



ORIGINAL PAPER

Children with special educational needs (SEN) – a challenge for the present Romanian society

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Abstract:

Modern pedagogical theories have begun to spread in special education in Romania, which uses specific methods for the recovery and education of children with disabilities, but has remained deficient in terms of integration of children with disabilities in public schools in Romania, due to the lack of specialists at national level to use specific methodologies in a differentiated manner.

A 2007 OECD synthesis report on education policies for at-risk and disabled pupils in South-Eastern Europe identifies factors considered to be "barriers or facilitators to inclusion" and equity in education in all countries covered by the assessment. These include: the economic situation of the country, the legal framework, poor diagnosis, lack of pre-school education for some at-risk groups, lack of quality of education for children with ESC in mainstream schools, lack of statistical data, insufficient teacher training, negative attitudes towards children who do not have disabilities (bullying) which generate marginalisation, inadequate attitudes of their parents and teachers in mainstream schools, prejudice, 'lack of responsibility, oversized classes, very demanding work' for both pupils and teachers, insufficient resources, limited access to other complementary services, difficulty in implementing a multidisciplinary approach, lack of a system for monitoring individual children's progress.

Our paper aims to analyse the extent to which our country is able to respond to the major challenge of remedying all these unfavourable aspects, in the shortest time possible, through a holistic approach, integrating the education system, the health system, the social welfare system and all relevant actors, in order to support the inclusive and remedial education of children with special educational needs and their integration into society.

Keywords: *special education needs, social work, vulnerable children, education, social inclusion.*

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Conceptual framework. Defining SEN

“Despite the universally accepted importance of supporting children with SEN, there is no common agreement in Europe of what constitutes special needs in education. The construction of any such definition is hindered by the absence of a harmonised system of classification for individual learning difficulties. There are significant differences across Europe in the labels used to categorise children with SEN, and the social understandings which underpin particular labels.” (European Commission, 2013). Moreover, there are many voices amongst the people with learning difficulties and disabilities who argue that the term SEN is becoming outdated, as it perpetuates labelling and exclusion, by pointing out that these persons are different (Murphy, 2022).

In Romania, special educational needs are defined as "additional educational needs, complementary to the general objectives of education, adapted to individual particularities and to those characteristic of a particular deficiency/affliction or learning disorder/difficulty, as well as complex assistance (medical, social, educational, etc.). Complex care without additional educational needs does not define SEN". (Ministry of Health, 2016).

The topic of approaching special educational needs from an integrated perspective is a main focus of the inclusive education policies, at European and international level and is subscribed to the general concept of inclusion. (Barton, Durkheim, Sen). Particularly for children, inclusion means that all children, regardless of their social status or of their vulnerabilities, must have opportunities to belong to their child care communities, must have the chance to not be seen as “different”, must have the right to learn from one another and grow together with one another (Croft, 2017).

Inclusive education can be explored through the lens of classic and modern sociological theories. Thus, the concept can be subscribed to the social system theory developed by Niklas Luhmann (Luhmann, 1995), given that the dichotomy inclusion-exclusion is identified at different institutional levels. Furthermore, inclusive education is the result of joint initiative and of the interactions and influences between various systems and subsystems. The social systems theory leads our reasoning back towards Herbert Mead’s social self theory (Mead, 2015), stating that an individual’s consciousness, desires, attitudes are developed within the context of social relationships and interactions. What differentiates modern society from traditional ones, according to Emile Durkheim’s theory on the different types of social solidarity, is a fundamental change in the form of social cohesion. (Durkheim, 2001).

If social inclusion cannot be obtained, social exclusion occurs. Likewise, if the purposes of inclusive education are not reached, educational exclusion and marginalization occur, whereas phenomena like bullying and labelling – causing vicious forms of social stigma – become more and more frequent. According to the reference group theory (Merton, 1949), “a person considered normal tends to have prejudices against a person whom he identifies as having a disability and is not part of his group” (Goga, I. C., Niță, A. M., 2018: 50).

Legal and strategic framework

In Romania, the legislative framework complies with the legislation created by international bodies on the education of people with special educational needs (SEN), to which it has adhered by signing these documents:

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989);

Children with special educational needs (SEN) – a challenge for the present Romanian society

- The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994);
- Standard Rules on Special Needs Education (UN, 1993);
- World Declaration on Education for All (UN, 1990).

