

**EDU WORLD 2022****Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues****INCLUSIVE EDUCATION. PRESS ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract**

In the last thirty decades, the emphasis has been on inclusive education as an engine of transformation and humanization of society. In this sense, the issue of educating children with special educational needs (SEN) is in the attention of decision makers, actors in education and last but not least the media. The purpose of our research is to conduct an analysis of local media articles to identify factors that contribute to the inclusion of children with SEN as reflected in online media. The method used is content analysis, and the analyzed corpus consists of 71 articles from the online newspaper *Ziarul de Iasi*, from 01 January 2020 to 31 January 2022. The research found that the written press reflects the following factors that contribute to the inclusion of children with special educational needs: community involvement, dissemination of projects, increased awareness of legal rights, condemnation of reprehensible acts, such as abuse of this category of children.

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*Keywords:* Inclusive education, press analysis, special educational needs

## 1. Introduction

Education is one of the fundamental rights of the child. However, 258 million children, adolescents and young people, respectively 17% of the global total, do not attend school, and disability is one of the factors influencing inequitable access to education (UNESCO, 2020). Initially, children with disabilities had a disadvantaged position to education (Vrasmas, 2018). At first they were deprived of education, then segregated in special schools, now they are trying to include them in the regular education system. Inclusive education involves opening up and adapting schools to provide an appropriate framework for the individual differences of all students in the community. It was found that, in addition to students with disabilities and other categories of children need support services to reach the maximum possible level of education, such as those suffering from a certain disease or those from socio-culturally disadvantaged families, etc. In this sense, the term SEN has been introduced. There is no consensus on the SEN's definition, with each country having a different view of who needs support and the nature of support. Thus, Germany, the European country with the largest number of students in special schools, adopts the classification of children with SEN in several categories, such as: learning disabilities, socio-emotional development deficiencies, language deficiencies, etc. In contrast, in Sweden, the country with the lowest number of segregated students, SEN are generally defined in legislation as the risk that a student will not be able to meet the required learning objectives or have other difficulties in school (Barow & Östlund, 2020). Sharma and Vlcek (2021) have identified six key elements for the inclusion of students with SEN in education. First of all, it is necessary for the student to attend school regularly. Then, it is necessary to participate in school activities, together with other colleagues. Third, the student must be accepted by members of the school community. Then, the student's performance must be taken into account, respectively the progress he is making. The positive feeling of belonging is the fifth element, and the sixth is the degree of happiness and contentment he experiences because he attends that school. Implementing inclusive education requires material and financial support to prepare schools to be open and flexible. On the one hand, teachers need to have the skills, knowledge, attitudes to meet the personalized needs of all students. On the other hand, schools need to have all the necessary equipment to make it easier for students to have equal opportunities. Although countless efforts have been made at the political, administrative or pedagogical level, the inclusion of all students in mainstream schools is not possible. Most states, including Romania, opt for the coexistence of mainstream and special schools. Thus, while some children receive the support they need in a boarding school, others attend a special school. The diverse views on educational inclusion and the different ways of implementation have their origins in the tradition of school systems (Sansour & Bernhard, 2018). Inclusive attitudes towards people with special needs are also formed through the media's effort to promote social diversity, tolerance and a non-discriminatory policy. For this reason, our research focuses on the analysis of the press.

## 2. Problem Statement

While the regulations approved by the competent authorities contain clear provisions that ensure the availability of quality universal education for all children, in practice, providing adequate education for children with SEN in an inclusive context is a complex issue. Recent research has identified several

