

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN ROMANIA. A CASE STUDY: THE EDUFORM PROJECT

Roxana Stefanescu

Spiru Haret University (Romania)

Abstract. The first part of the paper presents the concept of inclusive education, its evolution and the main international and Romanian approaches that are the basis of the process of transition from exclusion to inclusion in schools.

The paper starts from the premise that the classroom teaching staff have a fundamental role in the process of inclusion, being responsible for the education of all the students. The attitude of teaching staff towards the inclusive education depends on their experience, their initial training and the existence of some forms of support in the classroom.

In order to meet the need of qualified teaching staff and support staff in the pre-university education, from disadvantaged schools, to be transformed into inclusive schools, it was initiated by the “Spiru Haret National Society for Education, Science and Culture” (SNSH) in partnership with the Mehedinți and Caraș-Severin County Inspectorates, the inclusive quality **EDUcation project through lifelong professional training** with the acronym **EduForm**, a project financed by the European Union.

The training programmes developed through this project are designed so that the skills acquired by the trained persons become adaptable for the inclusion of all students in the mass education.

Among the achievements of this project is the fact that the activities that will be developed by teaching staff, the support staff and school managers through the project, will lead, in the future, to change the mentality regarding the students in vulnerable situations. A viable school-parent-community partnership will be created, teaching staff will be increasingly involved in activities with children, and local authorities will be closer to schools seeing the improvement of the school situation of students and the quality of education implemented in these and will support through various ways, in the future, these schools.

Keywords: inclusive education; disadvantaged schools; continuing vocational training; education for all; risk of social isolation

Introduction

The provision of qualified human resources, with specialized competences for the prevention of absenteeism and school dropout, as well as for transforming

the school environment into a friendly and quality one, capable of attracting and maintaining the child in the educational process is a necessity in ensuring an inclusive education.

The teaching staff needs the development of new professional competencies, necessary for working with children, which to be reflected in the socio-economic success of these children. As a result, the teaching staff need additional transversal professional competencies regarding the use of methods and tools that favour the increase of inclusion in the disadvantaged schools and the development of quality student-centered teaching processes.

Simultaneously with the competences aimed at their professional development, the teaching staff need additional professional counseling and cognitive-behavioral guidance for personal development, which help them to carry out the didactic activities in the classroom, they need specific learning resources and access to these resources to ensure quality inclusive education.

The teaching staff must represent the factors of change, able to positively influence the community through attitudinal, behavioral and motivational transformations, especially through authentic changes in education.

1. Overview on Inclusive Education – international and Romanian approaches

The issues regarding promoting equal access to quality education represent a concern of the European and global organizations, reason for which they have intensified the international policies and strategies for integrating children, students and young people into formal, non-formal and informal learning programs in order to reduce the educational risk percentage in school units.

As concerns the concept of Inclusive Education (IE), it has its origins in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN in 1948 (UN, 1948), which states in Article 1 that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. We can say that this statement gave birth to the idea that inclusion is the acceptance of all people, regardless of the differences between them. Alongside with this Declaration, education for all has become a concern that has engaged the international community.

Another important step in the evolution of the notion of inclusive education took place in 1989, when the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations. This Convention significantly contributes to the strengthening of the concept of inclusive education by recognizing all rights, for all children, without any discrimination, regardless of race, color, sex, language, religion, public opinion or other opinion of the child or parents or of its legal representatives, of their national, ethnic or social origin, of their material situation, their incapacity, their birth or other situation (UN, 1989). This document was also ratified by Romania in 1990.

The next step in the evolution of this concept was to define the concept of education for all, which was launched and adopted at the World Education Conference for All and took place in Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990 and was attended by decision-makers from 155 countries.

1994, represented a milestone for defining the concept of inclusive education, when at the World Conference in Salamanca Statement with the theme “Education of persons with special needs: access and quality”, the Salamanca Statement and the framework for action for education were adopted to people with special needs. On this occasion, the following definition of the notion of inclusive education was formulated: “*Inclusive education seeks to meet the learning needs of all children, young people and adults, with a special focus on those vulnerable from the point of view of social marginalization and exclusion.*” The key element contained in the *Salamanca Statement* is that: “schools must include all children in the educational process regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. These should also include children with disabilities and the gifted, street children and those employed, those belonging to linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities, as well as children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups” (World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, 1994).

