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**ASPECTS REGARDING SCHOOL INTEGRATION OF PUPILS
WITH LEARNING DIFICULTIES**

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Abstract

In the most common sense, learning difficulties are associated with the problem of school failure, where academic results are less than those expected, by reference to themselves and to other congeners. In other words, learning difficulties are caused by significant deficiencies in receiving and cognitive processing of information, followed by inadequate responses that affect the pupil's educational performance. The complexity of the studied phenomenon is also highlighted by the multitude of psycho-pedagogical characteristics of pupils with learning difficulties. The Romanian and international specialty literature lists some of these considered to be more important: the primary characteristics (which refer to deficiencies with direct action on the persons concerned), respectively the secondary characteristics (consequences of the primary ones and that alter the quality of students' relations with the environment). Therefore, in the present study, we wanted to identify how students with learning difficulties can integrate into mainstream education and how teachers are empowered to support this. The sample consisted of 152 professor teaching in pre-academic education from Bihor, Romania, and the tool used in the research was a questionnaire consisting of 27 items managed on-line. The obtained results show that, in the respondents' opinion, the main problem of students with learning difficulties is the lack of individualized education, but integration into mass schools with support teachers may be an effective solution for these children.

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1. Introduction

The casuistry of students experiencing various learning difficulties is extremely diverse and frequent. Practically, it can be said that most pupils have faced, at least once, situations when the school obtained results were below expectations, but also under the possibilities. Most often, those students were labelled as inattentive, non-cooperative, less-motivated, superficial, reproached that they did not make enough effort to study and so on. Repeating such a situation can lead to the feeling of frustration on the part of teachers or parents (who think they are doing everything that depends on them to get their pupils / children the best school performance), but also a sense of devaluation on the part of pupils (who consider themselves incapable of achieving at least acceptable school results). All these issues are included under the broad umbrella of "learning difficulties" considered by most teachers / parents as summing up all the school barriers faced by their pupils / children and reducing their chances of achieving the desired learning outcomes in accordance with their chronological age, respectively with the level of development of the group of congeners to which they belong (Blândul, 2014).

2. Problem Statement

The attempt to define learning difficulties is an extremely complicated enterprise due to the very complexity of the phenomenon put in discussion, its multiple causality and the variety of forms of manifestation. Since the 1960s, many authors have expressed their views about learning difficulties, but the proposed definitions have not been significantly different from each other. However, those opinions have rather been focused on some central ideas. Thus, a first vision belongs to Kirk (1962), who regards learning difficulties as an emotional and behavioural delay or disorder, aspects that could not be attributed to sensory, mental, motoric, language deficiencies and so on. Such an approach provides an overview of the learning difficulties, which are strongly influenced by the general retardation of individual development (as cited in Chelemen, 2011, p. 39). A second category of points of view can be grouped around the definition by Bateman (1967) according to which the learning difficulties refer to the significant educational discrepancies between the child's potential and his / her school results, that is not due to cultural or social, respectively physical or mental deficiencies. The central idea of this group of opinions would be that learning difficulties mainly focus on the child's educational activity, having more a performance characteristics and less an organic substrate (as cited in Chelemen, 2011, p. 39). Finally, the International Council for Learning Disabilities from the United States proposed in 1987 (Chelemen, 2011, p. 40) a definition that such difficulties are a general concept that includes a wide range of disorders in the acquisition and use of spoken, written and read, reasoning, mathematical abilities, social Behaviour etc., disorders that are structured on the background of problems in the central nervous system. We consider that this definition is a comprehensive one, bringing both elements confirming the organic substrate of learning difficulties as well as the socio-relational deficiencies.

On the same line is also the point of view of Gherguț (2005) who cites the federal legislation in this field as well as the position of the Congress of the National Committee for Counselling Children with Handicap from USA. According to them, specific learning difficulties represent a disorder of basic psychological processes that affect the ability to understand and express oral and written language, which is manifested by an imperfect skill to listen, pronounce, think, write or read, respectively perform

arithmetic calculations. Learning difficulties are structured against slight perceptive and / or psychomotor disorders, body and lateral disorders, poor spatial-temporal orientation, insufficient motivation, attention deficit, delays in language acquisition and so on. By the contrary, this term excludes conditions related mainly to sensory, mental, neuromotor deficiencies, emotional and behavioural disorders, educational and socio-cultural deficiencies etc. Concluding, it can be observed that the specific learning difficulties are represented by those instrumental deficiencies that constitute a slight retard in physical and mental development, with the limitation of the individual ability to acquire a higher adaptive behaviour and, implicitly, of the integration possibilities efficient in the community. Similarly, when the situation invoked affects the academic performance of the person, we can discuss about learning difficulties (Guțu & Vicol, 2014).

