

**THE PROBLEMATIC FIELDS,
THE SCIENTIFIC AND APPLICATIVE TOPICS
IN SPECIAL EDUCATION IN COMPLIANCE
WITH NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN POLICIES
AND STRATEGIES REGARDING DISABILITIES (I)**

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Abstract:

Research on special education give new response to the issue of disability from perspective often termed the "human rights based approach". In the next study our purpose is to identify the new research directions, the problematic fields, scientific and applied themes concordant to national and European strategies and policies. That article is based on the analysis of important journals according to inclusion strategies; new themes included in traditional journals, contents of some books, projects financed by EU, review edited by important organizations / institutions. The article identifies topics were related to: educational policies, organizational culture and ethos that promotes inclusion; researches on teachers' attitude towards the persons with disabilities and inclusion; studies on the training of the teachers regarding the educational inclusion; special educational needs; trends in Curriculum Design.

Key words: Normalization, Integration, Inclusive school, Positive attitudes towards inclusion, Special educational needs, Response to Intervention, Curriculum Adaptation; Universal Curriculum Design; Anti-Bias Curriculum; Affective curriculum; Integrated Curriculum, The Pyramid Approach to Special Education

For the quality of the doctoral school is very important to adopt a prospective attitude. It's important to report the doctoral school student's researches to themes and research directions that imply problems in which solutions could influence on long term the educational realities. These researches have also a lot of potential according to their value in theoretical and methodological fields and answer to a scientific and applicative purpose. In

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Education Sciences and in Special Needs Education also the value is attached to promoting and implementation of the greatest values of social and educational policies in the European area. Approaching all the problems of the disabilities persons through the lens of human rights, led to emerge into fields of theories, strategies, legislations and educational realities of some principles and concepts to which main notes are opposite to the anterior concepts and principles. The new approach proposes reactions and another type of actions in that field, and as direct consequences some other priorities in special education research. The great principles based on human rights (that could be found in United Nations documents, in European countries legislation and on other continents too) as preventing and fighting against discrimination, social solidarity, equal chances, respect for diversity, school and social integration and inclusion lead to the apparition of a new educational reality and also to the apparition of inclusive schools and some alternatives orientated to the fulfilling of support needs of the children/students with disabilities and also for those one discriminated by social environment. In order to prove the necessities of inclusive scholar needs an important role was played by the researches from Special Needs Education filed. These researches pointed the role of education and compensatory therapy and make up programs in updating and developing every children's potential, in developing strong, psychological and social mature personalities, despite some damages they have and proved that in majority of cases, every person, in some special conditions, can achieve some capacities and competencies important for the personal and social autonomy. In the next study our purpose is to identify the new research directions, the problematic fields, scientific and applied themes concordant to national and European strategies and policies of disability person's area.

The identification sources of the main orientations, tendencies and directions for the European research in special education were: the themes approached in new issues of the very important journals according to inclusion strategies; new themes included in traditional journals, which proves that those one include articles according to new principles and strategies; projects financed from European money, review of some organizations such as European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education; contents of published books. The most important research directions and themes identified propose new strategies, methodologies, technologies and educational styles, new directions in the field of initial and continuous formation of the school teachers. This type of researches can contribute in a significant way to the consolidation of the new educational realities based on the main principles wrote into European countries legislation. We are presenting one by one these problematic areas.

1. School inclusion; Educational policies; researches concerning training of the teachers in the field of inclusive school