barriers to inclusion. First of all, in Romania there is a lack of early intervention services, and cases are targeted at the private sector. Here, many times, specialists work independently, without any coordination and correlation of interventions, except for some NGOs, where they work in teams (Moraru, 2018). In addition, the conditions and resources are not ensured according to the minimum quality standards (Gherguț, 2020). For example, there are no textbooks adapted to the students with sensory impairments, 21% of middle schools do not have adequate access ramp, 64% of schools need a lift for ensuring access to the floor for students with locomotor disability, only 2% of schools have accessible toilets. 68% of schools do not even have a teacher trained in inclusive education and the human resources specialized in working with children with disabilities are concentrated in special schools, so that certain specific therapies benefit only the students enrolled in it (World Bank, 2021). For example, in the 2013-2014, 32,060 students with SEN were enrolled in mainstream schools, of which only 17,037 students benefited from educational support services (Angi et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers were put in a position to integrate students with SEN, without being sufficiently prepared and without wanting or accepting this situation (Gherguț, 2020). Working with students with disabilities for a longer period of time, but by not doing inclusive practices, is qualified as a negative work experience and contributes to increasing the level of stereotypes towards students with disabilities (Pachița & Gherguț, 2021) and the adoption negative attitudes such as: the rejection from mainstream schools, educational neglect, forcing SEN students to reach the class level, the application of punishments and sanctions (Gherguț & Ciobanu-Grasu, 2011). Another author (Marin, 2021) analyzed the way teachers are trained and concludes that it is necessary this support is needs to start early, from the teacher training programme, continue across the first years of practice of a newly qualified teachers, and, if necessary, to all the teachers who need assistance in adopting inclusive practices and implementing them. And the research conducted at the international level shows that the positive attitude towards students with SEN is influenced by experience, but also by school resources (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). Another study confirms the importance of previous experience for better representation and reduction of prejudice (Rizzo et al., 2021). Saloviita (2020) conducted a study to explore teachers' attitudes and their impact on the inclusion of children with SEN. According to the results obtained, for the efficiency of including in mainstream education, the positive attitude of teachers is very important. According to research, about 20% of teachers strongly opposed inclusion.

In the following, we will review some research on the role of the media in promoting social inclusion, given that the media play an important role in shaping public opinion, influencing ways of reporting on disability. Cioti (2010) making an analysis of the Romanian press from 1991-1999, highlighted a favorable change in the representation of disability, respectively the transition from the predominantly negative representation (impact of disability), from the first years, to a positive one, which leads to the possibility of improving the condition of the person with disabilities. At the international level, Zalkauskaite (2012) pointed out that in the Lithuanian press a stereotyped and mystified image predominates, people with disabilities being presented as beneficiaries of social benefits, at risk of developing deviant behavior, therefore they must be institutionalized and medicalized. On the other hand, information is also provided about the achievements of people with disabilities and their qualities, which shows interest in personal development and social involvement. Research in the Turkish press has

highlighted key issues of articles on disability: legal issues, abuse, social responsibility projects, diagnosis, therapy and education. The authors found the small number of news stories about disability compared to the report of individuals with disabilities in Turkey (Cinisli et al., 2016). Rusnac (2021) conducted an analysis of online media portals in the Republic of Moldova and noticed that there is a lack of material in which the topics are treated in depth, so the public knows very little about the lives of people with disabilities, about policies in this area, about the problems these people face. The vast majority of the material contains news based on press releases issued by approved institutions, so without further effort to go out and discover other topics.

### **3. Research Questions**

The main questions that this research aims to answer are: Does the press pay attention to the issue of educational inclusion? What are the main topics that appear in the press regarding educational inclusion? Does the press contribute to the inclusion of children with SEN? What factors facilitate media inclusion?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The chosen research topic is relevant because important changes are taking place in the Romanian education system to implement the concept of inclusive education. The purpose of this article is to explore the process of socio-educational inclusion of students. The approach was initiated by studying the literature, research in this field and completed by analyzing articles in the local press. We have identified the factors by which the press supports the socio-educational inclusion of children with SEN.

### **5. Research Methods**

To identify the factors that contribute to the inclusion of children with SEN in the online print media, we used content analysis. We monitored the *Ziarul de Iași* (self-proclaimed leader of the Iași press) over a period of 2 years (January 1, 2020 - January 31, 2022). To organize this study, we prepared a database with the identified articles that includes the following information: type of article, date, title, author, keywords, brief presentation of the article. The qualitative analysis followed the separation of the main themes of the articles. Quantitative analysis identified the frequency of the articles depending on the topic addressed and the time period in which they were written. The 71 articles were found in the archive of the *Ziarul de Iasi* newspaper ([www.ziaruldeiasi.ro](http://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro)) with the help of the following keywords - disability, handicap, SEN, autism, Down syndrome, special schools, inclusive schools. The articles were read carefully, to be framed within a theme. The quantitative analysis shows that in 2020 there were 30 articles on the subject of inclusion of children with SEN, 35 in 2021, and in 2022 we identified a number of 6 articles in the first month of the year alone.

