


Integration of children with special educational needs through the Comenius regio project Social and school integration of pupils with SEN in Romania and Greece

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Abstract

Keywords:

education, integration, school integration, social integration, children with special educational needs

Children with special educational needs are one of the most vulnerable sections of the community. In order to achieve the social inclusion of this category, we should focus on the education and rehabilitation of these children. In a perfect world it would be better and we really wished there were no sick children, no disabled children, no separation of children in mainstream schools and in schools for inclusive education. Inclusion, considered as an issue, has much deeper roots, however. We are not sure whether there have been other European projects addressing this issue, but the project which we have proposed aimed to make a comparison between the education systems of Romania and Greece, the effective integration strategies and methods used, the functioning of the integration process, the role of the responsible factors and the progress of this process, the way the education of children with SEN is supported (curriculum and teaching-learning strategies, specific evaluation), the way the inclusive education is promoted in the local community and last but not least, the problems encountered and the ways to solve them.

1. Introduction

According to the authors Bocoş and Jucan (2002), education represents the activity of forming the human personality, organized continuously and systematically, through which the axiological, social and cultural side of the human being develops.

Starting from the definition of education and the provision of equal opportunities in the sense of Schwartz that is, "to provide each individual with a rhythm and forms of education that suit him" (Schwartz, 1976, p. 59), we cannot address the issue of inclusive education without reviewing the specialized terms connected to this field.

Inclusive education is an ongoing process that aims to provide quality education for all, while respecting the diversity and different abilities and needs, characteristics and learning expectations of students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination (Vrăşmaş & Vrăşmaş, 2021).

In Verza's (1998) opinion, the idea of CES (special educational needs) represents those specific educational needs, adjacent to the objectives of education, adapted to psycho-individual particularities and the provision of complex assistance services more

precisely: medical assistance, social assistance and educational assistance.

Referring to the phrase special educational requirements, Gheorghiu (2005) emphasizes the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for school and social integration: "without an adequate approach to these special requirements, one cannot really speak of equal opportunities for access, participation and school and social integration" (p. 24).

From Watkins' (2009) perspective, inclusion encourages positive attitudes, stimulates learning in each person's personal environment, involves improving educational and social environments, meets the needs of everyone by ensuring participation in education, culture, community and eliminating exclusion in education.

Roman and Nădăban (2022) consider teaching the activity through which the learning process is organized and carried out, based on didactic communication through which the foundations of the relationship between teacher and student are laid.

"School represents an area of professionalism and responsibility, in which the teacher shows pedagogical



qualities through which it leads the student to success. The overall skills for the teaching career include the professional (general and specific) skills, the transversal and the specialized ones, supported on a wide and flexible theoretical purview, as well as on the research skills of the educational phenomenon. The communication skills is one of the most important skills in the series of professional ones that ensure the efficiency of the didactic act and the success of the entire instructive-educational process" (Catalano & Catalano, 2018, p. 119).

2. Theoretical foundation

There are several possibilities through which the integration of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools can be successfully achieved. I would like to remind you in this regard: raising awareness of the school and local community, training teachers in the field of inclusive education, ensuring optimal conditions for reorganizing the school to the needs of these children, rethinking and reorganizing the curriculum applied at the level of the educational unit, creating and adopting new teaching methods.

Occasional integration, which involves the joint participation in various school and extracurricular activities of students with special educational needs alongside their colleagues from the regular school, is one of the forms of integration used relatively frequently.

The Comenius-Regio Partnership "Social and school integration of students with SEN in Romania and Greece" through the targeted objectives and organized activities contributed to the achievement of occasional integration at the level of participating educational units in Romania and Greece. The ongoing project was initiated by the Bihor County School Inspectorate.

The aim of the Regio Comenius partnership was to promote the regional cooperation between regional authorities from Oradea, Bihor, Romania and Thesprotia, Ipeiros Greece by improving the delivery of education especially in the field of inclusive education. The partnership has allowed the organization of training programs in the field for at least 50 teachers in Bihor region, and 50 teachers from Ipeiros Greece. Another aim of the Comenius Regio Partnership called "Social and School integration for children with SEN" was to share models and best practices in inclusive education, and the professional development of teachers, but also, last but not least, to change the mentality of the local community about pupils with special educational needs.

