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Parental Strategies for Inclusive School Choices. A Qualitative Exploratory Study

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Abstract: *Romanian legislation allows children with special educational needs (SEN) to be admitted to both mainstream and special schools. The choice of school has consequences on the child's educational trajectory.*
Using a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews with parents of pupils with SEN, the article proposes to answer the questions: Are parents the key players in the inclusion of children with SEN? What are the expectations and fears of parents towards inclusive education? What strategies do parents use to send them to mainstream education? How is the choice of an educational institution made in the context of SEN?
The conclusion of the research is that parents of children with SEN are the key players of school inclusion. Their engagement in the search for the best inclusive educational institution is based on several strategies. Some of them involve a mobilization of the parents' social capital (at the school where they had other children or through a recommendation from specialists). Other strategies aim at appealing to attitudes of superiority (the legal right of the child), deliberately hiding the child's problems or postponing schooling.

Keywords: *inclusion of children with SEN, school choice, social capital.*

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Introduction

In this paper we aim to address how the school choice process is carried out by parents of children with SEN. When the child has special educational needs, some parents pay special attention to the learning conditions in educational institutions. Mobilizing parents in finding a suitable school environment helps children with SEN to develop and have a positive school experience, i.e. to be accepted and integrated in the community. The choice of the right school is influenced by parents' social capital as well as their expectations and fears. Parents do not always choose the school located in the proximity of their home, but make rational choices, guided by fear of social stigmatization or the need to move to another neighborhood (Grasu, 2014).

The international sociological literature on school choice by parents of typical children is rich and varied. In contrast, school choice processes from the perspective of parents of pupils with SEN are rarely studied (Castonguay-Payant, 2022). This article aims to contribute to the understanding of these aspects, answering the questions: What are the expectations and fears of parents regarding the inclusion of children with SEN? What is the willingness to support the child's schooling, from personal involvement (over-involvement of parents) to choosing a school that has the necessary resources? What strategies do parents use for the children with SEN to be accepted in a mainstream school?

Literature review

In accordance with international regulations, Romanian legislation allows the enrolment of a child with special educational needs in a special or mainstream school. The inclusive perspective assumes the child with SEN is attending a school together with children whose development is typical. However, the research conducted shows contradictory results regarding the effects of inclusive educational environments on the social functioning and cognitive abilities of students with disabilities.

Some authors (Dalgaard et al., 2022; Denham & Liverette, 2019; Tryfon et al., 2021; Creţu, 2015) show that parents encourage and seek inclusion in mainstream education and tend to perceive it as the first step towards the integration of children with SEN into the community and society, whereas the child's placement in a special school could lead to regression of the child, as well as stigmatization and social isolation, which affects self-confidence. Lutfi (2009) states that parents consider inclusion as

a high-quality education for children. In the study conducted by Gliga & Popa (2010) it was found that 76.5% of parents of children with disabilities are in favor of inclusive classes. Burstein et al. (2004) showed that pupils with disabilities in an inclusive environment were exposed to age-appropriate programs, had more positive role models, had the opportunity to mix with normal children of their age, and their behavior was found to improve. Tryfon et al. (2021) state that parents of children with mild and moderate disabilities consider their children's relationships with their peers to be an important benefit (quite a lot and a lot), while 66.6% of parents of children with severe intellectual disabilities answered "moderately". Yang Sin, & Lui (2015) found significant and positive correlations between the emotional and social competence of children with SEN integrated in primary schools in Hong Kong, between the positive relationships they have with classmates and teachers, and their academic performance. In turn, the emotional and social competencies of pupils with SEN favors the increase in their academic performance (Ware, 2015). Dell'Anna et al. (2022), synthesizing specialized studies, finds that in inclusive classes children have better academic results in literacy and reading and acquire adaptive skills (e.g., social behavior, personal and social responsibility) and reduced frequency of challenging behaviors (e.g., self-stimulation, injury). In contrast, other authors (Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Rogers, 2007; Vaughn et al., 1998) reported that pupils with disabilities, compared to their typical classmates, experience more feelings of loneliness, are less popular and have a more controversial social status than their classmates without disabilities. In special schools, where they have classmates similar to them, they feel better accepted. Ferreira et al. (2017) found that students with severe socio-behavioral problems and disabilities are at greater risk of social rejection and isolation. According to Rogers (2007), children with SEN experience certain exclusions, caused and aggravated by: a rigid assessment and examination system, cultural ignorance and misunderstanding of the concepts of difference and difficulty. Thus, children with SEN are removed from the classroom to be taught individually; they cannot access the curriculum in the same way as their classmates; their emotional difficulties prevent them from establishing networks of friends and developing social interactions with others. Children with SEN who do not disrupt teaching are more readily accepted than those with behavior disorders, but the progress they make may be reduced. Tryfon et al. (2021) find that the development of academic skills of integrated children is related to the degree of their intellect. The higher the degree of disability, the more difficulties pupils face in issues such as: understanding the content of school textbooks, due to reduced reading

