

Characteristics of School and Vocational Counseling for Pupils with Special Educational Needs

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ABSTRACT: Effective inclusion means following a path of integration of people with disabilities both in school and in society. Counseling families of children with special educational needs with a view to integration becomes a mandatory step in combating school drop out and facilitating social integration. This study examines certain aspects of education for children and young people with special educational needs, trying at the same time to clarify the theoretical context of inclusion and integration in school. It presents examples of good practices and shares insights gained from accumulated experiences to promote the participation of children with special educational needs in learning activities, thereby preventing school drop out. The objective of this study is to emphasize the important role of the teacher counselor, who must develop targeted strategies to address indecision by fostering the child's ability to choose, make decisions, and seek information. The counseling process focuses on the preventive aspect of affective and behavioral disorders, as well as on problem-solving, personal development, and optimization. By fostering an inclusive environment, this approach aims to support the individual development of children with special educational needs and help them feel welcomed and connected to society.

KEYWORDS: special needs, integration, inclusion, adaptation

Introduction

Treatment and care for people with disabilities have a long history in human history. For example, during the scientifically, ideologically and artistically revolutionary Renaissance (Rotaru 2005, 350-351), which took place roughly between 1300 and 1700, Queen Elizabeth ordered the government to care for the needy. Among those needy were the disabled people of the time, who at last had an institution where they could be institutionalized and cared for in the long term.

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The experience I gained both in mainstream education, as an itinerant teacher, and in special education gave me the opportunity to assimilate important information about the school development of children with special educational needs. I have come to understand that each pupil is unique and needs support and integration methods throughout the school years. The purpose of this paper is to present forms of support for children with special educational needs and means of their integration through the implementation of case studies on the topic of 'Counseling families of children with special educational needs for integration'.

Every year, new theoretical approaches emerge, and educational practice (Rotaru 2021a, 87-92) has enriched learning experiences (Rotaru 2021b, 190-196). The present study aims to update and structure some aspects of education for children with special educational needs while trying to clarify the theoretical context of inclusion/integration in school. It includes close examples of good practices from different European countries and shares accumulated experiences to favor the presence of children with special educational needs in learning activities, thus preventing school dropout.

Inclusive education centers face many challenges, of which I will mention the need to constantly change the mindsets and attitudes of mainstream pupils towards different pupils and to change the social representations of this segment of the school population, but also to work to break down labels and provide equal opportunities for social integration.

The Romanian Education Law No. 84 (1995) states that the entire population has the same right to education and all its stages. Special education belongs to the Ministry of Education and Research, it is part of the learning system and provides educational programs for children adapted to their respective developmental needs. Special education is the responsibility of all staff of the Center for Inclusive Education. It is flexible, adaptive, and inclusive. Qualified teachers, along with other staff members, show dedication when it comes to special children.

In Romania, children with special needs have access to various forms of education and, depending on their stage of disability, can be enrolled in the special education system, in the Inclusive Education Center or in a mainstream educational institution. Children with average impairments, language disorders, socio-affective disorders or behavioral disorders are integrated into mainstream schools, where they can benefit from educational services and support provided by itinerant teachers in collaboration with classroom teachers. Special education is organized based on the type of impairment—whether mental, sensory, motor or other. The authority responsible for identifying the type and stage of the mentioned impairment is the Commission for the Protection of Children's Rights, which is affiliated with the respective County Councils. In this collaborative approach, children receive the personalized support they need, facilitating their integration into the educational environment and encouraging their growth and development in meaningful ways.