The Romanian and international specialty literature allocates ample space to the problems related to the identification of features that define the difficulties of school learning. However, both specialists and teachers who teach such pupils, accept the notion that there is no general and valid clinical picture in which all children with learning disabilities can fit in. Each case is unique and has its own evolution requiring a personalized therapeutic intervention. To identify the main characteristic of pupils with learning difficulties, psycho-pedagogical specialists note that they are most often associated with psycho-physical underdevelopment and behavioural deviations. The first category includes delay / weak / unequal development of various physiological structures, retardation in central nervous system development, modification of electromagnetic wave paths, inappropriate operation of visual, auditory, kinaesthetic analysers etc. From the second category, it can be mention hyperactivity, certain mental disorders, attention deficit, psycho-emotional problems, adaptation difficulties, problems of communication etc. All these elements transform a high-potential student who would give him chances to achieve good school results, in a modest one, with an under-expected evolution (Marinescu, 2018).

Based on these findings, Chelemen (2011) dichotomizes the psycho-pedagogical characteristics of pupils with learning difficulties in two main groups. A first such category would be that of primary characteristics, consisting of the neuro-physiological constitutive factors determining the difficulties of school learning and which may influence the attention, the reception capacity, the circulation channels, the devices for storing and updating the information, the general development of the individual, its cognitive capacities and so on. In the opinion of the quoted author, the primary psycho-pedagogical characteristics of pupils with learning difficulties are the following:

- ✓ General problems related to the functioning of language and communication difficulties;
- ✓ Difficulties of concentration, distributivity, narrowing of the field of attention;
- ✓ Loss of short and long-term memory;
- ✓ Cognitive and organizational deficiencies, inability to follow the instructions received;
- ✓ Hyperactivity and poor behavioural control;
- ✓ Less-efficient processing of information;
- ✓ Difficulties in perception;
- ✓ Deficiencies in general and fine motor activity, disturbances in the temporo-spatial orientation;
- ✓ Deficiencies in ensuring the quality of reading, writing, arithmetic calculations etc.

In the second category mentioned by Chelemen are included the secondary psycho-pedagogical characteristics, represented by the socio-emotional problems that arise from the interaction between the constitutional factors of the learning difficulties and the environment. Such secondary characteristics arise from repeated school failures over several years and can be represented by:

- ✓ *Adaptation to school learning difficulties* - social deficiencies, poor social thinking, behavioural fluctuations, affective instability, poor self-control, inadequate behavioural reactions etc.;
- ✓ *Characteristics related to the relation between the student with learning difficulties and the educational environment* - writing, reading, arithmetic deficiency and so on;
- ✓ *Characteristics associated with the general relationship between the pupil with learning difficulties and the environment* – negative self-image, poor tolerance of frustration, learning-related passivity, inadequate behaviour etc.

Along with these psycho-pedagogical characteristics, Fehrmann, Keith and Reimers (2015) mentions a number of issues that students with learning difficulties might have in establishing quality interpersonal contacts: the student's tendency to play with much younger children than them, avoiding social situations, keeping their head in a bent position, symptoms that indicate high blood pressure and so on. Obviously, all of these factors are present in varying proportions, but cumulative can lead to the development of a rather general clinical picture of learning difficulties.

3. Research Questions

Trying to summarize the ones presented in the previous paragraphs, it can be appreciated that learning difficulties that some students may face in school is a limitation of their academic performance which is not due to mental, sensory or physical deficiencies. These problems can generate unsatisfactory school results, under the student's possibilities and, in the secondary plan, their social isolation within the school group to which they belong. According of the above, there are several questions regarding the attitude of the teachers towards the students with learning difficulties, the best pedagogical solutions for their support, the optimal schooling form in which they can achieve school success, their chances of inclusion in the community they live in and so on. Answers to these questions can help teachers and parents properly address the issues of learning difficulties in school and help students who face such problems effectively overcome them.

