

Access to Education for Disabled Students: a Comparative Review of the Policies in Romania and EU Countries

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Abstract—Recent Romanian ministerial strategies have confirmed the commitment to educating students according to a policy of inclusion based on principles of anti-discrimination. However, many problems with implementation still remain; children with disabilities are still not enrolled in primary education like in others developing countries. This paper reviews some of the key issues and challenges in relation to disability and education: definitions, statistical data, policies, reform strategies and service delivery in Romania and at the EU level. We intend to illustrate some of the theoretical and operational aspects developed under the educational exclusion and right to education for disabled students by comparative reference to policy and practice in a number of developed and developing country contexts.

Keywords---Disability, education, inclusion, segregation.

I. INTRODUCTION

AS philosophy is still searching for the right answer at the question “What is philosophy?” the modern world is still debating for the right definition of disability. Many researchers consider that it is part of human condition and, unlike the former medical approach; disability is a scholar category among the great human diversity. The former medical approach that segregated these people in special schools and residential institutions was highly contested by their associations and in the human rights perspective that challenged the world functioning many times the 20th century, a more social approach is now in action as states the UN’s Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability [1].

In fact the old personal (medical) perspective and the new more social one are interrelated in the “bio-psycho-social” model promoted by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) [2]. Disability is the umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, referring to the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and

that individual’s contextual factors (environmental and personal factors). In the ICF, problems with human functioning are categorized in three interconnected areas: *impairments* are problems in body function or alterations in body structure-for example, paralysis or blindness; *activity limitations* are difficulties in executing activities-for example, walking or eating; *participation restrictions* are problems with involvement in any area of life-for example, facing discrimination in employment or transportation.

There are around 785 (15.6% according to the *World Health Survey* [3]) to 975 (19.4% according to the *Global Burden of Disease* [4]) million persons 15 years and older living with disability, based on 2010 population estimates (6.9 billion with 1.86 billion under 15 years).

Estimates for the number of children (0–14 years) living with disabilities range between 93 million [5] and 150 million [6]. Many children and adults with disabilities have historically been excluded from mainstream education opportunities. In most countries early efforts at providing education or training were generally through separate special schools, usually targeting specific impairments, such as schools for the blind. These institutions reached only a small proportion of those in need and were not cost-effective: usually in urban areas, they tended to isolate individuals from their families and communities [7]. The situation began to change only when legislation started to require including children with disabilities into mainstream educational systems [8].

Children with disabilities are less likely than children without disabilities to start school and have lower rates of staying and being promoted in school. While children with disabilities have historically been educated in separate special schools, inclusive mainstream schools in both urban and rural areas provide a cost-effective way forward. Inclusive education is better able to reach the majority and avoids isolating children with disabilities from their families and communities [9].

So, despite improvements in recent decades, children and youth with disabilities have lower transition rates to higher

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levels of education. A lack of education at an early age has a significant impact on poverty in adulthood. Data on children with disabilities who have special education needs are hampered by differences in definitions, classifications, and categorizations [10]. Definitions and methods for measuring disability vary across countries based on assumptions about human difference and disability and the importance given to the different aspects of disability-impairments, activity limitations and participation restriction, related health condition, and environmental factors.

The category covered by the terms special needs education, special educational needs, and special education is broader than education of children with disabilities, because it includes children with other needs—for example, through disadvantages resulting from gender, ethnicity, poverty, war trauma, or orphans [11].

The broad sense of inclusion is that the education of all children, including those with disabilities, should be under the responsibility of the education ministries or their equivalent, with common rules and procedures. In this model education may take place in a range of settings – such as special schools and centers, special classes in integrated schools or regular classes in mainstream schools—following the principle of “the least restrictive environment”. This interpretation assumes that all children can be educated and that regardless of the setting or adaptations required, all students should have access to a curriculum that is relevant and produces meaningful outcomes. A stricter sense of inclusion is that all children with disabilities should be educated in regular classrooms with age-appropriate peers. This approach stresses the need for the whole school system to change.

The inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools -inclusive schools - is widely regarded as desirable for equality and human rights. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have put forward the following reasons for developing a more inclusive education system [12]. (a) *Educational*. The requirement for inclusive schools, to educate all children together, means that the schools have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences, to the benefit of all children. (b) *Social*. Inclusive schools can change attitudes towards those who are in some way “different” by educating all children together. This will help in creating a just society without discrimination. (c) *Economic*. Establishing and maintaining schools that educate all children together is likely to be less costly than setting up a complex system of different types of schools specializing in different groups of children.

A review of studies on inclusion published before 1995 concluded that the studies were diverse and not of uniformly good quality [13]. While placement was not the critical factor in student outcomes, the review found: slightly better academic

outcomes for students with learning disabilities placed in special education settings; higher dropout rates for students with emotional disturbances who were placed in general education; better social outcomes for students with severe intellectual impairments who were taught in general education classes;

In general, students with mild intellectual impairments appeared to receive the most benefit from placement in supportive general education classes.

But where class sizes are large and inclusion is not well resourced, the outcomes can be difficult for all parties. There will be poor outcomes for children with disabilities in a general class if the classroom and teacher cannot provide the support necessary for their learning, development, and participation. Their education will tend to end when they finish primary school, as confirmed by the low rates of progression to higher levels of education [14].

II. EUROPEAN SITUATION

In Europe, the Commission issued many programmatic documents in the field. For instance the Mid-term Evaluation of the European Disability Action Plan 2003-2010 was carried out by the Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services (CSES) on behalf of the Unit for the Integration of People with Disabilities (Unit G3) of the Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (DG EMPL) during the period January 2008 to June 2009.

Between the most important negative aspects of the programmatic actions required, the document stated that disabled people integrated into mainstream education throughout their youth are much more likely to develop the general and vocational key competences necessary to succeed later in the labor market [15].

Also, access to mainstream lifelong learning opportunities continues to be insufficient, especially for people with disabilities. People born with disabilities tend to attain lower education levels than those who acquire a disability later in life. Furthermore, people with disabilities participate less in education and have lower educational qualifications than those without a disability [16].

In Europe, The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) have been put into action with controverted results as shows the report of the European Union [17]. The report, compiled for the Commission by the NESSE network of experts, showed that, despite Member States' stated commitment to promote inclusive education, too many learners with special needs are still placed in segregated institutions or in mainstream settings with inadequate support. It also highlighted wide variation between Member States as to how children with special needs are identified, and whether, after

identification, they are placed in mainstream or special schools.

According to the latest EU-level data from the Labor Force Survey ad hoc module on the employment of disabled people in 2011, around 25 % of young disabled people (aged 18-24) are early school leavers, as compared with 12.4 % of non-disabled young persons. The high rates of early school leavers among young disabled people may indicate problems relating to accessibility and a lack of adapted programs. In the EU, pupils with special educational needs represented 4.1 % of all school-aged pupils in the 2010-2011 academic year. About 40 % of them are in segregated special schools.

Another study issued in 2013 in the same framework but authored this time by the University of Leeds experts [18] found out that at the EU level, 19% of young disabled are early school leavers compared to 11% for non-disabled young persons and also that “lack of experience further increases the initial disadvantage of persons with disabilities...this might push them to exit from the labour market, (p.71)”. In fact at the European level the disadvantage of young persons with disabilities compared to young persons without disabilities can be measured by the difference of the respective shares of early school leavers. This difference seems to be small in Austria, Netherlands, Sweden, Slovenia and Finland. On the other hand, the gap is relatively important in Greece, Romania and Lithuania (p.90). Also the rate of early school leavers among young people with a severe limitation is 39%. The same rate for persons with a moderate disability is 14%. This rate is 11% for persons without disabilities (p.91). In the same time, only 15% of persons with a severe disability aged 30-34 have completed a tertiary or equivalent education programme. This rate is 32% for persons with a moderate disability and 37% for persons without disability (p.111) [18].

