

THE ROLE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PROMOTING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Zorica Triff^a, Lia Pop^{b,7}

^a Senior Lecturer, PhD, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; e-mail:
Zorica.TRIFF@dspp.utcluj.ro

^b Senior Lecturer, PhD, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; e-mail:
lia.pop@dspp.utcluj.ro

Abstract

The present article examines the role of inclusive education in promoting diversity, equity, and active participation within the contemporary educational process. The article commences with a paradigm shift that reframes student difference as a normal feature of any classroom rather than a deviation to be corrected. It then traces the conceptual, historical, and theoretical foundations of the inclusive education movement, from international policy frameworks to the debates surrounding integration, mainstreaming, and inclusion. The text then goes on to analyse how inclusive practices can offer concrete support for diversity, equity and participation. It also discusses teaching strategies and the role of the teacher in implementing differentiated, universally designed instruction. Finally, it identifies the structural, attitudinal and resource-related barriers that continue to hinder full implementation, both internationally and within the Romanian education system. The article concludes that inclusive education requires a comprehensive redesign of pedagogy for the whole classroom, rather than supplementary measures reserved for a minority of students, and outlines directions for further development.

Keywords: inclusive education, diversity, equity, active participation, differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, teacher training, educational policy

^{7*} Corresponding author. E-mail address: lia.pop@dspp.utcluj.ro

1. Introduction

The present study sets out to explore whether teachers entering secondary school classrooms today still consider the fact that they are faced with twenty-five different learning pathways, as opposed to just one, before opening their register. This is not a rhetorical question. Indeed, it encapsulates the very tension around which the discourse on inclusive education has been built over the last three decades. For a period, an individual's 'difference' was regarded as a deviation that necessitated identification, diagnosis and, to the greatest extent possible, correction. In the contemporary context, at the level of public policy, difference is recognised as a normal feature of any human community. The task of the school has shifted from the elimination of difference to its management through pedagogical approaches (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006).

The present article adopts this paradigm shift as its point of departure for the purpose of examining the specific role that inclusive education plays in promoting three key aspects of contemporary education: diversity, equity and active participation. It is not the case that these are to be regarded as three interchangeable labels. Diversity can be defined as a state of affairs, that is to say, the actual heterogeneity of any given class. The term 'equity' is employed to denote a principle of distribution, namely the differentiated allocation of resources according to need, as opposed to an egalitarian distribution of the same resources to all. Participation, therefore, is defined as the extent to which each pupil actually learns alongside others, rather than merely in their presence. In the context of school practice, three distinct dimensions function as communicating vessels. This aspect is discussed in Section 2 in greater detail.

In this article, we posit a hypothesis that, while straightforward in formulation, is nevertheless challenging to operationalise: inclusive education should not be regarded as a series of supplementary measures applicable solely to a minority of pupils 'with special needs'. Instead, it should be conceptualised as a comprehensive redesign of pedagogical practices, applicable to the entire class. The present thesis is explored by first examining the historical, legislative and theoretical landmarks of the inclusive movement (Section 2), before outlining the conceptual and methodological approach adopted in this analysis (Section 3). Section 4 presents the results of this analysis, showing how inclusive practices contribute to diversity, equity and participation, and detailing the specific teaching strategies and the role of the teacher. Section 5 discusses, in no uncertain terms, the barriers that still prevent this change from being implemented on a wide scale, both in the international literature and, with certain particularities, in Romanian schools, before drawing the article's conclusions.

2. Literature Review (Theoretical foundation)

The following essay explores the conceptual, historical and theoretical foundations of inclusive education.

2.1. From exclusion to inclusion: an examination of paradigm evolution.

The manner in which education systems have historically responded to the needs of children with disabilities or in vulnerable situations can be traced through four successive paradigms.

The initial exclusionary practices have historically prevailed in the realm of institutionalised education, with children deemed ‘uneducable’ being systematically excluded from formal schooling. The responsibility for their education was exclusively shouldered by their families or care institutions. The second paradigm, segregation, acknowledged these children’s right to education but implemented it through separate structures – namely, special schools organised by type of disability – whilst nevertheless reinforcing a logic of parallelism: ‘different’ children were educated within a distinct system, with minimal opportunities for interaction with their peers.