4. Purpose of the Study

Starting from these theoretical considerations, the purpose of this research was to identify teachers' attitudes towards students with learning difficulties studying in mainstream education. The objectives of the research were: (1) to analyse the causes that may lead to students learning difficulties; (2) to identify possible educational solutions to overcome these learning difficulties, respectively (3) to assess the chances of students with learning difficulties to study in mass-education. It can be appreciated that the coverage of these objectives can provide an overall image, sufficiently faithful to the phenomenon under discussion.

5. Research Methods

The main instrument used in this research was a survey consisted of 27 open items and dual or multiple-choice items. These items can be grouped into the following categories: general problems and directions to which special / special inclusive education in Romania is directed, community attitudes towards pupils with SEN, knowledge and use of different didactic strategies in the teaching / learning / assessment activity for pupils with learning difficulties, difficulties encountered and solutions for the school inclusion of pupils with SEN, respectively self-assessed level of training of teachers whose teaching to pupils with SEN. The questionnaire was developed by a group of specialists in sociology and special psycho-pedagogy at the University of Oradea, Romania and is available at www.uoradea.ro. The tool was administered on-line between April and July 2018 and the quantitative interpretation of the obtained results was made by calculating the statistical frequencies of the values recorded for each response. The sample of research consisted of 152 teachers (N = 152) who teach in pre-university education in Bihor County, Romania. In a rotating population of approximately 6500 teachers teaching in 265 schools in Bihor, the selected sample represents 2.33%. The selection of the sample was carried out by the simple random sampling method from the total number of teachers who participated in the Postgraduate Programs of Continuing Vocational Training and Development in the field of Education Sciences offered by the University of Oradea, Romania. The structure of the sample was as follows: 78.2% women and 21.8% men; 15.1% aged between 21 and 30 years old, 37.2% - between 31 and 40 years old, 44.9% - between 41 and 40 years old, 1.6% - between 51 and 60 years old and 1,2 - over 61 years old; 12.2% are debutants in education, 10.8% have definitive the didactic degree, 24.1% - 2nd didactic degree and 49.7% - 1st didactic degree and 3.2% have a doctorate in science; 15.5% teach in pre-primary education, 21.5% in primary education, 31.4% in gymnasium, 30.1% in high school and 1.5% in post-secondary education. The sample may be considered statistically representative for the population from which it was selected.

6. Findings

The obtained results are presented in the following figures:

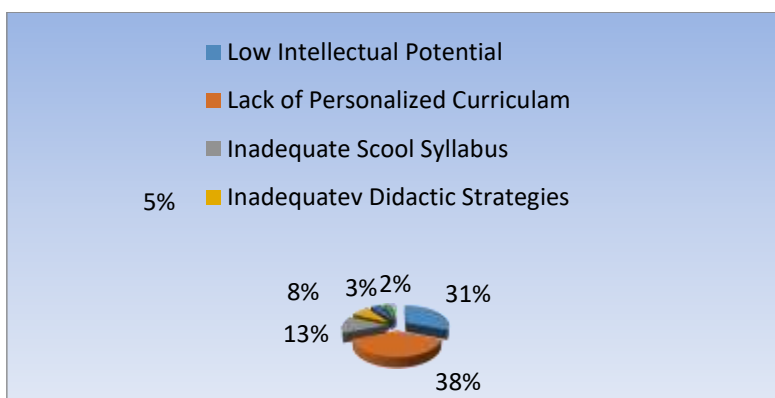


Figure 01. Etiology of Learning Difficulties

The obtained results presented in Figure 01 show that, according to the questioned teachers, the main etiological factors of the school learning difficulties could be represented by the absence of a

personalized education tailored to the pupils' real needs, the modest intellectual potential of these pupils or the inadequate school curriculum to the possibilities of such pupils. In the opposite of the percentage scale, factors such as social isolation or lack of educational resources needed to meet the requirements of such pupils are mentioned. The obtained results indicate that for most of the teachers surveyed, the causes that may lead to learning difficulties in their pupils are based, on the one hand, on their psycho-individual particularity and on the other hand on the specifics of the school curriculum. Such an approach reduces the ethology of learning difficulties at the relationship between the student and the workload without considering the possible quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships established within the school group, or the role of itinerant teacher in the therapy of pupils with SEN