III. ROMANIAN SITUATION

In Romania, the children with disabilities are included in the “special educational requirements” category students. Apart them there is other two groups: difficulties and disadvantages. Difficulty group include educational problems, attention deficit or behavior troubles. Disadvantaged groups include socio-economic excluded families or minority group belonging (as Roma). Disability group is 2-5% of the scholar population while the other groups represent 10-20% [19]. Before 1989 they were enlisted in special education units where they were divided in 3 categories: recoverable, partially recoverable and non-recoverable. The recoverable were oriented toward special vocational schools specialized on the disability type and then employed in protected economic units. Those partially recoverable and non-recoverable were sent to home schools or hospital schools and protected there for the rest of their life.

Between 1992 and 1999, the evaluation of disability was made by a Commission for Diagnosis and Sorting made of physicians, a psychologist and a psycho-pedagogue. In parallel the scholar inspectorate had a special commission for expertise that evaluated problematic scholars and found solutions. In 2001 Child Protection Agency created Complex Evaluation Service to evaluate (official handicap certificate) and orient children with deficiencies to a best scholar solution.

In 2011 Education Law states that evaluation of children with special educational requirements is made by County Centers for Resources and Educational Assistance with the help of the Child Protection Agencies.

One of the strategic goals of Romanian secondary education is the involvement of disabled children in ordinary or special schools. Even severe disability certificate is compatible with mass education [19]. The certificate is guaranteeing the involvement in the support program. For a child with disabilities the educational offer is: special school according to the disability type or support socio-educational services in the mass schools but also different cabinets such as speech therapy, psycho-pedagogy or support services with special or itinerant teachers or school mediators.

Special schools are usually for mental, physical, audio or visual impairments, with classes of 8-12 students and 4-6 students in the case of severe or associate disabilities. During the morning time classes are organized while during the afternoons different therapies for rehabilitation are taking place. All the schools have dormitories and canteens so that all the children are institutionalized during the school period. The staff is constituted by teachers, rehabilitation specialists and auxiliary personnel.

Inclusive education is based mainly on the teachers' capacity to organize the process so that every child receives some knowledge. An important role has the support teachers that help special needs children in different public schools. In some mainstream schools there are psycho-pedagogues who help the students to solve their problems (disabilities but also social or behavior problems) and assist the teachers and the families to better understand and help the students with such problems.

Inclusive education is confronted with some challenges:

- a. The inter-institutional evaluation of children with disabilities (the family doctor should refer earlier the case to a specialist and inform the parents, parents are often discouraged because they have to address to different institutions, population's poverty leads to confusion between disabilities and difficulties or disadvantages because of the social facilities from the special schools);
- b. Challenges because of team-work (difficult cooperation of the professionals with the parents,

- communicational barriers and rivalry between specialists but also lack of organization of services);
- c. Difficulties in the collaboration with the parents (parents are resisting to sending children in special schools or getting a handicap certificate because of stigma-especially the high social status parents, some parents are not fulfilling the required actions saying that it is too complicated);
 - d. Different students communities (inclusive schools have students with different educational levels and needs, Romanian schools are performance oriented and special needs students are diminishing the school prestige, students with disabilities are evaluated formally without having real knowledge acquisitions).

The professional's dilemma is about choosing the right alternative for each child: to be kept in family or to send him to a special institution, to put him in a special school or to send him in a general school. Sending a child from the very beginning to a special school is not a popular choice between professionals because at early age deficiencies are unequally manifested and children could often recuperate. In addition coming back from special schools to general education is very difficult and almost impossible. Also the large majority of parents reject the special schools because of stigma. There are also parents whose main revenues are due to their children disabilities and they refuse the special school under the pressure of losing these revenues. The actual situation about education of disabled students is more formally described in a recent study on behalf of Academic Network of European Disability Experts (ANED). [20].