The main documents that link the directions of development of the education of children with special needs with the reality of Romanian society are the following:

- Romanian Constitution - Article 46;
- National Education Law no. 1/2011;
- Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights;
- Law 448/2006 on the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities;
- Social Assistance Law 292/2011.

These organic laws have been supplemented by rules and regulations approved by Ministerial Order in order to implement the respective measures in the field of special education (Ministry of Education, 2011 - a, b).

There is an ongoing concern about special education, which is why the current rules will be constantly revised and adapted to the requirements of quality special education.

Within the meaning of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), “inclusive education needs to be clarified in national contexts and its principles promoted and integrated into national legislation and education policies and practices across Europe” (Popescu, A. M., Motoi, G., 2022: 275).

Identifying difficulties and challenges in enforcing educational inclusion policies for children with SEN

The Government Decision for the approval of the The National Strategy regarding the Rights of Persons with Disabilities for the period 2020-2027 acknowledges the fact that there exists a comprehensive legislative framework specific to inclusive education, but the approach is not coherent and unitary, “because of the lack of financial and human resources with the necessary skills and knowledge, trained in special education.” (Romanian Government, 2022).

The 2007 OECD Synthesis Report on Education Policies for At-Risk and Disabled Pupils in South-Eastern Europe (OECD, 2007) identifies factors considered to be "barriers or facilitators to inclusion" and equity in education in all countries covered by the evaluation:

"Facilitators are reforms in education that have introduced a positive legislative framework, policies and support from authorities, adherence to international agreements, the role of non-governmental organisations, the interest of schools and their flexibility, the professional autonomy of teachers, their training - particularly initial training and their positive attitude."

Other facilitators are: motivated parents, school leaders, national and international organisations that support the assistance process, the positive-socio-emotional climate, school equipment and material resources, individual education plans, etc.

The barriers highlighted by the situation analysis of the countries participating in the evaluation are: the economic situation of the country, the legal framework, poor diagnosis, lack of pre-school education for some at-risk groups, lack of quality of education for children with ESC in mainstream schools, lack of statistical data, insufficient teacher training, negative attitudes towards children without disabilities

(bullying) which generate marginalisation, inappropriate attitudes of parents and teachers in mainstream schools, prejudice, lack of responsibility, oversized classes, very demanding work for both pupils and teachers, insufficient resources, limited access to other complementary services, difficulty in implementing a multi-disciplinary approach, lack of a system for monitoring individual children's progress, etc.

Pointing out at the biggest challenge concerning the classification of special educational needs, the Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and training (NESSE) underlines the distinction between normative and non-normative difficulties. The first category includes physical and sensory difficulties, for which there is a consensus among specialists related to objective assessment measures. The second category includes the types of difficulties that are harder to identify and assess and where professional judgement plays a more consistent role. Whereas normative categories tend to have a low incidence, non-normative categories tend to have a higher occurrence. They are specific for the majority of children having SEN, at international level. (NESSE, 2012).

In 2017, in the framework of the project "Education without discrimination is also my business", carried out by the Centre for Legal Resources in partnership with the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Programme, relevant public documents in the field of educational policies for vulnerable children were analysed and specialists in education and social issues were consulted in three public debates in Bucharest, Iasi and Craiova. The specific issues raised were used as a starting point for developing public policy recommendations to reduce the socio-educational marginalisation of vulnerable children. The document draws attention to the following problems identified:

- the number of psycho-pedagogic teachers, psychology teachers, speech teachers, itinerant and support teachers and school counsellors is insufficient in Romanian schools;
- one specialist is responsible for a very large number of pupils;
- there is not enough effective working time for specialist support for children;
- in rural areas, there are far too few such specialists, or sometimes none at all;
- the professional roles of support specialists are confused and there is very little cooperation between education and social work specialists;
- school mediators are very under-represented in the school environment, relative to the existing need, and are not sustainable over time.

It is reported that "[...] all this limits the results that can be achieved in terms of reaching the child's development potential, maintains a low quality of socio-educational approaches and fails to ensure the educational inclusion of all children!" (Center for Legal Resources, 2017).