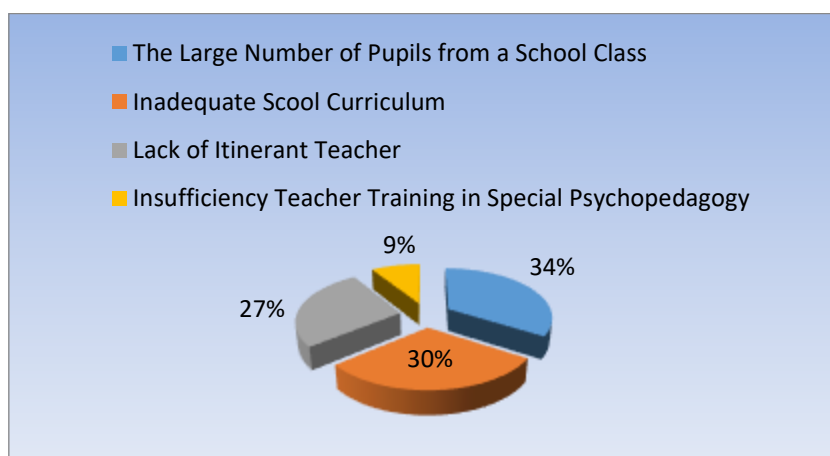


Figure 02. Factors that Make Difficult Didactic Activities for Pupils with Learning Difficulties

On the same line are also the opinions of the questioned teachers regarding the problems they are confronting when teach to students with learning difficulties. Among the problems identified can be mentioned: too many students studying in a school class, undifferentiated educational curriculum, lack of qualified support teachers, insufficient training of teachers in the field of special psycho-pedagogy and others. Basically, these factors can be analysed both separately and together, since, as it shown in Figure 02, there is no polarization of the values around a certain option, but rather a cumulation of factors that may generate an unfavourable educational situation. Thus, the large number of students in a classroom combined with an inadequate school curriculum and limited educational resources can create additional learning difficulties for pupils with SEN. Consequently, combining the ethology of school learning difficulties and administrative factors generating problems for teachers in their working with pupils with SEN, results in a rather pessimistic psycho-pedagogical view of pupils' chances of school success.

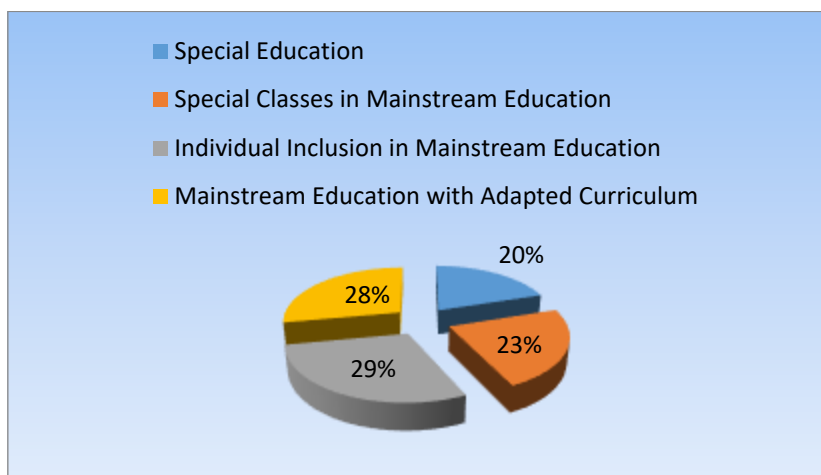


Figure 03. Forms of Schooling Proposed for Students with Learning Difficulties

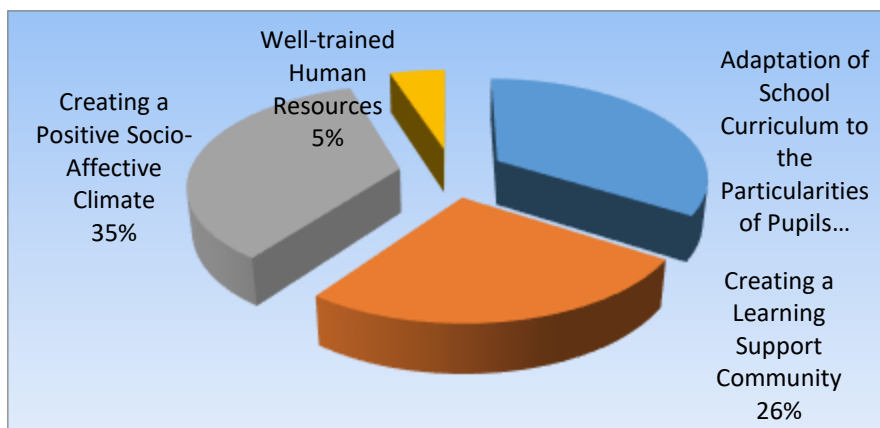


Figure 04. Solutions for Optimizing Didactic Activities for Pupils with Learning Difficulties