And the United Nations has been involved in supporting the idea of education for all and inclusive education by organizing in 2000 the World Education Forum for All.

The particular importance given to inclusive education and the process of restoring social equity is due to the fact that economic, socio-cultural disparities, poverty, migration, dispersal of families or disability are just a few of the factors that determine the exclusion of children from education and hence the risk of social isolation of certain categories of individuals.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has also introduced the notion of special needs education – a notion that signifies the adaptation, completion and flexibility of education for certain children, in order to equalize the chances of participation and inclusion.

In 2009, the key principles were worded, with an impact on inclusive education present in the UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education, and namely:

- Inclusion and quality are reciprocal;
- Access and quality are linked and mutually reinforcing;
- Quality and fairness are essential for ensuring inclusive education.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also believes that meeting the special needs of children is part of the development of a fair and inclusive society, in which individual rights are recognized and protected. OECD countries are committed to ensuring that their education systems are equi-

table for all students, which requires them to provide for groups with diverse needs (OECD, 2012).

As concerns the practices of inclusive education in the countries of the European Union, this is carried out by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education and EURYDICE the in-depth study *Special Needs Education In Europe* (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, and EURYDICE, 2003) which presents data from 30 European countries. The study focused on five areas of inclusive education, respectively:

- inclusive policies and practices;
- financial aspects of special needs education;
- teaching staff and special needs education;
- information and communication technologies in the special requirements education and
- early intervention.

This study showed that there are differences in the status of each of these countries in the implementation of inclusive policies, but in most countries 6-10 types of special needs are highlighted, and the concept of “special educational requirements (SER)” it is part of the concerns of the decision-makers and specialists in the countries analyzed.

As far as inclusive education is concerned, it is promoted and supported at European Union level, as evidenced by the following documents adopted by the Council of Europe:

- Recommendation (2006)5 of the Committee of Ministers of Member States of the Council of Europe;
- Action plan to promote the rights and full participation of people with disabilities in society: increasing the quality of life of people with disabilities in Europe 2006 – 2015;
- Recommendation (2013) 2 of the Council of Ministers of the Member States of the Council of Europe for ensuring the total inclusion of children and young people with disabilities in society (2013);
- Guidelines for the promotion and protection of children's rights (2017) – No children left behind (Council of Europe, 2017).

Through these ideas and guidelines, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to the protection and sustained and comprehensive promotion of the rights of the child in its foreign policy in the field of human rights.

In Romania, according to the provisions of the Order of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport no. 5537 of 2011 on the approval of the Regulation for the organization and functioning of special and specially integrated education, it is specified that, the state guarantees the right to education of all persons with SER. Art.8 of the Regulation expressly states that “special and special integrated education is carried out on the basis of the principles of democratic education, of

the access of all children to any form of education, of the right to differentiated education and to educational pluralism, of the right to education at all levels, regardless of social or material condition, gender, race, nationality, political or religious affiliation or any other restriction that could constitute discrimination". The regulation also includes the definition of the term: (school) inclusion as a permanent process of improvement of the services offered by the educational units that include in the process of education all the members of the community, regardless of their characteristics, disadvantages or difficulties; as well as the inclusive school term – representing the educational unit in which an education is provided for all children and represents the most effective means of combating the attitudes of discrimination and segregation.

2. EduForm – Project with a significant contribution to increasing inclusion in disadvantaged schools

The most recent inclusion guidelines emphasize the importance of some essential principles in order to ensure effective and quality inclusive education. One of these principles aims at training teaching staff (educators, primary school teachers, mid and high school teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, etc.), so that these teaching staff possess the appropriate attitudes, values and competencies necessary for an effective activity in the inclusive educational environment. Well-trained, professional teaching staff are essential for achieving inclusion, fair quality education and lifelong learning for all.