Perhaps a key-factor that must be underlined when investigating the main causes for the poor identification and classification of children with disabilities and/ or special educational needs is the fact that the Romanian legislation does not provide the parents' obligation of having their child assessed and leaves them the free choice to apply or not for a disability certificate or a school counselling and orientation certificate, the latter granting the access of the pupil with SEN to the complex educational support system. (Ministry of Education, 2011 a).

Some authors argue that inclusive education in Romania needs consistent change and the Romanian society need a change itself, from the paradigm of selfishness to helping each other achieve a common interest (Ghergut A., Frumos, I., 2019).

Children with special educational needs (SEN) – a challenge for the present Romanian society

A sociological analysis: Perceptions of the teachers and parents on the socio-educational approach of children with SEND

This section presents the main results of a qualitative and quantitative research that we performed based on an interview and, respectively, on a questionnaire applied between March-April 2023 in the city of Craiova, Romania.

During the first stage of the research, we interviewed 10 elementary school teachers, selected from 7 mass education schools in Craiova, using an interview guide with 8 questions. Subsequently, we applied a questionnaire consisting of 11 questions (both closed, scaled and open answer questions) on a number of 57 parents, indicated by the participants in the interview as parents of children with special education needs or potentially special educational needs (both classified and not classified as such) – namely 26 and, respectively, 31 parents of children from 2 classes with the highest prevalence of cases, according to the results of the interview.

The main objective of the present research is to identify the degree of knowledge and recognition of the SEND problematic amongst educators and parents.

Another objective concerns the extent to which teachers and parents are informed and aware about the resources and support that the legal framework in Romania provides and engages in solving this particular issue which involves a high level of responsibility for all relevant actors in the field.

A further objective aims at identifying further needs and gaps to be filled in the health, education and social work systems in Romania, in order to provide consistent and sustainable support in the future, for compliance with the requirements regarding educational and social inclusion and integration of this extremely vulnerable category of children.

First of all, we shall present the results of the interview applied to the selected elementary school teachers, which consisted of 8 questions, from which we selected a few of the most relevant answers for our research.

Q1: How many children with special education needs are included in your class?

Answer 1: “In my class there are, currently, 27 children, of which one child with Down síndrome who has a school counselling and orientation certificate issued by CJRAE Dolj and whose mother assists him daily during the school activities”.

Answer 2: “Out of 26 children in my class, there are 6 who have school counselling and orientation certificates and 9 children that, in my opinion, have learning difficulties and should also have this kind of certificate, but were not assessed by CJRAE. Thus, half of my class are SEND children.”

Answer 3: “3 of 31 children are SEND children. 2 of them are also physically disabled children and one has only learning impairments. There is also a pupil that has an ADHD- similar behaviour, but was never assessed as such and one that has certain cognitive issues.”

Answer 4: “I suspect that 3 children out of the 28 in my class have specific learning issues, but they are not diagnosed and have no certificate from the competent authority and, thus, I must declare that there is no SEND child in my class.”

According to all the answers of the participants to this first question, we identified 40 children with special education needs and disabilities, included in a total number of 9 classes and 276 pupils (only one teacher answered that there are no SEND

children in her class), which leads to the conclusion that the percentage of children belonging to this category is very high – nearly 14 %. The main problem appears to be the fact that many of these children are not properly assessed or diagnosed and do not possess special school counselling and orientation certificates.

Q2: How informed are you and, respectively, the parents, about children with SEND and the institutional measures taken for their inclusion?

Answer 1: “We, the teachers, are well aware of this problem that seems to be more and more extensive during the last years. There is, mainly, this Ministerial Order no. 1985 from 2016 that regulates the procedures for the assessment and the integration of children with SEND in the mass education system. Procedurally, we are ok, but the problem that I have noticed myself and many of my colleagues is that the system does not function as a whole, there are many missing links in the chain, there is a lack of specialists and the parents, on the other side, are not very well informed about the possibilities that the state offers.”

Answer 2: “We are obliged to be very well informed about this issue, it is our mission and duty as teachers to be informed about how to proceed when such a case occurs in our class. I very much agree with the integrated approach, I very much agree that these children have the right to be included in the mass education system together with all other children, but my impression is that the system is not fully prepared to integrate them – there is labelling, there is bullying, there is a lack of knowledge from the parents, they are not well oriented and they tend to rather hide the problem than confront it.”