School inclusion concept is the result of complex anterior process in which academically research, the action-research and the new educational realities build on legislation according to human rights lead to a terminological clarification and also to pointing the action directions through which the all society must be responsible for helping children/student with disabilities to have a future and a dignified life: "full participation and equality". One of the first concepts elaborated and defined into the light of the unalienable and nonnegotiable human being rights is the one called **normalization**. The "normalization" concept first appeared in Scandinavian countries, based on solid critics concerning the impact of all traditional educational system based on close institution services (special school, children home) which affected the psychical development of the children and also the capacity of communication and affectivity to the children discriminated by environment and seriously bound the perspectives of social, professional and community future integration. The person with disabilities, as full rights citizen, must have a normal life, meaning: be in everyday life where all the people are, being part of specific activities for their ages. The preschool child goes to the nearest kindergarten or to that one chosen by the parents and plays to some age kids. If all the students from the community are into school together, among them it must be the student with disabilities too. The young person and the adult with disabilities must do something useful and paid. All the free time activities to which every citizen has access to, must be accessible also to the child or adult with disabilities. Only this kind of normal life assures the valorization of a person with disabilities, stimulation and isolation attenuation, a dignified life, preventing discrimination, updating and developing the bio psychic potential of the child or young person and auto control to the inter personal relationships and its own way in life. A normal life and activities such as a normal person's life from the community needs family, social and professional integration. **Integration** implies the presence in community, in school and society for the child and adult with disabilities and also his visibility. **Integration** is usual defined by legislation as: "the interaction process between the person or group and social environment, thought which is created a functional equilibrium of the parts". In order to integrate to a given normal environment, the person with disabilities must overcome itself some obstacles, to change its behavior, to "adjust", to accommodate to the environment demands and to the all situation. School integration is define by Romanian legislation as: "adaptive process of the child to the necessities of school he is attending, establishing positive affective rapports with the member of his school group and successfully fulfill his scholar

duties. Assimilating by child of scholar status is the result of some internal modification in equilibrium between some personality dominants with direct consequences in his action plan" (17, pg 3). In the same time with integration process of the child with disabilities in normal school and of the adult with disabilities in labor market, it became clear that society must help to integrate the persons with disabilities. We are talking about implementation of all the right measures to assure in school and community the needed support for the person with disabilities to play all the roles the other citizen have. The process transfers the accent posted on rehabilitation of person in order to "fit" into society to idea that society must change, the society must include all its members and fulfill the needs (basic in the light of human rights) of every member, including persons with disabilities. The concept of large extension, which marks the responsibility of the society in order to give equal chances to person with disabilities and to support its educational and social integration, is the **inclusion** concept. The new vision requires among others: life into community; projection of a flexible world for everybody; strategies that value abilities and competencies in development; giving support measures and fulfilling the special educational needs; promoting an accessible and stimulating environment; breaking the barriers, reviewing the rules, strategies and attitudes. **Scholar inclusion** is the process of preparing schools in order to include in education all community members, no matter of their characteristics, disadvantages or difficulties. The inclusive education represents the process that improves school permanently and its purpose is to explore the existent resources, especially human resources, in order to support participation to the educational process to all the persons from the community. The **inclusive school** is that school in which is assured education for all the children. Because is a school of individual diversity it is considered the most effective way to combat discrimination. Inclusive school means that: physical, informational and attitudinal environment is adapted; teaching strategies are based on individual diversity, educational individual intervention plans; assessment and evaluation leave the pattern based on differences between normal children and children with disabilities and replace it to a pattern based on all potential of the child, on what the child could do and become in the future. The researches concerning social and scholar inclusion, building and developing inclusive schools, is the most important in all the informational resources identified by us. Important specialized reviews have significant titles: Inclusive and special education review; *Intégration et inclusion scolaire* ; *La pédagogie de l'inclusion scolaire*; *Zeitschrift für Inklusion*. **Educational policies**, managing the changing process and educational system innovations concerning scholar inclusion take a special place in special literature that we investigated. The educational policy of inclusion it was positive since the beginning – it gave an answer to major problem, the one of eradication of the scholar and social exclusion of child, young person and adult with disabilities. Also, educational policy became