Integration, the third paradigm, developed primarily in the 1970s and 1980s, facilitated the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs into mainstream schools. However, this integration often occurred without any substantial modifications to other aspects of the educational system, such as the curriculum, methodology, or the organisation of the classroom. It was the responsibility of the pupil to ensure that they were able to maintain pace. The result, as documented by numerous case studies, was a form of disguised exclusion: physical presence without genuine participation (Slee 2011). Inclusion, the fourth paradigm of interest in this article, reverses the direction of adaptation: it is not the pupil who adapts to the school, but the school – understood as a whole comprising the curriculum, assessment, methodology and institutional organisation – that is redesigned to respond to the real diversity of its pupils. It is important to note that the concept of inclusion is not exclusively limited to children with disabilities; rather, it extends to any pupil who may be at risk of marginalisation. This includes children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, children belonging to ethnic or linguistic minorities, gifted children who require a different approach, or pupils who are temporarily in vulnerable situations.

2.2. The international legislative and policy framework.

The Salamanca Declaration, adopted in 1994 under the auspices of UNESCO, is widely regarded as the foundational document of the inclusive education movement. The text states unequivocally that inclusive mainstream schools are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and building welcoming communities (UNESCO 1994). Nevertheless, it was the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2006, that truly changed the rules of the game: As stated in Article 24, persons with disabilities are entitled to an inclusive education system at all levels, without discrimination (United Nations, 2006). The transition from the medical model, which conceptualises disability as an individual deficit, to the rights-based model, which is comprehensively examined in sub-chapter 2.7, is legally codified through this document.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular, delineates the commitment of signatory states to ensure ‘inclusive and equitable quality education’ for all, as outlined in Goal 4 (UN 2015). The monitoring reports published periodically by UNESCO provide a global picture of progress and, above all, of areas lagging behind: the 2020 edition, explicitly dedicated to

inclusion, shows that the phrase ‘education for all’ remains, in many systems, closer to an aspiration than to a verifiable reality (UNESCO 2020). At the European level, the reports of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) provide a useful comparative framework across Member States (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022).

2.3. Inclusive education in the Romanian context.

In Romania, the principle of inclusive education has been enshrined in law through the National Education Act No. 1/2011, which recognises the right to education for all children, regardless of their social or ethnic background or whether they have special educational needs. The Act also provides for the development of dedicated support services (National Education Act No. 1/2011). It is evident, upon thorough examination of the extant literature, that the regulatory framework of Romania is, to a significant extent, congruent with European standards. Over the past two decades, educational policies have sought to extend the network of support and itinerant teachers, establish county-level educational resource and support centres, and introduce personalised intervention plans.

However, the discrepancy between this regulatory framework and its practical implementation in schools remains a salient issue, as emphasised in the EASNIE reports (2022), representing a persistent challenge within the educational system – a topic that will be addressed in greater detail in Section 5.

2.4. The presence of diversity within the educational environment is a key consideration.

Diversity can be defined as the totality of differences that characterise a student population. These differences can be categorised into various domains, including functional differences (cognitive, sensory and motor abilities), cultural and ethnic differences, linguistic differences, differences in socio-economic status, gender, learning pace and style, as well as differences related to life experiences, such as migration, institutionalisation or social vulnerability. The acknowledgement of diversity necessitates a paradigm shift in perspective, whereby differences are no longer perceived as deviations from an assumed norm, but rather as integral components of any given human collective.

It is imperative to emphasise that diversity should not be regarded as a mere administrative responsibility; rather, it should be recognised as an invaluable pedagogical resource. A heterogeneous class, in which pupils bring different perspectives and experiences, offers genuine opportunities for collaborative learning and for practising critical thinking (Jones, 2019). This idea will be revisited from a theoretical perspective in the following section, which discusses Vygotsky’s approach (sub-chapter 2.8).

2.5. The distinction between equity and equality has been demonstrated to have a significant impact on professional practice.

The concept of equality in education can be defined as the provision of identical resources and conditions to all pupils, irrespective of their individual needs. In contrast, equity emphasises the allocation of resources according to individual needs, ensuring that all pupils have genuine opportunities to realise their potential, as opposed to mere formal opportunities. The well-established metaphor of three people of different heights watching a match over a fence is employed to illustrate this point. Equality provides all of them with the same box to stand on, which solves nothing for the shortest person; equity, on the other hand, provides each of them with the number of boxes they need to see just as well as the others.