Answer 3: “I consider myself to be very well informed, because I have to and because I have been working with children with SEND since the beginning of my career. I also took part in several trainings organised by the school inspectorate or by the Ministry [of Education – or note]. Not very often, it is true. But what am I to do about the parents? I know that it is very difficult when this problem appears in a family, I know that there are many who struggle and do all their best to take the appropriate measures for their child – and even in these situations it is not sufficient. But there are also these parents that – no matter how hard you try to explain to them the correct institutional way and the good that they could do to their child if they took this way, refuse to do so.”

All teachers that took part in our interview stated that they are informed about the SEND- problematic, but would appreciate if they benefitted from more training and that only a small part of the parents of children from this category are well informed and are following the correct procedural steps when it comes to their education.

Q3: What are the most frequent types of SEND that you came or come in contact with, as a teacher?

Answer 1: “During the past years, I have witnessed a more and more frequent prevalence of autism amongst children, some of them even being diagnosed with acquired autism – from electronic devices abuse. There are also children with small or medium mental retardation, children with Down syndrome, ADHD or with specific learning impairments.”

Answer 2: “Currently, in my class, there is one child with autism, one that has a mild form of cerebral palsy, associated with small learning difficulties and a child with

Children with special educational needs (SEN) – a challenge for the present Romanian society

diagnosed ADHD. But in the past years, I worked with many children with various degrees of physical and/or mental disability, with Down syndrome, with unspecific learning impairments that – in my opinion- were not properly diagnosed by the clinicians. Those are the hardest cases, because you simply don't know what to do.”

The answers provided by the participants in the interview revealed that there are various types of deficiencies and impairments that can be classified as SEND – from sensorial deficiencies to physical-motor and neurologic-motor disabilities and mental disabilities. There are also children with recognisable learning impairments that do not have a diagnose, a certification of any kind or for which no individual intervention plan has been issued.

Q4: How much effort do you have to put in, as a teacher, in order to properly address the special requirements of these children?

Answer 1: “It is extremely difficult to work with children with special education needs. I am well aware of our duty, as educators, to ensure their inclusion and to prevent them from being bullied by the other children, but to use and stimulate their potential to a full extent is a rather overwhelming task, because those who are diagnosed are either alone in school or accompanied by their parents, as assistants, who do not have the abilities and competences of a professional supporting teacher. Because of the lack of sufficient itinerant and supporting teachers in the system, some parents have to pay a “shadow” for their child or become “shadows” themselves.

Answer 2: “I do not intend to be rude or unprofessional, but only on child with SEND is a game changer in the class. Not to mention that there are so many in my class and the most of them are not diagnosed and, because of that, they are pulling the whole class behind, given that I have to slow down everything so that they could keep the pace too.”

Answer 3: “Believe me, there are days when I go home after school and cry or have headaches because it is very exhausting to perform 100% when you have no help at all, with them not having the certificates or not having a supporting teacher and me being forced to adapt the whole content so that absolutely all children in my class understand it. It is a pity, on the other side, for the children with high potential, because I don't have enough time or means of help for them either.”

Most teachers expressed the idea that it is very difficult for a teacher to work with a class that includes one or more children with SEND, especially in a system that does not provide enough help in terms of supporting teachers and specialists.

Q5: How much cooperation there is between you, as a representative of the education institution, and the parents of the children with SEND?

Answer 1: “I could give you the example of the mother of a child with autism, who is very involved and cooperant – but her son's learning impairments are big enough and both her – as her son's shadow in school - and I have to work very hard; on the other side, I have the example of a mother of a child whom I suspect to suffer from a form of mental retardation and who is not willing to accept that and to do the necessary steps for her son's diagnose and inclusion on the specific rehabilitation and certification path. I tell her almost every day that she must take measures about her son and she says that he has no problem, he is just slower and will soon adjust. I think that she fears the fact that

she would be called in school to accompany him every day, if she takes a certificate for him and she has no time to do that. But I have contacted the school counsellor and, more recently, a social worker and I hope that they will find a solution to this problem as soon as possible.”