reality through official documents, national strategies, programs, implementation of resources. Scientific research has come in the support of educational policies by orienting towards mobilization all the actors from the educational space to accept the inclusion based on scientific arguments and its added value. The identified topics were related to: re-imagining of special education; paradigms changes and innovative approaches regarding inclusive education service; the role of the research in any decision concerning the unification of general and special education; inclusive education, concerns for equity and social justice in the educational space; increasing educational opportunities for all pupils; organizational culture and ethos that promotes inclusion, the creation of policies and practices of inclusive culture; organized support structures for inclusion, efficiency and effectiveness; addressing individual diversity in the classroom / school in terms of accessibility and resources; models of inclusive schools(the Infusion model, the Collaborative Training model and the Unification model equalization of human resources in national systems; flexible resource management systems that promote inclusion. Also, the comparative studies on inclusive policies and practices are revealed in the prestigious volumes as the Research in Comparative and International Education and in the publications of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Statistics Institute. Attitude factors from the social or scholar environment can be both barriers and facilitator elements of scholar inclusion. Among the analyzed studies, teachers' attitude towards inclusion is emphasized as a successful predictor of inclusion. Ascertaining studies were realized in different countries concerning the teachers' representations regarding the educational reform, which refers also to scholar inclusion. Research on **teachers' attitude** towards the persons with disabilities and inclusion and formation of **positive attitudes towards inclusion** in initial and continuing training of teachers are revealed in prestigious journals such as Cambridge Journal of Education, College Student Journal, Journal for Visual impairment & Blindness. The conception of positive attitudes towards inclusion as well as teachers' skills development required for the creation of an inclusive school, which could lead to the scholar progress of all pupils, as well as to superior performance in some areas, are quite dominant in the multiple studies related to research on initial and continuous training of the teachers in inclusive education. These conclusions are presented in numerous studies from reviews such as "Teacher Education and Special Education", International Journal of Inclusive Education, Teaching and Teacher Education, European Journal of Special Needs Education, and in the papers of international congresses (18), and in prestigious volumes. Ascertainable studies identify the training needs of various categories of teachers (15; 16). Studies on the **training of the teachers regarding the educational inclusion** are proposing: models of initial training of the teachers to include pupils with disabilities; modules of a Curriculum for training the teachers in scholar inclusion; establishing lines of contact between

the University and the inclusive-school, socio-cultural links and attraction of the graduates with physical / sensory disabilities to higher education; analysis and solutions regarding: the competences of the teachers to create key skills of pupils in heterogeneous classes, as well as their competence to engage in a practice based on reflection and research; the implementation of relevant research results regarding inclusion in effective teaching practices; collaborative teaching. A special place, among all this concerns: the presentation of good, effective and reflexive practices, the experience of the teachers and of the educational institutions in the creation of inclusive classes, the relation between the school and the community, the problem of eliminating the existing barriers in learning and participation. From all this we understand that the training of the teachers, especially the initial one has to be oriented towards attitudes, beliefs and values as well in order to assure the valuing and the affirmation of the development abilities and capacities of all pupils as well as of each one of them. Civic and human rights education in the continuous training of human resources from the education and social protection is addressed as an important component. The transformation of the teachers' from being "the victims of the change" into being the "agents of the change" is considered crucial for the future of their teaching profession.

2. Special educational needs/requirements

In 1982, the World Health Organization takes over the conclusions of the long-lasting scientific research of dr. Philipp Wood which makes the distinction between impairment, disability and handicap; impairment (in Romanian –deficiență; in French- défficience) is defined as "any loss or anomaly of the structure or of the psychological, physiological or anatomical function"; the disability(in Romanian- incapacitate; in French-incapacité) represents: "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of the ability to perform an activity in the manner or within what is considered normal for human beings". The concept of 'handicap (in Romanian- handicap, in French-handicap) is defined through a bio-psycho-social perspective "A disadvantage for a person, resulting from an impairment or disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a normal role, depending on age, gender, social and cultural factors for that person. Disability is a function of the relationship between disabled people and the environment. It occurs when they encounter cultural, physical or social barriers, which prevents access to various systems of society which are available to other citizens. This makes the disability is the loss or the limitation of the opportunities to take part in the community life on an equal level with the others"(44, page 3). These distinctions that underlines the necessity of equalization of opportunities have been included in the World

