the author, after analyzing both qualitative and quantitative results, draws conclusions that she does not view as alarm signals for the Romanian education system. The following data were analyzed (p. 229–306): the evolution of the infrastructure of inclusive education centers, the development of the inclusive pre-university education infrastructure, the respect for rights and support of educational services for students with disabilities, and the perceptions of direct and indirect beneficiaries regarding inclusive education.

Following the analysis of the obtained data, the following conclusions were formulated (p. 306–16):

- teachers say they agree with inclusion but acknowledge that mainstream schools are not always the most suitable choice for students with special educational needs;
- directors and teachers from inclusive education centers believe they are the only ones practicing inclusive education because they have specialized services, and support teachers in mainstream schools come from these institutions;
- to become truly inclusive schools, mainstream schools must provide recovery and rehabilitation services, specific therapies, support services, and counseling for students, parents, and teachers to eliminate barriers to inclusion; the development of services to monitor students' academic progress (advancement/regression) is necessary, with a key role played by social workers, mediators, psychologists/counselors;
- the development of optional courses designed to prepare students for the inclusion process, is required; improving access to educational institutions is necessary, ensuring participation in all activities and access to all classrooms within the school.

The author highlights the importance of specialized training for social workers in a system affected by multiple changes, where they must uphold social justice as its guarantor in a democratic society (p. 313). The added value that this specialist can bring to the educational institution is emphasized, with their role being to connect and support collaboration between the school, family, and community, and to manage shared

databases with other institutions. This work analyzes the specific issues of inclusive education in Romania, capturing both the essence of legislative dynamics and the implementation of normative provisions. It highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the organization of the two types of educational institutions – mainstream schools and inclusive education centers – identifies barriers to inclusion, and advocates for the presence of social workers and the entire multidisciplinary team in mainstream schools, as well as for collaboration to benefit students. The research initiative successfully continues the theoretical foundation, and the conclusions formulated can contribute to improving the quality of inclusive education in Romania.

In order to have a clearer perspective on the support services necessary to ensure inclusion in education, we consider it essential to evaluate the current social and economic context in Romania, where significant groups face the risk of exclusion due to poverty, ethnic background, and territorial disparities in the development of services. A fair allocation of financial, material, and human resources – such as doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and educators – based on needs and with thorough monitoring, is required. The common goal and the convergence of the actions of all those involved is the key to inclusive schools and an inclusive society.