

THE CHILD WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN): A HISTORY OF SOCIAL PERCEPTION

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DOI: 10.19062/1842-9238.2022.20.1.7

***Abstract:** The complexity of situations in the educational sphere generated by the presence of people at risk, in vulnerable situations is currently one of the priorities of governments worldwide. Historical periods show us that their social perception and acceptance was not at all favorable, on the contrary, attitudes ranged from hostility to extermination programs.*

History shows us that the separation of people with disabilities from others was determined by the fear of contamination and also by the desire to escape responsibility regarding those who were a burden to society and considered useless.

***Keywords:** vulnerable situations, acceptance, Special Educational Needs, disabilities*

1. INTRODUCTION

The complexity of situations in the educational sphere generated by the presence of people at risk, in vulnerable situations is currently one of the priorities of governments worldwide. Historical periods show us that their perception and acceptance was not at all favorable, on the contrary, attitudes were from hostility to extermination solutions.

History shows us that the separation of people with disabilities from others was determined by the fear of contamination and also by the desire to escape responsibility to those who were a burden to society and considered useless.

2. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS REGARDING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN DIFFERENT PERIODS AND CULTURES

One of the authors who manages to capture special education in the world until 1970 is Traian Vrașmaș, from whom I have taken, in this research, some very valuable information. (Vrașmaș T., 2010)

According to the author, the attitude of the society towards people with disabilities, as well as towards other people in difficulty, has been, over time, one of rejection, devaluation, isolation, segregation.

In ancient times, if we were to think of Sparta, children with disabilities were physically exterminated or exposed in cages; the same in Aztec society. In the Middle Ages these people were accused of witchcraft, cursing or paying for the sins of their parents. Regarding the attitude of modern society towards children with disabilities, a group of authors (Descamp si col., 1981, apud. Vrașmaș T., 2001, p. 9) highlights mainly 4 types of reactions: extermination, segregation, grant of reduced citizenship and recognition of equal rights.

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Christians have been referring to disabilities since the Old Testament, where non-discrimination is mentioned, with the Lord wishing "not to speak evil of the deaf, nor before the blind to put a hindrance." (Leviticus 19:14)

And yet, even among Christians, disability, although tolerated and encouraged an attitude of the citizens full of understanding towards it, was perceived as a divine punishment:

"And if you will not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, and force thyself to fulfill all his commandments and decrees," [...] 'Let the Lord beat you with foolishness, blindness, and with numbness of heart.' (Book of Deuteronomy (15: 11 and 28: 15-29)).

The cruel attitude towards children with disabilities is well known in antiquity, with Greek laws encouraging the killing of babies who up to 7 days did not prove normal development.

In Greece and Rome, any minor problem turned a healthy person into one with a disability and was later marginalised.

The concern to help people with physical disabilities dates back to ancient times. A first mention of a prosthesis is in the ancient poem Rig-Veda, a poem written between 3500-1800 BC, in which is presented the story of a queen, Vishpala, an ally of Ashvins, the spirit of the horsemen-gods, who loses his leg in battle and is given an iron prosthesis, returning to battle.

In the Middle Ages there is a new change of social and moral conceptions, the ideas of charity and mercy propagated by Christianity make people with disabilities to be cared for in asylums organized by the Church (Arcan and Ciumăgeanu, 1980, p. 34). Epilepsy was considered to have demonic causes, demonic mastery being considered the primary etiology for mental illness as well.

In the fifteenth century, millions of people (mostly women) were killed in Europe on charges of witchcraft. Many were women with disabilities or mothers of children with disabilities. The mentally ill and the mentally deficient were regarded by Luther and Calvin as sons of the devil, as possessed by Satan, and "In order to get the devil out of them, inhumane treatments were applied to them - they were put in chains and scourged in a barbaric way. Because they were considered to be related to the devil, they were hunted with dog packs on the domains of some magnates, and the conditions for sheltering in hospice remained hellish." (Arcan și Ciumăgeanu, 1980, p. 34)

In the 17th century, "the fools bound in their cells served, like the animals in the menagerie, for the amusement of the visiting public". (Semelaigne, apud. Arcan and Ciumăgeanu, 1980, p.35).

The empirical beginnings in the direction of protecting these people, who have been joined by timid attempts at education, are due to the Enlightenment period, when asylums and hospitals appear.