The report mention that, despite the fact that the rights of persons with disabilities are protected by specific policies, in practice there is a lack of adaptation in terms of materials and logistics for students with disabilities. Also there is a lack of qualified professionals and not enough resources to provide specific services for their particular needs (i.e. occupational therapist). The Ministry of Education decision to abolish the Arts and Trades schools has had a negative impact, reducing the opportunities for training among students with disabilities. "In 2009-2010, the Ministry of Education decided to abolish the Arts and Trades Schools, together with the completion year. These schools have been transformed into so called "technologic high schools", of two years duration. "This measure affected significantly the students with disabilities, who very often could not meet the high school requirements or/and the professional training in only 2 years" [20, p.5].

Although students with disabilities and their families have the right to choose the form of education they want to attend, in practice they are they mainly oriented toward special schools. The disability awareness of teachers, parents and students in mainstream schools remains low, despite efforts

that have been constantly made by the Government and NGOs over the years. According to the law, students with disabilities and their families have the possibility to choose the form of education they want to attend (inclusive or specialized). In practice, a vast majority of students with disabilities are still oriented by the assessment commission towards the special system, despite improvements that have been made in the last decade. Mainstream schools were completely unprepared to receive children with disabilities on large scale, parents were very concerned about whether their children could adapt and the consequences of the transfer, and the special schools felt threatened in terms of whether their work would continue.

A national evaluation of this decision in the following year (organized by UNICEF and the Government of Romania) showed that the decision was inappropriate and produced a lot of negative effects: "among which was a critical rate of student drop out after several months, as well as the return of numerous children to special schools, p.11"[20]. Although in Romania NGOs has had an important role in promoting the image of disabled students, they are still discriminated and stigmatization in mainstream schools. In Romania there was no culture of continuous education for disabled people but in recent years there has been some progress, on the one hand due NGOs activities and on the other hand, thanks to the funds received from European Union.

There is a poor accessibility to public space and there are also important limitations regarding devices for communication for disabled students. On the other hand, the poor integration of young disabled on labor marked is due to the fact that only recently the vocational curricula of special schools was related to labor market demands: "young adults with disabilities are confronted with significant problems, since vocational programs in special schools have not been adapted, until more recently, to the reality of the labor market. Young people who cannot pass the baccalaureate examination are at more risk of exclusion in employment subsequently, p.12" [20].

IV. CONCLUSION

Young severely disabled are still excluded from the education system. Support services for education and employment are relatively new in Romania. In addition, the provision of assistive devices is limited in Romania, and they are not always affordable. Moreover, the profession of occupational therapist does not exist in Romania; and therefore there is little knowledge about ergonomic arrangements, adaptation of work places, of homes and of schools.

There are no databases in order to centralize the school situation of students with disabilities according to different variables (e.g. type of educational support, participation in

vocational training): there are no recent statistics regarding the number of children and young people with disabilities in mainstream and in special schools (pre-tertiary education). Data are not disaggregated by type of learning difficulty or type of educational support.

In Romania, there are no detailed extensive studies to present and describe the costs of inclusive education in all its aspects and forms.

Also, the NGOs services for support disabled young people education or employments are not sufficient or are not available in all communities. Because of the financial incentives they receive from the state are very low, employers are reluctant to invest in training disabled employees. Lack of financial resources is the main cause of the barriers that stand in the way of community integration of disabled people in Romania (human resources, medical equipment, and infrastructure).

It should be noted that in Romania there are big differences between regions in terms of availability of support services for disabled people and also these services are not the same in all country. The provision of support services depends on where people live in Romania. It is difficult to transfer these services from one county to another.

And finally one could notice that inclusion and integration remain a controversial concept in education and overall, both in Romania and across EU member states only a small proportion of disabled children/youth have the opportunity to attend a regular community school. On the other hand, the concept of inclusion is ubiquitous in education today, and its importance is not matched by a total clarity of meaning or understanding.

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