ability, activities that involve cognitive skills, new language and terminology in textbooks, which makes it difficult for them to understand.

In conclusion, for an adequate inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools, an individual assessment of the child's specific educational and psychosocial needs is necessary. We believe that the role of parents in inclusive education is crucial.

Sociological research on parental school choice shows the complex interplay between policies, strategies, contexts, resources and values (Raveaud & Zanten, 2007) and, in the case of typical children, is particularly linked to increasing social inequalities. In France, in spite of legal regulations on sectoring, the deliberate departure of pupils to private institutions or institutions in another district is a common phenomenon. Thus, colleges are engaged in a discreet competition to attract good students, while schools on the outskirts are forced to accept any pupil (Broccolichi & Zanten, 1997). Parents choose the school unit because there are significant differences between schools in terms of the support given to pupils to progress. Parents use different strategies such as: choosing a private school, choosing another public school, choosing a place of residence near a good school (Zanten, 2009). Cultural and economic resources play an important role in developing, implementing, and supporting these strategies. Thus, middle-class parents have developed exclusionary practices and ideologies towards poor and minority pupils, seeing them as a hindrance to their children's cognitive, personal and social development. These parents fear limiting the intellectual potential of their children in heterogeneous school contexts. On the one hand, they have negative views on the education of children from poor and/or immigrant families. On the other hand, there is the parents' lack of confidence that teachers cannot cope with heterogeneity and that teachers spend a lot of time disciplining and building relationships with working-class pupils and thus devote less time to their own children's learning (Zanten, 2002; Zanten, 2003). Working-class and immigrant parents are attached to schools close to home, being less aware of the differences between schools and less skilled in school choice (Raveaud & Zanten, 2007). According to Horvat et al. (2003), middle-class parents have been found to be much more active in their children's educational needs compared to poor families.

Methodology

Characteristics of the sample

The invitation to participate in the research was launched to a number of 15 parents, who had children with special needs included in two inclusive schools in the city of Iasi, but 3 of them declined. The parents were recommended by the support teachers in the respective schools. The final sample included 12 parents, 10 biological parents and 2 substitute parents (foster parents) who gave their consent to participate in this study. 7 parents had their children enrolled in secondary school, and 5 of them in primary school and all of them were asked about their experience with enrolling their child in kindergarten.

The study was guided by ethical principles of autonomy, non-invasiveness and fairness. Subjects were guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Two parents did not agree to audio recording, and the interviews were summarized immediately after they took place.

Initially, we had a discussion in principle with each referred parent, informing them about the objectives of the research and the ethical principles. Those who agreed to participate in the research were met a second time for the interview. This took place in a school office, and in two instances at the parent's home.

Of the 12 subjects interviewed, 2 are men and 10 are women, with an average age of 37.6 years. 3 parents have higher education, 7 have secondary education, and 2 are graduates of a vocational school.

At the beginning of each interview, confidentiality was discussed, and additional demographic information was gathered. Permission was sought from the parents for the interview to be audio-recorded for later transcription. Interviews generally lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Methods used in data collection and analysis

The aim of this study was to describe parents' personal experiences of choosing an inclusive school, therefore we chose a qualitative methodology. In the semi-structured interview approach, the researcher will go into the field with a series of themes around which he will organize the interview and not with the questions formulated in detail. The quality of the interview depends on how the interviewer introduces himself and conducts the interview (Ilut, 1997). The themes of the interview guide include: the child's school trajectory, description of the school choice process, difficulties

encountered in enrolling in school, parents' expectations and fears related to school, collaboration with the school, supporting the child's schooling.