The first opening to the possibility that even children who learn harder to deserve educational attention is found in Comenius, in *Didactica Magna* (chapter IX): "The heavier and less endowed someone is from nature, the more he needs help, in order to free himself from his limitations and stupidity." (Comenius, apud Vărășmaș, p. 10)

The first to carry out specialized education is considered Gabriel Itard, who tried to humanize that "enfant sauvage" called Victor, discovered at Aveyron, France (1799) whose tutelage he obtained. In the history of pedagogy, these "wild" child is considered the first mentally deficient for which it was demonstrated, according to the authors Arcan and Ciumăgeanu (1980) that education is possible. The teaching-learning techniques used by Itard were later taken over and developed by Seguin, who influenced the progress of "treatment" for people with mental disabilities in special institutions (nursing homes, hospitals).

"Chronologically, the term idiotism was used by J. Esquirol in the eighteenth century, and in 1846 E. Sequin introduced notions of the degrees of mental deficiency: idiot, imbecile, mentally backward or retarded." (Arcan și Ciumăgeanu, 1980).

The orientation of children with disabilities towards special institutions, within which special boarding schools are differentiated and developed more, was a fundamental feature also in the twentieth century.

Between the two world wars, the first timid attempts to overcome the model of separate schools are identified, by establishing special classes, inside the usual schools. This is the case of the "refresher classes" in France, or of the special classes built in our country, for "abnormally educable children", based on the Education Act of 1924:

"For the late-minded children, for those touched by contagious diseases or by physical and intellectual infirmities, which do not make them incapable of receiving primary education, special classes or schools will be established." (Art.16, Education Law of 1924)

A radical form of separation, better said extermination, was known to mankind during the period of the Third Reich, when about 300000 people were killed, considered "subhuman". (Wolfensberger, 1981)

The "segregationist" orientation in special education will continue and will be amplified after the Second World War, when the structures of separate education are strengthened and multiplied, increasing the number of children excluded from the usual living and education environments.

International organizations (UN, WHO, EDF) claim that 10% of the population has disabilities. In many countries it is recognized that, out of the entire school population, about 15-20% have school learning difficulties.

Inclusive education has become a movement at international level, aiming to create an education system in which all children learn together, and are treated equally, regardless of conditions, background, health status, gender, ethnicity.

"A nation can be judged by how it treats its most disadvantaged and vulnerable members. While it's hard to repair the harm already done to children with disabilities, states should take steps more quickly to stop the discrimination that is clouding the lives of these children and theirs. As the report points out, now is the best time to transform the care and treatment of children with disabilities from public shame to the extent of human progress..." (Calivis, 2005)

The concepts used today for the Special Educational Requirements want to replace those concepts that had negative connotations and with the help of which children were considered deformed, infirm, retarded.

The current conceptualization of children with special needs has replaced the negative labeling of the past who saw children with disabilities as crippled, infirm, less fortunate or mentally retarded.

With all the efforts made, we are still faced with the lack of access to education for all children with Special Educational Requirements (SEN), in violation of a fundamental right for all, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and protected by various international conventions, which is a very serious problem.

"Everyone has the right to education. Education must be free of charge, at least as regards elementary and general education. Technical and vocational education must be available to everyone, and higher education must also be equal, accessible to all, on the basis of merit. Education must aim at the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms." (UN, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

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In most countries, there is a dramatic difference between the educational opportunities offered for children with disabilities and those provided for those without disabilities. It is impossible to achieve the goal of Education for All unless a complete change in the situation is achieved. A significant number of children and young people with disabilities are largely excluded from educational opportunities for primary and secondary education.

Education is widely recognized as a means of developing human capital, improving economic performance and increasing people's capacities and choices.

Exclusion, poverty and disability are interlinked. Exclusion and marginalization reduce opportunities for people with disabilities to contribute productively to domestic work and community work, and also increase the risk of falling into poverty.

Attitudinal as well as physical barriers, such as lack of proper transport, physical inaccessibility, and lack of learning opportunities, can affect access to education and employment opportunities, while also reducing the chances of income consolidation as well as social participation.

"The combination of poverty and disability is a frightening one. Any of them can cause the appearance of the other, and their presence in the association has an enormous capacity to destroy the lives of people with disabilities, and to impose burdens on their families that are too hard to bear." (Acton, 1983)

As we can see, poverty and disability are inextricably interconnected. People with disabilities are poorer as a group than the other population in general, and people living in poverty are more likely than others to be disabled.

In order to better understand the current moment of inclusion of children with SEN, it is recommended to present the evolution of the Romanian educational system that has gone through the turbulent periods, which have left consequences. We must not forget that until 1989 Romania was a country that lived in a totalitarian regime, which preferred to ignore the reality of children with disabilities / disabilities at that time.