Answer 2: “I have had children with SEND in my class for many years, almost every education cycle comes with such challenges. From my experience, I can tell that most of the parents are not very open about this issue, they somehow feel hurt or overwhelmed when I try to come closer to the problem, discuss with them and guide them towards counselling or other forms of help. Very surprisingly, there was also one situation in which I signalled certain learning difficulties to the family of one of my pupils, they were very receptive, but none of the specialists that they consulted afterwards was able to provide a diagnose and the problem remained unsolved. We don’t have enough specialists and the ones we have are – for their most part- not very well prepared”.

Answer 3: “I have had and I am still having cases from both poles: either extremely engaged parents, that gave up any other activity for taking care of their children and accompany them in school and became their children therapists and work uninterruptedly for their rehabilitation or parents who don’t know enough about their children’s condition and even seem to not want to know more and leave everything up to us, considering that it’s the school’s duty exclusively to remediate the learning problems. It’s a very delicate situation.”

Most of the interviewed teachers complained about a rather poor communication and cooperation with the parents of children with SEN, who either tend to overprotect their children and force certain requirements or conditions to be ensured by the school, that are sometimes impossible to attain or, on the other hand, tend to ignore all recommendations and suggestions of the teachers, trying to impose their opinion and have a negative attitude, varying from indifference to hostility. Cooperative parents are rare and teachers also mentioned cases in which they had a good communication with the parents, but the other institutions and specialists involved in the assessment (e.g. doctors) were not able to provide a diagnosis or to recognize the problem.

Q6: What do you consider to be the biggest problem when it comes to the integration of children with SEN in mainstream schools?

Answer 1: “It think that it all comes down to the lack of knowledge and information and to the fact that the people involved do not know their roles and their rights completely and maybe they are also afraid to take responsibility, because it is such a delicate matter.”

Answer 2: “Romania, in my opinion, is still not prepared to integrate these children and to facilitate their access to a normal life and to normal education. I am very aware of my affirmation, because I am a teacher, but I am also the mother of a child with physical and intellectual disability. I know the legislation by heart, I have studied everything and tried everything, because I have always wanted to give my child the same opportunities as “normal” children and I have been fighting very hard for this. The problem is that, somewhere on this path, someone is not properly doing their job, someone avoids taking responsibility, someone doesn’t do his/her job very well, someone or something is missing from the chain. It still isn’t a unitary approach, it will

Children with special educational needs (SEN) – a challenge for the present Romanian society

take long until things will be better in Romania.”

Answer 3: “Honestly, I don’t know which of the problems – because there are many- to mention firstly. I would say that we don’t have enough specialists for the correct assessment and classification of these children, I would mention bullying – that sometimes makes parents to make the decision not to obtain a disability certificate or a school orientation certificate for their children and I would also mention the fact that the parties involved don’t know their rights and their obligations or know them only partly or abuse their rights and ignore their obligations. Imagine a chain in which there is always a missing link; and when you repair one link, another one breaks or even if none is missing, some of them are rusty and the chain never functions well. I think it’s time that a good craftsman repairs the chain and puts all links together and oils them and gives them a new shine.”

The teachers’ answers reveal that none of them is satisfied with the functioning of the complex system consisting of institutions, educators, parents and various specialists involved with regard to addressing the SEN problematic. The very expressive metaphor of the chain summarizes that there is an unsatisfying allocation of roles and resources and that the relevant actors do not fit together very well, up to this point.

As mentioned above, the second component of our sociological research, aiming at investigating the other perspective of the school-parent relationship and at taking a further step in understanding the parents’ perception on the process of educational integration and social inclusion of children with SEN, envisaged using the quantitative method on a sample of parents from mainstream schools in Craiova city. From the 7 schools investigated previously through the qualitative study, we selected 2 full classes in which the occurrence of children with SEN was the most frequent. Thus, the sample consisted of 57 parents of children with or without educational needs, in order to grant the authenticity and objectivity of the results.

The results of this study are presented in the following, mentioning that, out of document economy reasons, for certain open answer questions we only selected the most relevant answers.

Q1: How informed are you about the problematic of children with special educational needs included in the Romanian mainstream education system?