The semi-structured interview was supplemented by participatory observation, which was designed to verify the reality and logic of the discourses (Arborio & Fournier, 1999). The interviews with parents stopped when the information started to become redundant. As soon as the interviews were completed, they were transcribed. The observations collected during the interviews were also recorded in a field diary, which included the interview situation. In addition, the data collected through the field survey were verified, cross-checked or supplemented by analyzing documents, namely by studying legislative acts, press articles, institutional websites, etc., thus respecting the methodological triangulation.

We chose thematic analysis, starting with the research questions reformulated after reading the entire corpus of interviews, then we cut the speeches into fragments corresponding to the specific themes or subthemes, while taking into account the conditions under which the interview was obtained, the relationships established between the interviewer and the interviewee, the interview situation, the concordance and discordance between the data obtained through the interview and the data obtained by other methods, especially by the observation method. The theme is empirically developed on the basis of the data found in the interviews, and the way of cutting remains the same for each interview (Blanchet & Gotman, 1998).

We mention the fact that in a previous field survey in inclusive schools in the municipality of Iaşi, which aimed at the collaboration between institutions and between the players in the school inclusion process of children with SEN (Grasu, 2014), there was a triangulation of the data obtained from the research, the information being collected from three categories of sources: support teachers, teachers working in the classroom and parents. But the parent category was less well represented (only 5 parents participated, compared to 22 classroom teachers and 14 support teachers). The study is complementary, wanting to delve deeper into the experiences of parents of children with SEN in relation to school choice. For this reason, for this article, information was collected only from parents.

Results

The analysis of the interviews, conducted according to the main themes of the interview guide, reveals that the processes underlying the construction of school choices of children with special educational needs are centered on the following dimensions:

- parents' expectations and fears related to the school inclusion of the child with special educational needs;
- the willingness to support the child's schooling;
- school choice strategies.

Parents' expectations and fears

A major concern of parents is to find a mainstream school that will welcome and accept their child, respecting their needs, interests and individuality. Parents rate schools according to the resources they have, experience in integration, support teacher, speech therapist.

Another concern of parents is that their child be in a learning environment made up of learners whose values and behaviors are close to those of the family. Parents subtly exert a form of control over the audience of pupils who gravitate around the child, either in the classroom or in the close social environment (Felouzis & Perroton, 2007), in order to avoid contact with an anti-social or harmful environment for the child.

Parents of younger children expressed their fear of failing to repeat a grade in middle school, where there are more teachers, and the subject matter is more abstract. This happens for several reasons: the initial training of primary school teachers is focused on elements of psychopedagogy and child psychology, while that of middle school teachers is focused on the specialized subject and secondarily on the methodology of its teaching. In addition, the primary school teachers spend more hours a day with the pupils and can get to know them better.

Parents also expressed uncertainties regarding the child's future, his inclusion in society and emotional support, when they will no longer be there. They are also concerned about school graduation, the ability to acquire a profession and economic independence.

Supporting the schooling of the child with SEN

In order to mitigate the impact of the difficulties of a mainstream/general education school, parents get personally involved (homework, tutoring, etc.). Sometimes there is an overinvestment of parents who dedicate their free time to helping the child with homework or taking them to tutoring or therapy. The following forms of parental involvement were identified from the interviews:

- parents explain the lesson to the child again at home:
- they give concrete examples to better understand the concepts;
- they divide school tasks into smaller steps;

- they do the lessons together with the child, help him where he doesn't know, praise and encourage him;
- involve her/him in activities that she/he enjoys and that raise self-esteem (cooking, dancing, painting, sports, etc.);
- parents seek tutors or therapists for the child.

Strategies for parents in choosing a school

After analyzing the qualitative data, we distinguished several types of strategies used by parents: appealing to the social capital of the parents, an attitude of superiority, deliberately hiding the child's problems, postponing schooling.

Using the social capital

In order to enroll their child with SEN in school, some parents draw on their social capital network, namely the connections and social relationships they have established with different people in the community. For example, they ask for the support of the various professionals with whom they have collaborated in the child's assessment or with therapists, in order to guide them to a mainstream school where they can integrate the child with SEN. Most of the time, the referral generates trust, which is the basis for future collaboration between the parent and the school institution.

If the parents have had other children and have already established relationships with the headmaster and teachers of a school, they have the confidence to present the situation of the child with SEN and request his/her enrollment in the school. Usually, such cases are not refused because the interest and determination of a parent to integrate their child with SEN impresses and compels the teacher to get involved as well.