Children with disabilities represented, in Romania, "the most controversial category of children protected according to Law 3/1970" (Zamfir, 1995: 140). During the communist period, the admission of these children in an institution was considered the most appropriate way of care and, eventually, their schooling, because it was considered that they needed an environment adapted to the special requirements.

Under this law, children were divided into "recoverable," "partially-recoverable," and "unrecoverable."

Those who received the employment of "recoverable" children were oriented to special schools that corresponded to the deficiency to which they belonged (special schools for the hearing, visionary or motorized), and those with mild mental deficiency, to schools-helpers. At the end of the gymnasium, they attended special vocational schools that offered them a professional qualification.

The "partially-recoverable" children were hospitalized in dormitories-school and carried out elementary school education.

The "unrecoverable" children, that is, diagnosed with severe mental disabilities or associated deficiencies, were admitted to the dormitories-hospital, where they received only care, the staff of these institutions having medical training.

The year 1990 meant the beginning of some transformations that our country felt on all levels after the revolution of 1989; then everyone was hopeful of embarking on a new path when the whole people were trying hard to adapt to changes for which they were not yet prepared. The revolution was the signal that the changes were imminent, but the steps that will follow will be difficult, mentalities that have persisted for decades will have to be removed, everything that had been built until then had to be transformed, without having a model that would adapt to what had defined Romania until that moment.

Social interventions will be needed to cover the shortcomings of the general education system, to which will be added intense efforts to change social perception. The period of communism had formed some "models" that now had to be adapted and transformed. The Romanian educational system up to the 89th moment was based on a rigid system, which centered on performance, which it promoted, and whose results, why not admit it, had formed some internationally recognized personalities. The role of the individual was belittled, the achievements were of the party and the individual, especially if it did not "optimally" serve its causes, it was not taken into account.

If we did not present these realities from which the Romanian educational system started, it would be very difficult to understand how inclusive education appeared and what steps inclusive education took in Romania. We can imagine that if even today, 31 years after the revolution, although there was a rigorous concern for legislative regulations and changing the perception of the pedagogical act, the practices of inclusion encounter difficulties, the mentality is very difficult to change, the empathy of all the factors involved is very difficult to achieve, the more the course of the communist era of the system of acceptance of children with disabilities is more dramatic.

After 1990, the measures of child protection, recognition of its value and uniqueness had a good evolution more in the social sphere (from which they "profited", unfortunately some parents, being with their children only for material benefits), but the educational system did not move as quickly and efficiently.

For Eastern Europe, the direction and level that Romania has reached in the sphere of protection of the rights of the child is to be commended, thinking about the starting point, the extemporaneously poor and limited conditions from which it started. We could even say that, in 1990, the zero moment for the change towards inclusive education, the situation of children in Romania was, if not the worst, one of the worst in Europe.

Romania has demonstrated that it has mastered, at least at the level of theory, the principles of inclusive education, which recognized equal opportunities for all children, trying to apply these principles in legislative terms, in practice, proposing innovative projects, carried out by people with a soul, professionals who understood that all children have the same rights regarding access to education and social life.

Goffman is the one who has demonstrated that "total institutions" exercise social control over the individual, create his dependence, do not respect the right to privacy, because absolutely all activities are carried out in this space, they cannot take any initiative without being allowed to do so, he is humiliated being "violated the boundaries of the self". The result of this research was that it set in motion the process of deinstitutionalization and people at risk began to benefit from support services. (Gofman, 2004, p. 52)

The numerous researches aimed at educating children with SEN wanted to highlight the fact that special education, by being "special" itself, stigmatizes, violates the rights of the child and goes against the values of democracy. (Skrtic, 2005)

CONCLUSIONS

Recent years have intensified actions to ensure that all children, regardless of disability, could be included in mainstream education. This cannot change without changing school policy, which would remove any form of discrimination, accept differences between children as uniqueness, and thereby be all the more valuable, promote respect and tolerance among all participants.

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For this to be possible, you need to have prepared communities that accept diversity (Watson, 2009), to have human resources to work with children who have SEN, to have services appropriate to their special needs, to be able to cooperate closely with parents.

"... in the orchard we like to have trees that bear fruit sooner or later [...] all these fruits are good; none is to be thrown away. why not accept more keen or slower minds in schools, then? why wouldn't we help them? we lose time but gain satisfaction and respect..." Comenius

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