For a quality education, human resource in schools must be properly prepared and accountable.

Taking into account this wish it was started by "Spiru Haret National Society for Education, Science and Culture" (SNSH) in partnership with Mehedinți and Caraș-Severin County Inspectorates, SNSH having as an associate member Spiru Haret University, the project "EduForm – quality inclusive EDUcation through Continuous Professional Training." This project is financed by the European Union and is carried out within the framework of the Operational Programme Human Capital, Priority Axis: Education and competences, Specific objective improving the competences of the teaching staff from pre-university education in order to promote quality educational services guided to the needs of students and an inclusive school.

The project started in April 2018 and will run until July 2020.

The implementation of this project is aimed at the South-West and West development regions of Romania, marked by the need for proper training of the education staff, according to the needs analysis carried out in schools in these regions.

The project intends to implement in partnership a system of activities in order to develop the professional and transversal competences of the teaching staff and of

the school managers, at the level of 2 counties in Romania, involved in the project, namely the counties Mehedinți (MH) and Caraș-Severin (CS), counties chosen based on the conclusions of the needs analysis regarding the situation existing before the proposed interventions and aims at increasing the quality of inclusive education in the target schools in Romania.

The partnership was created as a result of the complementarity of the competences of the three institutions – “Spiru Haret National Society for Education, Science and Culture” applicant within the project (SNSH) and the County Inspectorates Mehedinti and Caraș-Severin. SNSH has as an associate member Spiru Haret University (USH), which benefits in addition to its own material base and the entire infrastructure of USH's teaching staff, SNSH is a continuous training provider and offers access to various information sources, and Partners P1 Mehedinti County School Inspectorate and P2 Caraș – Severin County School Inspectorate has adequate technical, financial and operational capacity. The results are ensured by the cumulation of the competences of the three institutions, respectively: only SNSH has the quality of continuous training provider and only the County School Inspectorates have the attributions and competences conferred by law in managing the education processes at the level of the counties.

The target group of the project consists of 2 distinct categories, teaching staff from pre-university education and school managers from 2 counties of Romania Mehedinți and Caraș-Severin. The personnel involved come from 13 disadvantaged school units, with mass or special education.

As a dimension, the target group of the project consists of 360 teaching staff from pre-university education, from 2 counties of Romania (150 from Mehedinți, 210 from Caraș Severin).

The teaching staff mentioned above are divided into target group categories, as follows: 346 in the category of pre-university teaching staff and 14 in the school managers category. The needs analysis conducted by the partners shows that over 50% of the target group members are part of the disadvantaged school structures of the target schools selected.

The training of the 360 members of the target group contributes to achieving Romania's objective of reducing early school leaving for children belonging to vulnerable groups, in accordance with the recommendations made in the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in the Field of Education and Vocational Training (ET2020).

The human resources needed for the implementation of the project activities are qualified human resources, namely: on behalf of the applicant media, design and specific events experts, advice and coaching experts, online educational and communication platform experts, coordinators of training and practical monitoring, professional training programs experts, good practical experts, professional development experts, training experts; and from the partners

teaching mentorship expert, target group expert, expert in relationship with the community.

3. Modern and effective training through classic and online courses through the EduForm project

Starting from the results obtained from the interpretation of the information gathered with the help of a questionnaire to identify the needs of continuous professional training of the teaching staff in the pre-university education, completed by the teaching staff from the target schools co-opted in the project, 3 training programs have been designed accredited by The Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research of Romania.

The programmes of professional training of the teaching staff in the pre-university education, carried out within the project consist of 6 courses each.