Attitude of superiority

At other times parents exert pressure to enroll their child in school and try to convince through threats that the child's right to education is respected. They resort to this attitude of superiority when they are rejected by some teachers. Parents' rights, children's rights and teachers' rights are often in conflict and can cause tension, dissatisfaction and difficulties (Rogers, 2007). The legislation gives children the right to education in mainstream schools, but practice at the microsocial level shows a series of difficulties and challenges. The attitudes of superiority often bother teachers, who expect respect and gratitude from the parents for having accepted the child in their class.

Deliberately hiding the child's problems

Parents do not disclose the child's problems, for fear of being sent to a special school. The parents' desire to raise a child adapted to the norms of society leads them to avoid „special schools", which are perceived negatively due to stigmatization. This parenting strategy is felt by teachers as a "resignation" from the parental role and gives them the feeling that parents are delegating to them alone the entire responsibility for their child's education.

Postponing schooling

If the child's intellectual development is lagging behind, parents are advised by specialists to postpone school enrolment. By repeating the upper preschool, where information is presented in the form of a game, the child will gain more knowledge and more self-confidence.

Debates

Parents play a key role in the difficult and dynamic process of inclusion, which begins with their decision to place their child in a mainstream school. Other research (Rogers, 2007) has also shown that parents want education in a mainstream environment. According to them, inclusion helps their children to develop their potential as well as to find role models for learning social and communication skills. Parents expect their children to make progress, to be accepted and appreciated by teachers and classmates. They want them to have the chance to continue their studies and to be able to acquire a profession so that they can get a job in society (Bahdanovich Hanssen & Erina, 2022).

Analyzing the process of school choice by parents of children with SEN, Castonguay-Payant (2022) identified several parenting strategies. Thus, some parents change their residence when the ideal school is not located near their home or avoid the official school and look for another school more open to the idea of inclusion, particularly a private one. Other parents assume the role of advocate for their child's rights and pressure for enrollment in a mainstream school, arguing to the headmaster the advantages of inclusion. Other strategies adopted are to postpone the child's enrollment in school, extending the kindergarten period or to reveal the diagnosis only after the enrollment has been approved. The fear of parents to reveal the child's diagnosis is explained by the fact that they experienced rejection when they wanted to enroll their child in another school, phenomenon also described by other research conducted in Romania (Creţu, 2015). Soodak & Erwin (2000) conducted a study on 10 parents of young

children with significant disabilities who were educated in inclusive environments. Only two parents received inclusion as an "open door policy" in their school districts, the remaining eight parents threatened due process, went to mediation, moved their families, or found schools on their own that were willing to accept their children.

Parents' open attitude towards school staff leads to good collaboration. If parents are honest and open about their expectations, it helps teachers to gain a full understanding of the child's needs so that they can build strategies to help. In inclusive education, listening, support, trust and mutual respect for each other's roles are of the utmost importance (Colomeischi et al., 2016; Lalumière-Cloutier & Cantin, 2016). A satisfactory and transparent exchange of information, adequate presence and participation of partners, as well as goodwill also contribute to successful inclusion. Vosler-Hunter (1989) states that clear and open communication, when conducted in an atmosphere of respect and sensitivity towards the other person, will provide a basis for mutual understanding and action between parents and professionals. Accurate and timely information, sharing, openness to questions and clarifications and a willingness to share knowledge will help to overcome many barriers. Parents with psychological capital are more likely to adopt an open attitude towards teachers. This fosters the building of a trusting relationship, in which in-depth knowledge and information about the child's needs and how to deal with certain situations can be shared.

However, many studies (Poptean & Popovici, 2022;Thuy & Berry, 2013; Colomeischi et al., 2016; Andrioni et al., 2022; Al-Qaisy, 2012) have shown that parents of children with disabilities have communication problems and lack sufficient psychological capital because they experience higher levels of stress and depression compared to those of typical children. Throughout their lives, parents continuously face challenges, ranging from family imbalance, social isolation, financial problems, difficulties in finding therapy services, to burnout or experiencing strong emotions. The birth of a child with a disability is a traumatic event for parents, who are faced with the "loss" of their ideal child and are affected by strong emotions (Rogers, 2007). In the case of serious diagnoses, parents may experience a conflict of emotions, for example, relief, but also devastation (DePape & Lindsay, 2015). Relief because the diagnosis provided answers about their child's development, devastation when they learned that the child's problems will persist throughout life and will involve many problems for them as caregivers. One of the best-known models of parental reaction to a child's disability, which involves going through five stages, was developed by