When applied to the classroom, equity signifies the provision of additional time in assessments for pupils with processing difficulties, the adaptation of materials for pupils with visual impairments, and the provision of language support for non-native speakers. These disparate measures are aimed at the same objective. A frequently overlooked aspect pertains to the fact that equity concerns not only initial conditions, but also outcomes. An equitable education system is defined as one in which academic performance cannot be predicted on the basis of a pupil's social or ethnic background. PISA data demonstrate that the highest-performing systems are also the most equitable, thus contradicting the notion of an irreconcilable tension between excellence and equity (OECD, 2023).

2.6. Active participation is defined as engagement rather than mere attendance.

Of the three concepts, participation remains the most reliable indicator of the success of inclusive practices. Participation, therefore, must extend beyond mere physical presence in the classroom and encompass active involvement in the learning process, the right to express one's opinions regarding decisions that affect one's educational trajectory, and the assurance of recognition as a full member of the learning community. As asserted by Booth and Ainscow (2011), participation is defined in terms of three complementary dimensions: the presence of the individual, their acceptance by others, and their active involvement alongside others. The absence of any one of these compromises the quality of participation: a pupil may be present but socially isolated; they may be socially accepted but excluded from relevant learning activities.

From the perspective of inclusive education, participation also involves the recognition of the pupil's voice, namely their right to express their opinions and to be heard, as provided for in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989). This dimension has been shown to transform the pupil from a passive recipient of education into an active participant who shares responsibility for their own learning journey.

2.7. The social model of disability.

One of the theoretical pillars of inclusive education is the social model of disability, formulated as a critical alternative to the medical model, which was dominant until the second half of the last century. The medical model is predicated on the premise that the problem resides within the individual, treating disability as a condition to be diagnosed and, as far as possible, corrected.

In contrast, the social model posits that disability is not rooted in biological impairment, but rather in the barriers erected by the environment that impede full participation. These barriers can be categorised as physical, attitudinal, or institutional.

When applied to the school setting, this distinction has immediate practical consequences: the pupil is not the ‘problem’, but rather the environment – understood as a whole comprising a rigid curriculum, a one-size-fits-all methodology, standardised assessment and unsuitable infrastructure – which contains the barriers that must be identified and removed. The role of the teacher has evolved from one of ‘fixing’ pupils to make them compatible with the school environment, to one of reconfiguring said environment so that it becomes accessible to all, regardless of their individual characteristics.

2.8. The socio-cultural perspective: Vygotsky and the zone of proximal development: an analysis.

The socio-cultural theory of development, formulated by Lev Vygotsky, remains one of the most robust psycho-pedagogical foundations of inclusive education, through the concept of the zone of proximal development, defined as the distance between what a pupil can achieve independently and what they can achieve with the support of an adult or a more experienced peer (Vygotsky 1978). The central idea is that social interaction and mediation are not an addition to the learning process, but its underlying mechanism. This provides a solid theoretical justification for the collaborative learning practices discussed in sub-chapter 4.8.

From a Vygotskian perspective, the heterogeneity of a class is not regarded as an obstacle, but rather as a resource. Students with different levels of competence can act as ‘more advanced experts’ for their peers, mediating their learning through explanations and modelling. Indeed, the majority of contemporary inclusive teaching strategies are predicated on this notion, encompassing a wide spectrum of approaches from peer tutoring to the organisation of heterogeneous working groups.

2.9. Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is arguably the methodological framework with the most direct practical impact on current teaching practice. The UDL framework is predicated on the principle of universal design in architecture, namely the conception of spaces that are accessible from the outset to a wide range of users, without the need for subsequent adaptations (CAST 2018). The same logic is applied to curriculum design.

The Undergraduate Course (UDL) is distinguished by three core principles: namely, the utilisation of diverse representations of information, varied modes of action and expression, and multiple pathways for engagement and motivation. A fundamental distinction of UDL lies in its deviation from conventional curriculum adaptation, namely the absence of impromptu modifications to a curriculum intended for a ‘standard’ pupil. Instead, UDL emphasises the proactive design of adaptable activities and materials from the outset, with the objective of catering

to the actual diversity of the class (CAST 2018). In practice, this approach is proactive rather than reactive, and notably, it serves to reduce the stigma associated with ‘visible’ adaptations intended exclusively for individual pupils.