Variants	Percent
Not at all informed	12.2 %
Little informed	17.6 %
Quite well informed	43.9 %
DK/ NO	26.3 %

Nearly 44 % of the respondents stated that they are quite well informed about the topic of children with special educational needs, but this involves a certain level of one’s subjectivity about himself/herself.

Q2: Do you agree with the fact that children with special education needs have the right to be integrated in mainstream schools?

Variants	Percent
Yes	70 %
No	21 %
DK/ NA	9 %

The percentage of 21% parents that do not agree with children with SEN being integrated in mainstream schools is quite worrying, taking into account that these parents' children have school colleagues with SEN and they might transmit their children a negative attitude towards these children.

Q3: To which extent are you familiar with the procedures and measures for the integration of children with SEN in mainstream schools?

Variant	Percent
To a very large extent	17.5 %
To a large extent	8.8 %
To some extent	12.2 %
To a small extent	10.5 %
To a very small extent	21 %
DK/ NA	30 %

More than 50% of the parents answered that they are not familiar with these measures or they have no opinion at all, which points out a small degree of visibility and understanding of this issue.

Q4: To which extent do you consider that children with SEN are well integrated in the mainstream schools from our city?

Variant	Percent
To a very large extent	12.2 %
To a large extent	15.8 %
To some extent	17.5 %
To a small extent	14 %
To a very small extent	35 %
DK/ NA	5.5 %

The highest percentage of parents (35 %) consider that children with SEN are integrated in mainstream schools "to a very small extent". We must keep in mind that amongst these respondents we may encounter both parents of children with SEN and without SEN.

Q5: To your knowledge, are there children with special educational needs in the class that your child belongs to?

Variant	Percent
Yes	73.7 %
No	0 %
DK/ NA	26.3 %

It is rather improbable that a parent should not know the composition of his/ her child's class. We are inclining more towards the supposition that part of the 26.3 % of the respondents are those parents mentioned by several teachers, that refuse to acknowledge that their children are SEN children.

**Children with special educational needs (SEN) – a challenge for the present
Romanian society**

Q6: Do you personally know any children with special educational needs?

Variant	Percent
Yes	100 %
No	0%
DK/ NA	0 %

The respondents unanimously pointed out that they personally know children with special educational needs.

Q7: If the answer to the previous question was affirmative, please explain.

(selected answers)

Answers indicating that their child has SEN	<p>“My son has Down syndrome and associated minor learning difficulties”</p> <p>“Yes, my daughter”</p> <p>“I have a child with dyslexia which is in this class”</p> <p>“My daughter has a certificate from CJRAE because she was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 5”</p> <p>“My boy. He suffers from a physical disability and a mild mental retardation”</p> <p>“My daughter has cerebral palsy and learned to speak very late and is behind in school so that is why we issued a certificate for school”</p> <p>“My own daughter has a ASD and I am her shadow in school, she has a certificate”</p>
Answers indicating that their child doesn't have SEN	<p>“Yes, in my son's class there are 3 children”</p> <p>“In our class there are some children with handicap, the class teacher explained it to us in the beginning”</p> <p>“I only know the children from my son's school”</p> <p>“There are a few in my child's class and in our school”</p>

Q8: If you suspected that your child has learning difficulties of any kind, who would you contact first?

The family doctor/ paediatrician/ other doctors	47.3 %
The teacher/ head teacher in school	31.6 %
The school counsellor	7 %
The authority for social protection	3.5 %
A psychologist	10.6 %
Others (please name)	0 %

47.3 % of the parents stated that they would contact a doctor (family doctor/ paediatrician/ other doctors) if they suspected that their child has learning difficulties. Other 31.6 % mentioned that they would contact the teacher/ head teacher, 10.6 % would contact a psychologist, 7% would go to the school counsellor and 3.5 % towards the authority for social protection. We appreciate that these are satisfying answers, given that any of the specialists mentioned are part of the inter-institutional network or system of resources that is able to engage the other relevant actors in finding the appropriate solutions for any child with SEN.