Kübler-Ross (1973). After being informed of their child's diagnosis, parents go through a period of shock and denial, which manifests itself by denying or minimizing reality: "No, it's not true", "not to me", being unable to directly face the idea that they have a child with disabilities. This denial acts as a defense mechanism used by the parent to slowly process the information and gradually acknowledge the loss. The second stage is that of anger, which manifests itself in a build-up of irritability, due to the inability to solve the situation. During this period, parents ask themselves "Why did this happen to us?" and blame themselves. The third stage involves negotiating and seeking solutions, and parents find various strategies to manage their anger and pain from the limiting conditions. The fourth phase is depression, which involves sadness, low mood or loss of interest in pleasant activities, shattered hopes and unfulfilled dreams, isolation from others. Overcoming this phase leads to inner stability and balance, manifested by resignation, acceptance of the diagnosis. This last phase involves the elimination of false hopes and the adoption of coping strategies based on the nature of the disability. Some parents may go through all stages, while others may skip one or two stages to achieve a well-adjusted life (Kandel & Merrick, 2007). Other authors (Roll-Pettersson, 2001; Worthington, 1994) have noted a cyclicity of grief, with recurring stresses and initial feelings of denial, shock, and depression when parents experience difficult times.

Parents who have been rejected by schools often adopt a position of distrust, which manifests itself by claiming power, respectively imposing. This bothers some teachers, who do not accept the intrusion of other people into the educational plan they want to implement and can give rise to conflictual relationships. For example, it can arouse suspicion because teachers are convinced that parents who have resorted to superior attitudes to enroll their children in school will not respect institutional obligations and rules.

Several studies suggest that school choice is influenced by social capital, namely the material and immaterial resources that parents can access through their social connections. Thuy & Berry's (2013) research shows that caring for children with disabilities, no longer allows parents to use their time for bonding through social participation. In addition, parents tend to avoid social stigmatization or confronting their own difficult feelings because they feel excluded. Especially in situations where children exhibit behaviors that deviate from the social norm, parents feel excluded and marginalized (Currie & Szabo, 2020).

Limitations

This qualitative study provides useful information about parents' experiences and challenges in choosing the right inclusive school for their children with SEN. However, the study has a number of limitations. First, as this study is qualitative in nature, the sampling method used is non-probability and the sample is small. Therefore, it cannot be considered representative for the population and the results obtained are not generally applicable. A better representation of different groups would have contributed to a more complete picture of the school choice phenomenon. In the future, we will consider continuing the research with a quantitative approach, in order to shed more light on the phenomenon described.

The results of our study contribute to increasing the level of understanding of how parents of children with SEN choose school. We argue that the choice of a school in which children with SEN are included is a complex challenge for parents. Our study could be a wake-up call for teachers and headmasters of inclusive schools to be more understanding and empathetic towards this group of parents, who struggle in different ways to integrate their children. The study also underlines the need to counsel parents who have children with SEN in order to help them become real partners in inclusive education.

Conclusions

The inclusion of children with SEN is an ongoing process of struggles and negotiations, involving cooperation and interpersonal relationships, and parents are the key players. They are engaged in a personalized and practical search for the best school for their children, by mobilizing the social capital they have (recommendation, school tourism, going to the school where they had children before, etc.). Children from affluent families are enrolled in schools where there are diversified social services, while poor groups are present in peripheral neighborhoods where infrastructure and services are poorly developed.

Among the strategies used by parents to enroll a child with SEN in a mainstream school, the most effective is an open attitude. It is based on good communication, cooperation and collaboration. In this way, parents and teachers become partners in the educational process. There is a relationship of ”complementarity” between them, but also of ”continuity”. The relationship of ”complementarity” involves the parents' concern to obtain everything the child needs for school: clothing, school supplies, books and to create learning conditions at home etc. The relationship of ”continuity” refers to the daily support of the child, in the same way as the teachers' direction of action, but

also by providing services useful to the child, but which are lacking in the school.

Thus, the successful schooling of a child with SEN in a mainstream school depends not only on objective criteria, such as the degree of deficiency, but also on the involvement of the parents.

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