2.10. Inclusive pedagogy.

In their 2011 publication, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) propose the concept of inclusive pedagogy, which extends beyond the logic of individual adaptations for pupils with special needs, advocating instead an expansion of the available resources for all pupils. From this standpoint, individual differences are regarded as inherent aspects of development, rather than as issues necessitating distinct solutions for specific pupils. This approach circumvents the dichotomy between ‘mainstream pupils’ and ‘pupils with special needs’.

In practice, inclusive pedagogy demands a shift in the question a teacher asks when designing an activity: from ‘what do I do differently for this particular pupil?’ to ‘how do I design the activity so that it is accessible to all pupils in the class, including this one?’ (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011). While the distinction may appear negligible, it has the effect of transforming the very foundation of the intervention, moving from a model of individual remedial support to one of inclusive lesson planning at the level of the class.

2.11. The Inclusion Index.

The Inclusion Index, a tool developed by Booth and Ainscow (2011), has become one of the most widely utilised instruments for the assessment and development of inclusive practices within educational institutions. The tool is organised around three dimensions: inclusive cultures (the values, attitudes and relationships that underpin the school community), inclusive policies (the organisation of resources and support) and inclusive practices (the actual occurrences in the classroom). The value of the framework lies precisely in the fact that it places inclusion at the level of the school’s organisational culture, rather than at the level of one-off measures aimed at a few pupils.

3. Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual and analytical approach, based on a narrative review and critical synthesis of the international and national specialised literature on inclusive education. Sources were selected to cover three complementary strands: (a) the historical, legislative and policy documents that have shaped the inclusive education movement; (b) the theoretical frameworks that underpin current inclusive practice; and (c) empirical and policy-oriented reports documenting the implementation of inclusive education internationally and in Romania. Rather than presenting original empirical data, the article’s contribution lies in the systematic organisation and critical interpretation of these sources around the three axes of diversity, equity and active participation, in order to identify convergences, tensions and gaps between policy intentions and classroom practice.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the conceptual analysis undertaken in this article. It first examines the function of inclusive education in the promotion of diversity, equity and active participation, before turning, in its second part, to the specific teaching strategies and the role of the teacher in inclusive education.

4.1. The progression from tolerance to valuing diversity.

The promotion of diversity within educational settings is primarily facilitated by inclusive education, which involves a shift in the manner in which differences are addressed within the school environment. This shift entails a transformation from an approach that perceives differences as deficiencies to one that recognises them as assets to be utilised. The shift under discussion is evident in the field of lesson planning. Teachers who value diversity design activities in which pupils can contribute from different perspectives, drawing on their life experiences, cultural knowledge or the languages spoken at home. A class comprising pupils from Roma families, families of migrants who have returned from abroad, or Hungarian-speaking families has the capacity to transform this very linguistic and cultural heterogeneity into a starting point for intercultural education activities. In such activities, pupils present their traditions and perspectives to one another – not as a weekend ‘exoticism’, but as a natural part of the curriculum.

4.2. The implementation of a differentiated curriculum, as opposed to a simplified one, is imperative.

In terms of curriculum, the promotion of diversity necessitates a transition from a uniform curriculum to a more adaptable one, characterised by diversified learning pathways. It is imperative to elucidate what differentiation does not entail: namely, it does not pertain to the simplification of content for some pupils and the augmentation of complexity for others. Rather, it concerns the diversification of pupils’ access to the same fundamental learning objectives (Tomlinson, 2014), through tasks of incremental complexity, a plethora of materials, and manifold methods of demonstrating comprehension.

In practice, this may involve tasks at different levels of difficulty within the same topic, multiple options for the final learning outcome – such as an essay, an oral presentation, a poster or a role-play – or flexible working groups, formed according to the needs of the teaching moment, rather than on the basis of fixed labels assigned to pupils over the long term (Tomlinson 2014).

4.3. The presence of a diverse range of cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds within the classroom environment.