Q9: If a teacher/ educator would bring to your knowledge that your child might have certain learning impairments/ special educational needs, what would you do? (selected answers)

“I would ask for a second opinion, I would bring him to the doctor”.
“I think that these teachers are simply lazy and don’t want to do their job and blame everything on us, the parents, like I have to teach my child, not her.”
“I would be scared, but I would consult my husband and decide what to do. I think a doctor should be seen first.”
“The teacher even told me several times that my son has learning difficulties but I think these things are normal in children, some of them are slower and need more time to catch the rhythm.”
“I have already been in this situation. I suspected something already, but when the teacher told me, I went to CJRAE and had my daughter assessed and she became a certificate for that.”
“The teacher and school counsellor signalled some problems that my son has in school. I don’t know what to say about it, but I am still not taking a certificate for him, because I don’t want him to be laughed about in school. Children are mean, they laugh all the time and call them “handicapped”.
“I think teachers should teach the children mathematics and Romanian, not to give their opinion about my child. They have no right to make statements about my children’s health.”

The answers to this question are not homogenous and they correlate to the answers provided by the teachers, during the interviews, namely that there are parents who respond to the signal that their child might have SEN in a positive manner, willing to accept and follow the recommendations of the educators and, on the other hand, there are parents who are very sceptical and mistrusting of the teachers’ abilities to identify special educational needs in children or of their right to interfere. There are also several parents who fear that their child would be bullied in school if the other children found out that he belongs to a “special” category of children.

Q10: To which extent do you consider that children with SEN are well integrated in the mainstream schools from our city?

Variant	Percent
To a very large extent	8.8 %
To a large extent	14.2 %
To some extent	24.5 %
To a small extent	14 %

**Children with special educational needs (SEN) – a challenge for the present
Romanian society**

To a very small extent	17.5 %
DK/ NA	21 %

More than 50 % of the respondents consider that children with SEN are integrated in the mainstream schools from our city from a moderate to a very small extent. These answers point out that there still are many things to be addressed and remediated.

Q11: What would be your recommendations for a better integration of children with SEN in the mainstream schools?

(selected answers)

“I think that more should be done about bullying. It is very difficult to convince a child that school is good for him, when everyday he comes home upset and frustrated because the other children hurt him”.
“We need more specialists. There are not enough psychologists, not enough doctors who are specialized in this problem, not enough supporting teachers in schools, it’s like the hardest part remains to us, the parents. It is simply not fair”.
“I guess we need more communication. School with parents, parents with children, children amongst them, the institutions with each other.”
“Teachers need more training and also more help, because they are overwhelmed with their job. There should be more supporting teachers and the state should also offer free therapy for all children with special education needs”.

These recommendations speak for themselves and are, also, correlated with the answers to the questions addressed to the teachers during the interviews. There is need for intervention from multiple points of view for a proper educational inclusion of children with SEN.

Conclusions

The results of our sociological research proved to be correlated to the previous theoretical and empirical observations made by specialists in the field of social and educational inclusion and, particularly, in the area of expertise regarding children with special educational needs. There doesn’t seem to be a coherent approach with regard to the integration of children with SEN in the educational system in Romania, as there is a certain lack of responsibility amongst most of the relevant actors. Although most of the teachers are familiar and compliant with their tasks and duties regarding the educational approach of pupils with SEN, there is a strong need for further training and instruction and for appropriate resources and supporting staff.

Public awareness campaigns, at national and local level, about the recognition, identification, support and educational inclusion of children with SEND, targeting educators, parents, caregivers, therapists, social workers and all members of the support network for vulnerable children would bring consistent benefits for the harmonization of the whole process. Parental education workshops would help parents understand their role and obligation towards their children with special educational needs and to build trust in the reliability of the educational support measures and programmes. Many of these interventions could be achieved within projects with European financing, within public-private partnerships, with the involvement of civil society that has been playing a key-role, during the last decades, in promoting social inclusion and integration initiatives.

Furthermore, we recommend that specific legislation and normative acts in the field of inclusive education for children with disabilities and/ or special education needs shall be amended, in order not to completely invest the parents with the power of dictating the educational path of their children with SEN. We also suggest that the School Inspectorates work in close connection with the Child Protection authorities and with social workers, as well as with the other specialists invested with specific roles, in order to form a reliable network of support, based on a thorough assessment and identification process.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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Children with special educational needs (SEN) – a challenge for the present Romanian society

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