Programme of Action concerning disabled people adopted by the UN General Assembly and signed by the Member States. Starting with that moment a shift has occurred regarding: the implementation of the social and educational services needed for the reduction of the disadvantages generated by the physical, informational and attitudinal environment; the identification of the support needed for a certain category of persons with disabilities and for that each of these persons to be integrated into the educational and social environment. In order for them to be integrated into the educational system and to benefit of the school services, the child with disabilities needs a differential and individualized support, in order to satisfy what has been introduced in legislation under the term "special educational requirements". The Educational Science research have been focusing towards the identification of needs of pupils both from special and inclusive schools but also from new created institutions such as the Day Centre for the children with polihandicap. New concepts have emerged such as **Needs of support, Special Educational Needs (SEN)** / **Besoins des enfants handicapés** or, in the Romanian legislation - special educational requirements (CES), defined as "additional educational needs, additional to the general objectives of education adapted to individual characteristic deficiencies or learning difficulties, and a complex care (medical, social, educational, etc. (17, page 3)". Among the major topics addressed in a continuum we find: the defining indicators of inclusive school and of special educational needs; development of the abilities and strategies of the teachers in order to meet the needs of children with SEN; physical, informational, communicational adjustment to the school environment; reasonable conditions adjustment of the teaching methods and technology to individual needs; strategies for changing the attitudinal factors that limit the activity and participation of children / adults with disabilities; multidisciplinary partnership to identify and support the needs / special educational needs; individual modules for students with special educational needs; prevention of relapse in earlier stages of development; early and timely intervention; removing barriers to learning; psychological foundations of individual diversity lesson. Prestigious researchers (Sternberg 1999) have argued that meeting the special educational needs, based on their identification through a scientifically designed program, properly and early remedial of the identified difficulties has greatly reduced the number of children diagnosed as having learning disorders. The most important and recent inclination based on research and that also marks a paradigm change is the critic of the discrepancy model, which defined pupils with special educational needs in relation to a low IQ and poor school results. Alternative approach, called **Response to Intervention (RTI)** proposes the classification of pupils among those with special educational needs and the establishment of the services and the necessary support only after a high-quality, student- centred training with clear targets and pupils responses. The approach based on Response to intervention – RTI, emphasizes especially the achievement rather

than the deficits of the pupils and makes a clear connection between the identification of difficulties / disorders of learning and the quality of the education. RTI can be used in relation to all students, not only for those with disabilities. This approach prescribes interventions based on validated research, to ensure that pupils will have access to the most appropriate learning experiences, focusing on performing / production and implementation of immediate and early support for pupils' needs. The researchers noted more obstacles to promote this approach, such as: the insufficient knowledge and skills of some teachers, especially in the individualization of intervention, insufficient concern and perspective to the approach to be implemented in the gymnasium and secondary education. This approach Response to Intervention (RTI) underline the assets of learners and the relation between learning disorders an quality of instruction. RTI is important for assesment of all the pupils.

3. Trends in Curriculum Design: Curriculum Adaptation; Universal Curriculum Design; Anti-Bias Curriculum; Affective curriculum; Integrated Curriculum; The Pyramid Approach

Curriculum plans and programs that were specific to a particular type of special school were for decades the only option of selection and proposal of contents. Gradually, the researches in this area have led to the inclusion of specific strategies that lead to achievement of the objectives. Promoting school inclusion have implied the existence of an adapted curriculum once the integration of handicapped pupils in mainstream schools have started and also when the principle of equalization of opportunities by providing adequate support have begun to be promoted. In fact, the concept of adaptation is particularly important in the area of respecting the rights of the handicapped person and it is defined in the Romanian legislation. Adaptation is the process of transforming the physical and informational environment, products or systems in order to make them available for people with handicap.

Adapted curriculum requires the correlation of all the contents that form the National Curriculum with the competences of the pupil with special educational needs in terms of adaptation and social / school integration of him. In inclusive school, curriculum adjustment is made by the support teachers together with the classroom teachers by removing, replacing and adding the contents in accordance with the objectives and the results proposed usually by the Individual Education Plan (IEP). The researches focus especially on: a. accessibility of the content, different ways of adaptation for children with

mental, sensory and others deficiencies; b. effectiveness of strategies and methods; c. the use of individual evaluation methods by which to highlight the progress and the performance of the student with special needs, but, also, on d. collaboration of the support teacher with other teachers, with the student's family and multidisciplinary team that provides specific therapies; e. development of the curriculum for children with severe and profound disabilities.