Considering those exposed in the previous paragraphs, the question arises is to the best form of schooling for pupils with learning difficulties. From the analysis of Figure 03 and Figure 04 it can be noticed that despite the difficulties that their pupils are confronting, most teachers support the idea of including students with such problems in mainstream education. The main educational measure proposed is to create a learning community where students with SEN are supported by teachers of different specialties, by itinerant teachers, by family, by classmates etc. In addition, customizing educational curriculum based on pupils' individual psychological peculiarities is another prerequisite to ensure their chances of success in school. Qualified teachers in special education can design such a curriculum customized, based on specific objectives adapted for students' needs, information content airy and interesting for them, didactic strategies and interactive process of teaching / learning / assessment, differentiated according to particularity of each person and so on. By meeting these requirements, it is possible to create favourable premises for students with learning difficulties to meet the challenges of mass education and have succeed in later adult life.

7. Conclusion

A first aspect which could be discussed concerns to analysis of the types of factors that can influence the learning difficulties and the relationship that is established between them. According to the results presented in the previous paragraphs, it can be appreciated that there are two major categories of such factors. The first one includes those factors that not allowed students to effective accomplish their learning tasks, mentioning here: inadequate school curriculum, lack of personalized teaching / learning / assessment strategies, lack of itinerant teachers able to help pupils in difficult educational moments, insufficient educational resources and so on. From the second category it can be mention the personal factors, as well as those referring to the inter-human relations established at the level of the college of pupils: the psycho-intellectual potential of these students due to a backward development, social isolation etc. Specialty literature (DuFour, 2002, Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, & Walker, 2007 and so forth), but also the results of the present study show that a clear differentiation cannot be made between those two large groups of factors in the sense that they are interdependent and influence each other. For example, the large number of pupils studying in a school class will make it more difficult to personalize the didactic process according to the educational needs of each student. On the other hand, school failure because of learning difficulties can lead to rejection or marginalization of the pupil within the school staff and, possibly, the amplification of learning disabilities and behavioural problems. Therefore, it can be appreciated that solving problems related to the teaching activity of pupils with SEN (personalization of the educational process, providing support for the correct acquisition of didactic content and solving of school tasks etc.) could be a first step in overcoming the difficulties related to scholar learning and effective integration of the pupil in the school staff to which they belong.

In this context, most of the teachers who have compiled the sample of this research suggest that for most students with learning difficulties, the best form of schooling is represented by mass education. The statement is justified by the fact that these pupils do not have any disability that cannot be held accountable for the emergence of learning difficulties. As demonstrated in this study, such problems arise from the action of causes limiting the student's ability to effective acquire a certain informational content. Therefore, recovering delays in psychosomatic development or limiting the action of generating external causes can lead to successfully overcoming learning difficulties. Thus, offering a qualified assistance from itinerant teachers with a good training in the special psycho-pedagogy can help pupils with SEN both in solving school learning tasks and in providing socio-emotional support from other colleagues. This may be the most important argument for scholar and social inclusion of pupils with learning difficulties in mainstream schools, alongside other typical students (Blândul, 2014).

In conclusion, it can be appreciated that the problem of learning difficulties is frequently encountered in schools from Romania, but which is not always properly diagnosed and addressed. Possible etiological factors can be grouped into the "objective" ones (that are related to the learning task in school) and "subjective" ones (including personal and interpersonal causes). The consequences can be extremely serious and can lead to the social isolation of student. Therefore, preventive and corrective measures are required to provide educational and socio-emotional support to the pupil in difficulty. However, the most important thing, is that students with learning difficulties can be enrolled in mass

education, and this is a chance for them to social inclusion and a normal life in the society where they live.

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