Children in the special learning system may attend an adapted mainstream education program or a special school/inclusive school program. The length of school hours can also vary. In general, there is discussion about the need for improvement in special education, but we also encounter some shortcomings when it comes to accessibility and resources. Given that the number of children with special needs is increasing, teachers face obstacles in developing differentiated approaches to teaching-learning and assessment of these children. I believe that a teacher who intends to work with children with special needs must fulfill two fundamental qualities: professionalism and pedagogical talent. This includes the ability to captivate students easily, making them enjoy learning—a natural endowment that serves as the centerpiece for teacher evaluation, criticism and appraisal within the educational system. We are witnessing extensive reforms in special and integrated special education, characterized by constant searches for new formulas, organizational methods and legislative changes, which contrast with societal progress and varying perspectives on children with special educational needs.

The goal of the counseling program is self-discovery, the enhancement of one's own competencies, skills, and qualities. The most common techniques used in counseling include questioning, empathic listening, focused reflection, and A.R.B.—Action, Reasoning, Behavior. Although the decision-making process is powerful, it relies heavily on information, in terms of provision, adaptability, management, accuracy, quality, cognitive processing by users. This entire process is sometimes based on reason and intuition, but also on inspiration, involving understanding, acquiring, introspecting and processing information. It alternates between time sequences of decision and indecision, independence and dependence, ultimately leading to the development of a stable, preferably positive, and realistic self-image and decisions to be pursued voluntarily, independently, with perseverance and strong motivational support. Social maladjustment status results from factors such as lack of information, superficial analysis of certain information, negative self-image, inability to understand oneself, excessive reliance on others, internal conflicts, choice anxiety, decision-making immaturity, unrealistic goals, lack of ability to synthesize data and inability to identify alternative options—categories that complicate decision-making

The counselor must develop targeted strategies to combat indecision by educating the subject's ability to choose, make decisions and seek information. The counseling process focuses on the preventive aspect regarding affective and behavioral disorders, as well as problem-solving, personal development and optimization. Disability should not be an obstacle to success.

Scientific novelty and originality - at the heart of this work lies a genuine desire to meet the needs of children and adolescents with special educational needs. This is achieved through the implementation of school and vocational counseling programs with the sole aim of integrating them into a social and professional life. Understanding the individuality of each child has been a longstanding concern, paralleling parents' dedication to their child's healthy development. At the same time, it becomes a concern for the entire social construct (Rotaru 2016, 29-43) and is expressed through a collective effort to integrate young individuals into various forms of social life.

Conclusions

The family-school partnership (Rotaru 2011, 5) has led to a thorough understanding of the psychosocial portrait of the pupil. Joint efforts will address most of the challenges faced by the minor, resulting in a positive change in the child's attitude toward situations that initially had a negative influence on his or her psychological development and social integration.

From an analytical point of view, it is recognized that the school population is divided into two categories: normally developed children and children with special educational needs, who are not to blame for their particular situation, their share in the preschool groups in all kindergartens being considerable. A child with special educational needs can be defined as a child whose abilities are below average for his or her age. This understanding has led me to seek answers to the following questions:

Why should we care?

We should care because children with special educational needs cannot manage on their own. They need help because everyone has the right to education, because everyone is capable of learning, because everyone has something to gain—even typically developing children, who will get used to diversity, and understand that it is okay for these children to be different. It is essential for these children to realize that being different is not a stigma. By fostering an environment where all children feel accepted, we prepare them for life and society. That is why it is necessary to develop inclusive practices.

Who discovers children's special needs?

First of all, the parents should discover the special needs of the child, as they are the "witnesses" to the child's first years of life, then teachers, who have the responsibility to get to know each of the children they work with. Children with special educational needs are part of the classroom community, participating in activities and educational programs according to their abilities.

Why be inclusive?

Welcoming children who are 'different' should not be done for their own sake or out of pity but rather to uphold the right of each individual (Rotaru 2019, 214-215) to participate in common activities that foster their development and contribute to the development of the society in which they live.

What are we aiming for?

The goal is to educate children's attitudes (Bâlc 2018, 203-207) and behaviors to accept individual diversity within a group. By doing so, we can turn the aspiration of providing equal learning opportunities for all children and their harmonious integration into a reality.

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