The phenomenon of migration, international labour mobility and the expansion of socio-economic inequalities have collectively led to the transformation of the majority of classrooms in Romania and throughout Europe into inherently diverse spaces. Inclusive education is a pedagogical approach that acknowledges this reality by placing a premium on plurilingualism. It

involves the provision of support for non-native speaking pupils in acquiring the language of instruction without diminishing the significance of their mother tongue. Furthermore, it fosters a connection between the pupils' cultural backgrounds and the school's cultural milieu (Loreman, Deppeler, and Harvey 2010).

Inclusive education also acknowledges the considerable impact of socio-economic status on educational outcomes and proposes compensatory measures such as 'second-chance' programmes, financial support for pupils from vulnerable families, or 'after-school' programmes. The purpose of these programmes is to reduce the influence of social background on outcomes and to offer all individuals a genuine chance of success.

4.4. The concept of equity in access to education is of particular significance in this context.

The initial dimension of equity promoted by inclusive education is access: the guarantee that all children, irrespective of their individual circumstances, can attend a high-quality form of education in close proximity to their community. This process encompasses the removal of physical barriers, such as ensuring accessibility for pupils with mobility impairments within educational buildings, along with the removal of administrative barriers, including the implementation of transparent enrolment procedures. Additionally, economic barriers are to be addressed through the provision of complimentary textbooks, school supplies, and, where necessary, school transport.

The process entails the preliminary identification of children who are at risk of disengagement from education, or of never attending school. This group includes children residing in isolated rural communities, children from low-income households, and children belonging to ethnic groups that have historically experienced marginalisation. Early intervention programmes have been shown to play a pivotal role in this context, with longitudinal studies frequently cited in the relevant literature indicating that the gaps that accumulate in the initial years of life often prove to be extremely challenging to remediate later in life (UNESCO 2020).

4.5. The concept of equity in the learning process is of particular interest in this study.

The second dimension pertains to the learning process itself: beyond formal access to a school, it is imperative that every pupil receives the support they need to learn effectively. In practical terms, this necessitates the formulation of personalised intervention plans for pupils with special educational needs, the provision of support services (i.e. itinerant teachers, school counsellors, speech and language therapists, school psychologists), the implementation of reasonable adjustments to teaching methods and, where appropriate, the use of assistive technologies.

Furthermore, it necessitates meticulous management of the teaching pace. It is important to acknowledge that pupils do not all learn at the same pace. A rigid approach, which imposes a single pace on the whole class, systematically disadvantages both slower pupils, who fall behind and

develop gaps in their knowledge, and faster pupils, whose needs for deeper learning remain unmet. Station-based learning or learning centre rotation strategies represent tangible pedagogical responses to this tension.

4.6. The concept of equity in assessment is a complex and multifaceted one.

The third dimension, which is often insufficiently discussed in relation to the other two, concerns assessment. It is important to note that a fair assessment does not necessarily imply uniformity for all individuals; rather, it signifies a method of evaluating each pupil's progress that is valid and does not compromise their opportunities on the basis of factors unrelated to the competence being assessed.

In practice, this necessitates the implementation of reasonable adjustments to the assessment conditions, including the allowance of additional time, the provision of alternative question formats, and the utilisation of assistive technology. Furthermore, the diversification of assessment methods is imperative to ensure that they do not systematically favour a particular type of competence (e.g., rapid written expression under time pressure) at the expense of other equally valid forms of demonstrating learning, such as the use of portfolios, projects, oral presentations, and practical work. Formative assessment, with its emphasis on constructive feedback, fulfils a role that is challenging for summative assessment to fulfil on its own.

4.7. The involvement of pupils in the decision-making process is of paramount importance.

The concept of inclusive education emphasises the promotion of participation not only in day-to-day teaching activities, but also in decisions concerning the pupil's educational pathway. The involvement of pupils in the formulation of personalised intervention plans, the establishment of realistic goals, and the creation of participatory structures at school level – such as pupil councils or peer mediation schemes – fosters a sense of ownership over their own educational journey, which would otherwise be challenging to achieve.

The participatory dimension assumes particular significance for pupils with special educational needs or from historically marginalised groups, whose voices have historically been under-represented in decisions that directly affect them. Practices of self-determination, defined as pupils' ability to express their preferences and make informed decisions, remain an important educational objective in their own right, with documented effects on motivation (Loreman, Deppeler, and Harvey 2010).