Concepts of Education for All and School for All / School for an individual diversity, depth analysis of real inclusion but also contributions in the field of architectural design have led to a demonstration of the need for an **Universal Design** (U.S. architects have promoted for the first time the term "Universal Design" by legislation). The concept of Universal Design is defined in the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006), document of United Nations Organisation, which is a very significant for the densification of national efforts in preventing and combating the social exclusion and promoting the inalienable rights of every human being. According to the Convention, Universal Design means "designing products, environment, programs and services so that they can be used by all people, as much as possible, without any need for adjustment or specialized design". Universal design does not exclude the assistive devices for particular groups of people with disabilities, when necessary. The term "reasonable accommodation" is also defined. "Reasonable accommodation" means the necessary and the appropriate changes and adjustments that do not impose a disproportionate or undue burden when it is not necessary in a particular case, in order to enable disabled people to enjoy or exercise, on equal terms as the others, all the rights and fundamental freedoms ". Initially, in education, the term "Universal Design" has been used with regard to the elimination of the physical barriers for the access to educational space, facilities and teaching materials. Immediately after it understood that a Universal Design genuine suppose learning and informational accessibility much more than physical, and requesting cognitive / intellectual access. The Universal Design movement in education involves the selection of curriculum content and its development but also the selection and implementation of teaching and learning methods to ensure evaluation "in view of students with a wide distribution of abilities, disabilities, learning style, skills acquired in literacy, mother tongue..." (Sheryl Burgstahler, 2007). The traditional curricular design was planning the training by referring to an average student, unlike the universal curriculum design which relates to the great individual diversity. From the completion of studies realised by universities and researchers from the U.S. who have adopted the concept of universal design in education, three research and emerging design directions are outlined, all subsumed to **Universal Curriculum Design**: Universal design of objectives and content; Universal Design of Training (UDT); Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Universal Design for Learning has brought new significations to the curriculum design in

order to push to the fore the individual diversity, taking into account pupils' needs. Nowadays, there is a variety in terms of culture and also socio-economic environment from which pupils with different abilities, knowledge and also with different disabilities and disadvantages come from. The pupils with physical, sensory problems, with learning disorders, from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with different preferences and motivations, the gifted and many others need individualized support for learning that cannot be accurately determined until after the implementation of a flexible high-quality training program. Several U.S. Universities have research centres that study various aspects of Universal Design: University of Connecticut, North Carolina State University (Center for Universal Design – CUD), Sonoma State University, University of Washington (The Access Center). Research centers such as The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), the National Center to Improve the Tools of Education (NCITE), National Center on Educational Outcomes and professional associations such as Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development have published important works on the Universal Design Curriculum, Universal Design Applied to Large Scale Assessment, Universal Design of information and technology. These realities and the attention given to the lesson of individual diversity on the European Continent indicate, in our opinion, that the Universal Design is the most important theme of research in Curriculum.

The **anti-bias curriculum** is an “activist approach which its proponents claim challenges prejudices such as racism, sexism, ableism/disablism, ageism, , and other -isms”(46). The bias term has multiple meanings but in this case it has the meaning of prejudice, polarization attitude or negation. A cognitive bias is the human tendency to make systematic errors in certain circumstances based on cognitive factors rather than evidence. Anti-bias curriculum has a strong relationship to multiculturalism curriculum and its implementation. The objectives of the anti-bias curriculum are to raise awareness . These objectives are related to: the "formal curriculum" consists of the educational content, expectations, course materials (e.g. textbooks), evaluation, and instruction; the "hidden curriculum" that encompasses all the values passed on by teachers and educators, and from the school or educational milieu. Researches on anti-bias curriculum objectives are made under the umbrella of this concept or are not focused on: raising awareness by students of the great individual diversity and equality in dignity and rights (“different but equal”). The objectives of multicultural education, of human rights education, of becoming European citizenship can be found in Anti-bias Curriculum. The preparation of pre-service teachers to implement an anti-bias curriculum is also key, requiring approaches which develop positive self-esteem for all, empathy and activism in the face of injustice (Derman-Sparks, 1989). El-Haj and Rubin (2009) stress that rather than directing pre-service teachers to align their lessons and curriculum with existing standards, teacher educators should also ask them to

analyse the standards in relation to both their inclusive and exclusionary consequences.