The 3 training programmes are composed of 3 specific and 3 common cross-sections modules, presented below (Spiru Haret National Society for Education, Science and Culture, 2018):

For the **Quality Education programme, centered on the beneficiaries of education (P1)** the modules are:

- Technologies for Information Processing, Communication (ICT) and e-Learning in education (M1)
- Methods and techniques for optimizing teaching activities (M2)
- Innovative methods and techniques for evaluating school outcomes (M3)
- Cognitive behavioral coaching to optimize professional performance (M4)
- School-family-community partnership for school inclusion (M5)
- Inclusive education of qualified through personal and professional development (M6)

The program **Methods and tools for school inclusion (P2)** consists of the following modules:

- Technologies for Information Processing, Communication (ICT) and e-Learning in education (M1)
- Student's knowledge and assessment of learning progress (M2)
- Differentiated training – theory of multiple intelligences (M3)
- Assessment adapted to the individual particularities of the beneficiaries of education (M4)
- School-family-community partnership for school inclusion (m5)
- Inclusive education of qualified through personal and professional development (M6)

The **institutional development program through quality education (P3)** comprises the following modules:

- Technologies for Information Processing, Communication (ICT) and e-Learning in education (M1)

- School management for institutional capacity development (M2)
- Educational projects and programs (M3)
- Performance and motivation in the school organization (M4)
- School-family-community partnership for school inclusion (M5)
- Inclusive education of qualified through personal and professional development (M6)

Modules M1, M5 and M6 are transverse modules and are common to all 3 programmes.

By participating in one of the 3 programmes, the members of the target group will be trained, and will receive graduation certificates issued by the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research in Romania.

The teaching staff from the target group are directly involved in the following activities:

- Development of training, consisting of:
 - Information, awareness, and motivation campaign for attracting and maintaining qualified teachers in disadvantaged schools;
 - Organization and development of training programs with participation in the classical component of the courses;
 - Monitoring of internships consisting of 6 hours / module of theoretical activities in the classroom;
 - Assessment consisting of 4 hours final assessment exam in the classroom
- Exchange of experience and professional support networks, consisting of:
 - Teaching mentorship for the professional development;
 - Participation in the exchange seminars of good practices for personal and professional development of human resources in the target schools organized to facilitate the school-family-community dialogue;
 - Stimulating professional development through:
 - participation in workshops and sessions, updated and improved during the implementation of the project;
 - participation in the specialized assistance programs granted within the professional development support centers.

The teaching staff from the project are involved online, at and from a distance, using the computer and communication tools developed, integrated and configured based on the technological infrastructure of Spiru Haret University and the Internet, in the following activities:

- Development of transversal competences through training programs and continuous professional development, with the subactivities:
 - participation in the online campaign organized and carried out through access to information, awareness, and motivation materials;
 - participation in the online component of the courses;

– participating in online assessments during the course (1 hour / online evaluation mode);

➤ Exchange of experience and professional support networks, consisting of:

– permanent access, to and from a distance, to knowledge bases / educational resources and specific databases. Teaching staff have access to an online educational platform for professional support that includes: online database with educational resources to support quality inclusive education; online database with good practices for quality inclusive education; forum for professional support of human resources from disadvantaged schools;

– participation in the online sessions using the professional support networks created within the project, during its implementation, between specialists in the field, including experts from the project team and the teaching staff from the target schools.

4. The Impact of the EduForm Project

The training programmes developed through this project are designed so that the skills acquired by the trained persons become adaptable for the inclusion of all students in the mass education. The materials made and used in education by the members of the target group represent a source of information and a model of good practices that will be used by other school units, other students, other authorities, having an important role in multiplying the effects of the project.

The motivation of the teaching staff involved will be realized through the following incentives:

– support grant for the process of carrying out, by the teaching staff, the activities and internships in the target school in the amount of 150 euros / teacher;

– performance scholarships in the amount of 200 euros / teacher per school year for 2 school years;

– prizes for the contribution to increasing the quality of education and school inclusion respectively: 10 prizes I of 300 euros / person, 15 prizes II of 200 euros / person, 25 prizes III of 100 euros / person. These prizes will be awarded to those teaching staff who participated and won the competition organized and carried out in the project.

The motivation of the target group in the project will also be achieved through:

– The quality and attractiveness of the training programs;

– The skills certified through training programs in a growing area of interest;

– Granting professional credits transferable to graduates who passed the final assessment exams and obtained recognized certificates on the labor market;

– The expertise in the field of training experts, university teaching staff holding disciplines from the same fields with the modules of the training programs that are the subject of the project, provided for the undergraduate / master's degree programs organized / carried out within the faculties of Spiru Haret University.