4.8. The utilisation of collaborative learning methodologies in conjunction with mixed-ability groups has been demonstrated to be a highly effective pedagogical approach.

The organisation of activities in mixed-ability groups, which bring together pupils with different levels of competence, is one of the most effective strategies for promoting participation. Structures such as the mosaic method, pair work or group projects offer all pupils an active role

and a visible contribution to the shared outcome, thus counteracting the tendency, common in traditionally organised classrooms, for certain pupils to remain mere spectators.

In order to facilitate genuine participation in collaborative learning settings, it is essential to meticulously design tasks that assign each member a clearly defined responsibility for the successful completion of the shared task. This approach is crucial to ensure that collaborative learning fosters meaningful engagement, rather than merely formal co-presence within the same group. The positive interdependence among group members, a central concept of cooperative learning according to Johnson and Johnson (1999), is the condition under which the group's diversity becomes a resource for learning, rather than a source of inequality within it.

4.9. The school–family–community partnership.

Active participation is not confined to the pupil–teacher relationship; rather, it necessitates a functional partnership between the school, the family and the community. The families of pupils with special educational needs or from vulnerable groups must be regarded as active partners, rather than passive recipients of decisions made by specialists. Their genuine involvement in the creation of personalised intervention plans contributes significantly to the coherence of the support offered to the child.

At the level of the community, collaboration with social services, health services and non-governmental organisations can supplement the resources available within the school and provide complementary forms of support, such as psychological counselling, material support or school mediation for vulnerable communities. This, in turn, can expand the school's capacity to respond to the diversity of pupils' needs beyond its own, often limited, resources.

4.10. The implementation of Differentiated Instruction is of paramount importance.

The central strategy through which the principles of inclusive education are put into everyday teaching practice is that of differentiated instruction. The focus of the curriculum may be oriented towards content (the knowledge and skills that pupils acquire), process (the methods by which pupils learn), product (the ways in which pupils demonstrate their learning), or the learning environment (the physical and temporal organisation of the educational space) (Tomlinson 2014). Each of these dimensions may be adapted according to pupils' level of attainment, interests and learning profiles.

In order to facilitate successful differentiation, it is imperative to undertake initial and continuous assessment of pupils' prior knowledge. This enables educators to ascertain each pupil's initial starting point and to design tasks that are situated within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Such tasks must be both accessible and achievable with support, while simultaneously challenging to ensure progress is generated.

4.11. Cooperative learning and peer tutoring.

As previously discussed in sub-chapter 4.8, cooperative learning structures are also one of the most thoroughly documented strategies for enhancing academic performance in mixed-ability classes. Meta-analyses in this field have repeatedly demonstrated that the implementation of effective cooperative structures consistently yields superior outcomes in comparison to both competitive and individual approaches, exhibiting benefits for pupils across the entire spectrum of academic performance (Johnson and Johnson 1999).

Peer tutoring, whereby more advanced pupils provide structured support to those experiencing difficulties, is a particularly effective form of collaborative learning. The pupil receiving support is given explanations in language that is often closer to their own way of thinking than that of an adult, whilst the student providing support consolidates their own knowledge through the very act of explaining it to someone else.

4.12. The utilisation of assistive technology and the promotion of inclusive digitalisation are pivotal in this regard.

The advent of digital technologies has led to a substantial augmentation in the array of instruments at the disposal of educators seeking to implement inclusive pedagogical practices. Assistive technologies can facilitate access to information for pupils who would otherwise face significant barriers, ranging from text-to-speech and speech recognition software to alternative communication devices for pupils with severe communication difficulties.

Digitalisation also offers opportunities for large-scale differentiation, with adaptive learning platforms being able to automatically adjust the level of difficulty according to individual progress. Furthermore, open educational resources, available in multiple formats (text, audio, video, interactive), enhance the flexibility of access to content. However, a key issue that cannot be overlooked is the need for careful consideration of equity in device and internet connectivity, which must accompany the introduction of technology into the classroom. Otherwise, there is a risk of perpetuating the very exclusion that these tools are designed to address.