Recent researches in psychology and special education curriculum emphasizes the need of approaching an “**affective curriculum**” particularly for students with behavior disorders (“disruptive pupils” or “with problematic behavior”) so that to treat the emotional and the behavioral difficulties of these children in terms of individual diversity. In this type of curriculum children are encouraged to share experiences, to think and act independently, to recognize their vulnerability, to feel as part of the world but also to help them to positively interact with it, based on the idea that once known the cause that led to the problematic behavior of both pupils and teachers they will mutually change their attitudes and feelings. For many teachers it was a revelation that negative feelings that children may cause to the adults concerning them, can, unintentionally, influence the messages that teachers often say to their students. Understanding children’s emotional problems involves not only improving the therapeutic teaching skills but also the establishment of the therapeutic intervention programs. In these intervention programs, implemented in the U.S. in the early ‘90s, known as the “Circle of Time” and the “Circle of Friends” children were encouraged to explore solutions to situations that we all have experienced at least once in a lifetime and they probably will experience again (sadness, anger, disappointment) being encouraged especially those who had an increased risk of marginalization from the community.

Integrated Curriculum involves linking content, knowledge or skills belonging traditionally to distinct disciplines or disparate disciplines so that learning to become an experiential one, centered on solving specific problems of everyday life. The main arguments in favor of development and approach of such curriculum are multiple: exponential growth of knowledge, by providing multiple perspectives; easier identification of relationships between ideas, concepts, themes addressed, increases the possibility of an intuitive transfer from the cognitive plan to the behavioral or action plan, forms a flexible way of thinking, dynamic and multidimensional, a holistic perspective (which is not easy to achieve in case of working with students with mental disability in view of stiffness, reduced mobility of thinking that limits the functional transfer of information, etc.); allows reporting the content to student life experiences, promote cooperative learning, relates to real world problems, leading to increased interest and motivation for learning and problem solving.

The Pyramid Approach to Education is one of the newest approaches in education and is widely used in education of children with learning difficulties, challenging behaviors but particularly for students with Autism Syndrome. The Pyramid Approach to Education is solidly founded on scientific principles. One of the principle of the pyramid is that the triangular shape of a pyramid is that it provides stability. As the Great Pyramids of Egypt were built to last over 40 centuries, being the highest stone structure in the world with a

solid base, so the approach to education was built to withstand to various disturbances, providing to the specialists new methods of intervention, from planning of functional curricula to choosing and implementing strategies to achieve the goals – from acquisition, to fluency, to generalization and adapting those strategies to meet the student's needs in relevant contexts and settings.

In the Romanian Special Education literature Ruxandra Foloștină (15) disseminated a model of pyramid approach to education for students with learning disabilities and challenging behaviors. The model contains 10 building blocks stacked into the shape of a pyramid. The base of the pyramid is the learning environment – an external variable that includes a child's home, school, and classroom environments. The 10 blocks of the pyramid are divided into three distinct groups. At the base are the four foundational blocks: attention and self-regulation, emotions, behavior and self-esteem. The middle level contains a set of three symbolic blocks: phonology for phonological processing; orthography for orthographic processing and motor for and motor processing. The top level contains the three conceptual blocks: language, for thinking with language; images, for thinking with images and strategies, for thinking with strategies. Although all the blocks are the same size, some of the blocks are more important than others for certain types of learning. It is acknowledged that not all the abilities are accounted for in this model and it is also recognized by the authors of this model (PhD. Nancy Mather and PhD. Sam Goldstein) that learning is an interactive process and that these blocks are not discrete units but rather encompass interrelated and interactive factors and abilities. In our point of view an understanding of the unique affective, behavioral, cognitive and linguistic variables that influence development and school performance can help specialists who work in special education system to understand the various types of learning difficulties and behavior disorders and subsequently design or select appropriate behavioral and academic interventions.

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