## 6. Findings

The qualitative analysis of the corpus of articles revealed the following factors that contribute to the social inclusion of children with SEN: social involvement, community sensitivity to the problems of children with SEN and their families: charitable organizations, donations for recovery therapies or creation of services, but also round tables, debates (29 articles);

- i. dissemination of projects on children with disabilities (18 articles);
- ii. increasing the level of information by explaining the rights of children with disabilities (state allowance, for example), presenting procedures (enrollment in special vocational education) or describing the manifestations of disorders or success stories (18 articles);
- iii. drawing attention to cases of violation of the rights of children with disabilities: abuses by the authorities or parents (6 articles).

### 6.1. Social involvement through awareness campaigns

Most articles focus on social involvement to raise community awareness of the problems of children with SEN. For example, several campaigns, such as “Good deeds in gift”, “The most beautiful gift”, were organized by the *Star of Hope* Foundation from Iasi ([www.ziaruldeiasi.ro](http://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro)). The purpose of these campaigns was to raise funds to pay for therapy sessions for children with SEN. The *Blue Smile* Foundation also requested donations for the creation of a multifunctional therapy center for people with autism (Sandu, 2021). Various community activities are held annually on the occasion of *International Day of Persons with Disabilities* (December 3), *Down Syndrome Day* (March 21) or *Autism Recognition Day* (April 2). Such events are organized by NGOs, but the Iași School Inspectorate was also involved in commemorating these days. Also, in June, the School Inspectorate celebrates the *Days of Special and Specially Integrated Education*, in 2021 it has reached its ninth edition, when round tables, debates, artistic moments, etc. are held. Also, the cause of children with disabilities is supported by sports and arts. Publicity by the mass media of non-governmental organizations' fundraising initiatives for the cause of children with SEN and their parents helps to raise public awareness and involve them in these activities. In this way, attention is drawn to the fact that the state does not support these children and their families insufficiently.

### 6.2. Projects for children with SEN

In the mass media, in a number of 18 articles, projects developed for children with SEN and their families are presented. In general, the financing of these projects is obtained from the European Union and aimed at either teacher training, working with different categories of children with SEN, or exchanges of experience. We note that there are also projects that directly target children and young people. In this sense, we mention the project “Together is better!” implemented by Constantin Păunescu Special High School in Iasi. At the same time, the Iasi Local Council financed some social inclusion projects for children with SEN, such as the one initiated by the Star of Hope Foundation.

### **6.3. Presentation of statistical data, legislative news or scientific findings**

A third category of articles includes legislative news or presents scientific information that everyone can understand or describes success stories. For example, the enrollment procedure in special vocational education was clarified or how two teachers transformed a school by positively approaching children with different inclusion problems (Olariu, 2020).

### **6.4. Failure to respect the rights of children with SEN**

The fourth type of articles presents various non-respect of the rights of children with SEN, for example, teachers who discriminate against this category of students, abuse or serious neglect, which take place within the family. Some of these cases fall under criminal incidence, for example a man who beat his child with disabilities has been jailed (Discă, 2022).

## **7. Conclusions**

In the context of implementing inclusive policies and practices towards children with SEN, the role of the press is essential. The press promotes and informs the general public about the concept of inclusive education, political decisions, the rights of children with SEN. Increased attention to the disability issue in a public discourse reduces social exclusion, shapes more favorable attitudes of members of society towards this category of disadvantaged people. Through this research we have shown the involvement of the local media in the issue of social inclusion of children with SEN, namely:

- i. presents the disability of children as a community-wide issue through published articles on public awareness and fundraising campaigns;
- ii. provides legislative information, scientific news etc., which helps the families of children with SEN to know and access legal rights. At the same time, the media presents success stories that have the potential to change society's perceptions of children with SEN and to help them integrate into society;
- iii. disseminates information on the development of projects that have as beneficiaries, direct or indirect, students with SEN in mainstream or special schools;
- iv. presents cases in which the rights of children with SEN are not respected and the principle of equal opportunities is violated.

In the Iași press, there were several NGOs that fight for the cause of children with SEN, such as the Star of Hope Foundation, the Blue Smile Association, the Holtis Association. Moreover, the state institutions, for example the School Inspectorate, with the network of mainstream or special schools or the Local or County Council initiate various projects that pursue social inclusion. In conclusion, our research proves the vital role of local media in raising awareness, combating stigma and misinformation. At the same time, it conveys the message that this category of children can be integrated into the community, through the support and involvement of social actors.

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