In pursuit of this overall aims, the partners have agreed to the following objectives:

- to promote the European dimension in inclusive education through the cooperation between local authorities and institutions involved in this project;
- to share experience and good practices in integrating pupils with SEN in school and society;
- to develop a positive attitude of the community towards the children with special education needs, to stimulate interest in their problems;
- to gather knowledge and experience from Romania and Greece about educational school systems and effective integration strategies;
- to promote inclusive education within the local community;
- to develop the professional skills of teachers involved in the recovery / rehabilitation and social integration of children with SEN;
- to develop cultural horizon and multicultural youth, to foster the spirit of commitment, the responsibility for promoting values, to protect the children with special education needs and their potential;
- to improve communication skills in English, language of communication of the project.

3. Research methodology

The most interesting part of the book is the mini-research concerning some issues of inclusive education in Romania and in Greece from the point of view of the parents, teachers and headmasters. The results are conclusive, offering information to all those who are not familiar with the two education systems, presenting the resemblances, as well as the differences regarding inclusive education, but also the points where many things could be improved.

3.1. Research objective: The aim of the research carried out on samples from Romania and Greece approved the first surprise of how inclusive education is perceived.

The theme was focused on children with SEN children with disabilities in the context of transition to a school-type base integrativ. On general diagnosis would show which areas they need to act to facilitate and ensure better implementation of school and social integration in the educational process.

3.2. Analysis and interpretation of the obtained data

The Participants' Profile

a) Parents participating the study

23 parents from Greece and 101 from Romania have participated in the study by recording their demographic characteristics and by answering several questions related to the “Social and school inclusion of children with special educational needs”. All participants were parents of children with special educational needs, attending special education programs within their school.

In Greece, in particular, the study sample comprises mostly women, as only two men were recorded; the majority of the participants were high-school graduates. In Romania 19 men and 82 women took part in the research. The age of the parents in Greece most frequently reported was 31-40, 2 of them were 20-30 years old and 5 were above 40. In Romania, the age of the parents most frequently reported was 31-40 (59 persons), 11 of them were 20-30 years old, 26 of them were 41-50 years old and 5 were above 50.

b) Teachers participating in the study

In Greece, the majority of the 38 teachers who have taken part in the study are under 40 years old and in Romania, the majority of the 370 teachers who have participated in the research is within the range 31-40. Also, in Greece specifically 39,5% of them are 30 years old or younger, 28,9% are between 30 and 40 years old, 8 teachers (21,1%) are between 40 and 50 years old, and 4 teachers are above 50. In Romania, 22% of the respondents’ ages are above 50, 20% are between 41-50 and 18% are between 20-30 years old.

c) Headmasters participating in the study

In Greece, the majority (60%) of the 20 headmasters are aged between 41 and 50, only one is aged below 40 and 7 of them are older than 50. In Romania, the majority (44%) of the 50 headmasters are aged between 41 and 50, nine are aged below 40 and 19 of them are older than 50 years old.

4. Results: Comparisons between headmasters, teachers and parents

Subsequently, tests aiming to highlight differences on certain questions have been carried out between the three categories of participants.

In Greece, all three groups agree that students with special educational needs would not be better in special schools and few participants claimed the opposite. It is worth mentioning that only 2 headmasters have claimed N/A and that this option has been mostly chosen by teachers and parents.

Table 1

Question: Do you believe that special schools would be a better context for the education of children which special educational needs?

GREECE

Question - Answer	Group			Total
	Headmasters	Teachers	Parents	
Do you Absolutely believe that disagree special schools would N/A be a better Agree context for the education of children which special educational needs?	4	4	3	11
	8	14	8	30
	2	10	7	19
	5	9	2	16
	0	1	2	3
Total	19	38	22	79

Figure 1

Representation of question answers Do you believe that special schools would be a better context for the education of children which special educational needs?

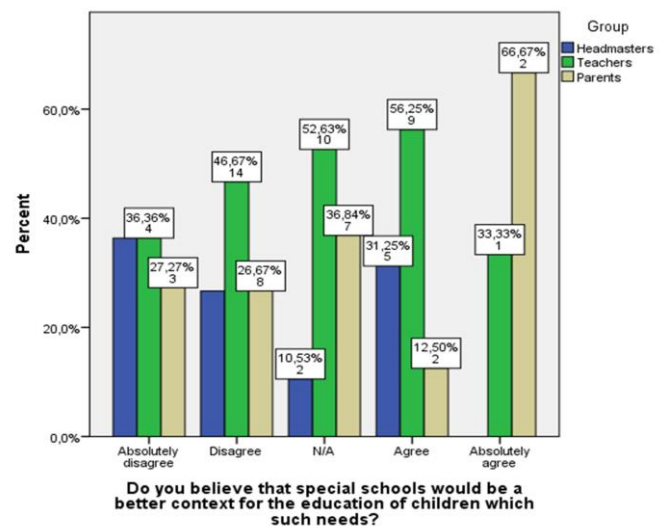


Table 2

Question Do you believe that special schools would be a better context for the education of children which such needs?