The members of the target group formed represent factors of change, able to positively influence the community of teaching staff from the region and from the country through the transformations generated by the project in attitudinal, behavioral, motivational plane. Following the implementation of the project, competences will be transferred from the trainers to the participants in the training, to equip the teaching staff from the disadvantaged schools with sets of competences necessary to provide quality educational services oriented to the needs of the students and an inclusive school.

Another benefit of the project will consist in the transfer of competences from the members of the target group to the students, to be acted in a conscious-flexible manner in the instructional-educational process to improve the frequency and the school results of the students, to change some behaviors and prevention of risk situations, etc. The competences acquired after completing the training programs will be transposed into practice by adopting differentiated and personalized teaching strategies, by integrating new technologies in the classroom and optimizing the teaching act, by efficiently managing the situations of crisis in class and in school.

The effect will be identifiable at the students' level by reducing the risk of school dropout, improving their attendance and school situation, personal development, orientation and socio-professional insertion.

The members of the trained target group will in turn become trainers for the other colleagues who did not participate in the training, taking place a cascade training, through which the acquired skills will be transferred in new training contexts between colleagues at the target schools. Also, within the methodical commissions and the pedagogical circles or on the occasion of scientific conferences or symposiums the teaching staff formed by the project will be able to disseminate the acquired knowledge and will transfer the acquired competences and to other guild colleagues or other communities of practitioners (social workers, psychologists, school counselors, doctors and so on).

Thus, the whole approach of the project represents an investment in people and for people, meant to correct the low level of education in the rural area as well as the phenomenon of early school leaving, which are essential factors that increase the risk of becoming an inactive or long-term unemployed person having as a catalyst the school with qualified and motivated teaching staff.

Conclusions

Promoting inclusion and teaching from an inclusive perspective requires a broad vision and specific skills that all teaching staff must possess. In this context, the Spiru Haret National Society for Education, Science and Culture and its partners implement a project, EduForm, which initiates actions to provide training programmes for teaching staff, aimed at attracting and maintaining in school the competent and motivated teaching staff, capable to ensure school inclusion.

Since in Romania, certain areas face a series of profound socio-economic problems, which generate an educational deficit at the population level and a high risk of diminishing the participation in education for several categories of children, the EduForm project comes to meet solving these problems in education. Among the teaching staff, these problems consist of: the existence in some schools of some unqualified human resources, the fluctuation of the staff from one school year to another, commutor teaching staff, beginners or at most with basic teacher certification who did not take training courses appropriate to their needs in order to develop their professional, pedagogical and methodical competences or do not know methods of implementation in practice. The project aims to reduce or eliminate these shortcomings.

The programmes implemented by the project ensure the development of competencies of the teaching staff from the pre-university education in areas that contribute to the development of the child, to the prevention or reduction of absenteeism and early school leaving, to the increase the quality in education and the school inclusion. To ensure the quality of the training programmes, the project intervenes through 2 types of support actions; namely, teaching mentorship and cognitive-behavioral coaching for the personal and professional development of the teaching staff in the target schools in order to develop the career by improving learning skills, managing emotions and personal and professional conflicts.

Through the activities to be implemented, it contributes to the improvement of the professional training of the teaching staff, and to the increase the motivation to be a teacher in disadvantaged schools.

Acknowledgements

The article presents some present and expected results of the implementation of the project Inclusive quality education through Continuous professional training with the acronym EduForm, financed by the European Union, Operational Program Human Capital, Priority axis 6. Education and skills, call code POCU / 73 / 6/6 / Improve the competences of the teaching staff in pre-university education in order to promote quality educational services guided to the needs of the students and an inclusive school.

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✉ **Ms. Roxana Ștefănescu**

ORCID 0000-0003-4762-3814

Head of Juridical and Economic Sciences Department

Faculty of Juridical Sciences and Economic Sciences

Spiru Haret University

Brașov, Romania

E-mail: roxanstefanescu72@yahoo.com