4.13. The implementation of inclusive classroom management strategies is of paramount importance.

The organisation of an inclusive classroom necessitates a re-evaluation of established rules, routines and the physical learning environment. The arrangement of furniture to facilitate work in flexible groups, the consistent application of clear rules to all pupils, and the establishment of a socio-emotional climate founded on mutual respect and acceptance of differences are prerequisites for the implementation of a differentiated teaching strategy.

It is imperative that behavioural management is predicated on a functional understanding of challenging behaviours as a form of communication of unmet needs, rather than as acts of disobedience requiring punishment. Positive approaches to behavioural support, centred on prevention and the explicit teaching of expected behaviours, have proven to be more effective in

the long term than exclusively punitive approaches, both for the pupil concerned and for the overall classroom climate (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006).

4.14. The possession of the following professional competencies is a prerequisite.

The successful implementation of inclusive education is contingent upon the competencies, dispositions and convictions of the teaching staff who engage directly with pupils. In addition to general teaching skills, a teacher prepared for an inclusive classroom must possess the ability to assess individual learning needs, to design differentiated activities, knowledge of the main categories of special educational needs, and the ability to collaborate with support specialists and families.

It is important to note that this ability to reflect on one's own practice is often underestimated, yet it is essential. An inclusive teacher is one who is able to critically evaluate their teaching decisions, identify the barriers that their own practices may inadvertently create for certain pupils, and continually adjust their approach based on pupils' actual progress, rather than on assumptions about what 'should' work.

4.15. Initial and ongoing professional development.

The extant literature pertaining to the training of teachers consistently draws attention to a discrepancy between the mounting demands of high-quality inclusive education and the preparation imparted by initial training programmes. These programmes are frequently found to be inadequately focused on the acquisition of practical skills for mixed-ability classes. The introduction of modules dedicated to inclusive education, in conjunction with teaching placements in genuinely inclusive settings, is internationally recognised as a priority (Ainscow 2005).

Continuing professional development (CPD) plays a role that initial training cannot fulfil; it updates the skills of teachers already in post. The most effective models combine a theoretical component with sustained practical support, such as mentoring, supervision or professional learning communities, enabling teachers to experiment with new strategies and reflect collectively on the difficulties encountered.

4.16. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs regarding inclusion.

The extant literature consistently documents that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are among the strongest predictors of the success of inclusive practices in the classroom, often exerting a greater influence than the material resources available (Ainscow, 2005). The correlation between a teacher's confidence in their ability to address diversity in the classroom and the efficacy of their practices, as well as the academic outcomes of their pupils, is positive.

The development of positive attitudes towards inclusion is not solely determined by theoretical training; rather, it is shaped by direct, sustained experiences of working with diverse pupils, complemented by support from colleagues and the school leadership. School cultures that

value collaboration between teachers and provide time for collective reflection on inclusive practices contribute significantly to the consolidation of such attitudes.

5. Discussions and conclusions

The following discussion addresses the challenges, barriers and prospects for development that have been identified.

5.1. The issue pertains to the existence of structural and institutional barriers.

Despite conceptual and regulatory progress in recent decades, the implementation of inclusive education continues to face significant structural barriers. In many cases, school infrastructure remains inadequate for pupils with motor or sensory disabilities, whilst class sizes – often disproportionately large in relation to the available teaching staff – limit teachers' ability to provide individualised attention.

The rigidity of the national curriculum and the pressure of standardised assessments also represent a significant barrier. The fear of 'wasting time' on differentiation, to the detriment of exam preparation, often discourages teachers from adopting practices which, in theory, they consider valuable. The inadequacy of support services has been reported as a consistent issue, particularly in rural or disadvantaged communities. This inadequacy is characterised by a shortage of support teachers, school counsellors, and speech and language therapists, relative to the number of pupils who would benefit from such services (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2022).

5.2. Attitudinal barriers.

Research consistently demonstrates that, beyond structural barriers, attitudinal barriers are among the most persistent. The implementation of the principles of inclusion is often superficial or inconsistent. This is due to a number of factors, including prejudices regarding the learning ability of pupils with disabilities, some teachers' fears about their own competence, and the resistance of some parents – both those of pupils with special needs and those of other pupils – to mixed-ability classes.

The phenomenon of stigmatisation, in its subtle forms, continues to exert an influence on the school experience of pupils perceived as 'different'. Manifestations of these barriers include labelling, low expectations from adults and social isolation, even within a formally inclusive class. These barriers cannot be eliminated solely through regulatory measures but require a sustained effort towards cultural change across the entire school community.

5.3. The issue can be attributed to two key factors: limited resources and insufficient training.

The inadequacy of financial resources allocated to inclusive education – specifically for teacher training, the development of adapted materials, the recruitment of support staff or the

provision of accessible infrastructure – is a recognised barrier in both international literature and analyses of the Romanian system. In the absence of adequate and predictable funding, regulatory commitments to inclusive education are at risk of remaining merely declarations of principle.

As previously discussed, insufficient training can act as both a cause and a consequence of these barriers. Specifically, a lack of robust training can engender a sense of insecurity among teachers, which, in turn, can result in increased resistance to practices that are perceived as excessively demanding in relation to the available resources.

5.4. The following discourse will consider the question of good practices and prospects for development.

Despite the presence of contextual differences, successful international experiences often converge on a set of common principles. Firstly, a consistent institutional commitment is required, underpinned from the level of national policies right down to the culture of each school. Such commitment must be reflected in the allocation of resources, systematic in-service training and effective mechanisms for monitoring the quality of implementation (UNESCO, 2009).

Secondly, systems that have achieved outstanding results have demonstrated a consistent commitment to the development of flexible and timely support structures. These structures include multidisciplinary teams, early intervention services and networks of support teachers who are organically integrated into classroom activities, rather than being present only on an ad hoc basis, ‘on a visit’. The effectiveness of interventions has been demonstrated to be contingent on close collaboration between classroom teachers and support specialists, through joint planning and constant communication (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006).

Thirdly, a successful implementation of initiatives underscores the significance of authentic family participation and the establishment of collaborative networks between educational institutions, thereby facilitating the dissemination of effective practices. Professional learning communities, in which teachers share their experiences and collaboratively develop teaching solutions, remain an effective mechanism for consolidating inclusive practices at the level of a school or a network of schools.

In the context of Romania, the areas of development identified by practitioners and researchers in the field are as follows: the strengthening of the network of educational support services, with a particular focus on rural areas; the expansion of continuing professional development focused on practical skills; the development of truly flexible curricula and assessment tools; and the promotion of effective partnerships between schools, families and community services (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2022). Sustained investment in these areas, combined with a gradual yet consistent shift in school culture, remains the realistic prerequisite for the principles of inclusive education to move from regulatory text to everyday school practice.

5.5. Concluding remarks.

The analysis conducted in this article demonstrates that inclusive education cannot be regarded as a set of supplementary measures intended for a limited category of pupils. Rather, it signifies a reconceptualisation of the manner in which the educational process as a whole is conceived. The promotion of diversity, equity and active participation is evident at all levels of the teaching process, from curriculum design through to assessment, classroom management and teacher training.

It is evident that these three concepts do not function in isolation, but rather are characterised by a reciprocal relationship, whereby they are mutually dependent. It is important to acknowledge the value of diversity, however, it is equally crucial to recognise that this recognition is only valuable insofar as there are concrete mechanisms in place to ensure equity. If such mechanisms are lacking, the recognition of diversity may be reduced to a mere formal declaration. It is imperative to acknowledge that the active and genuine participation of all pupils is a prerequisite for the full realisation of equity. In the absence of a commitment to diversity, participation may, in fact, reproduce the mechanisms of exclusion that inclusive education aims to overcome, albeit in more subtle forms.

The barriers identified – whether structural, attitudinal or resource-related – confirm that the transition to truly inclusive education systems is a long-term process that goes beyond the scope of one-off reforms. Documented cases of best practice, both internationally and within the Romanian context, demonstrate the feasibility of this transformation and substantiate the merit of sustained investment in this domain. The advantages accrue to the pupils directly concerned, their peers, and society at large.

The concept of authentic inclusive education cannot be evaluated simply by the presence of all pupils in the same classroom. Rather, its true value should be determined by the quality of the learning experience each individual pupil undergoes. This involves ensuring that every child feels seen, supported according to their needs, and actively involved in their own learning journey. It functions as both a guiding principle for day-to-day teaching practice and a vision for education systems seeking to strike a balance between academic excellence and responsibility towards every pupil, regardless of their individual circumstances.

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