ROMANIA

Question - Answer	Group			Total
	Headmasters	Teachers	Parents	
Do you Absolutely believe that disagree special schools would N/A be a better Agree context for the education of children which special educational needs?	2	11	32	45
	2	37	12	51
	6	43	26	75
	20	163	19	202
	19	116	12	147
Total	50	370	101	521

Figure 2

Representation of answers for the question: Special school is better context for children with SEN?

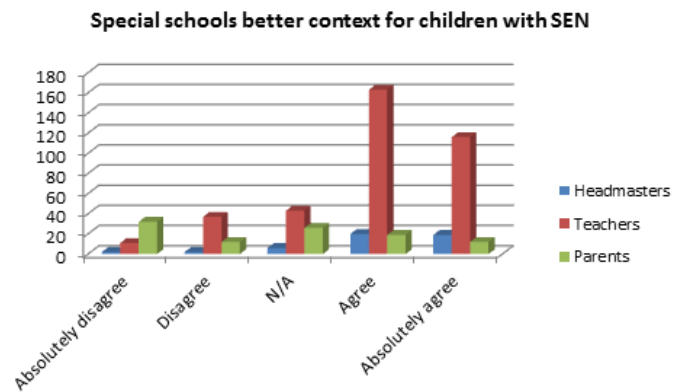


Table 3

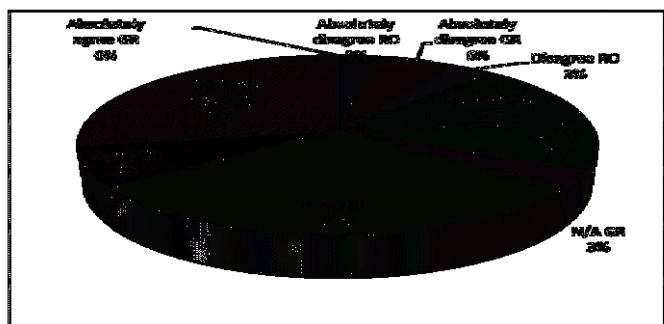
Representation of the answers of directors, teachers and parents

Group	Abs. disagree		Disagree		N/A		Agree		Abs. Agree	
	RO	GR	RO	GR	RO	GR	RO	GR	RO	GR
Headmasters	2	4	2	8	6	2	20	5	19	0
Teachers	11	4	37	14	3	0	163	9	116	1
Parents	32	3	12	8	6	7	19	2	12	2

In Romania, the vast majority of the respondents – 163 teachers, 20 headmasters and 19 parents agree, while 116 teachers, 19 headmasters and 12 parents absolutely agree with the idea of educating the pupils with SEN in special schools, considering that these institutions would represent the best educational context for their schooling. A rather high number of respondents – 43 teachers, 6 headmasters and 26 parents - have chosen the answer option N/A for this item of the questionnaire.

Figure 3

Comparisons answers from Romania and Greece



The Table 4 item highlights participants' opinion concerning the necessity of the personalized education

plans for the work with pupils with SEN, plans which should be designed by specialists.

Figure 4

Comparisons answers from Romania and Greece

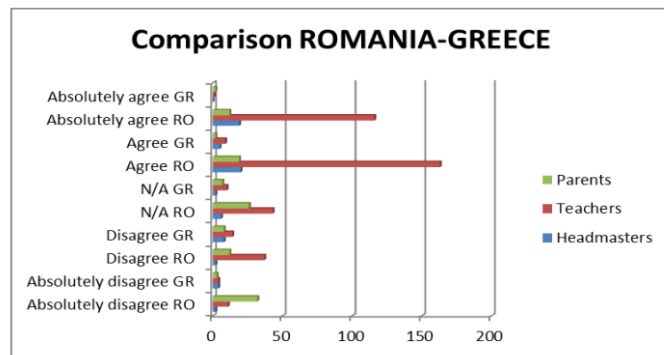


Table 4

The representation of the answers between headmasters, teachers and parents in Greece

Question - Answer	GREECE			Total
	Headmasters	Teachers	Parents	
Do you Disagree believe that N/A students with special educational needs must be assigned a special educational plan designed by special educators?	2	5	1	8
Agree	8	23	10	41
Absolutely agree	5	8	8	21
Total	18	38	23	79

Regarding the need to have a specially designed teaching plan for students with special educational needs, headmasters, teachers and parents seem to agree. Most disagreements come from teachers.

Figure 5

Comparisons answers from Romania and Greece

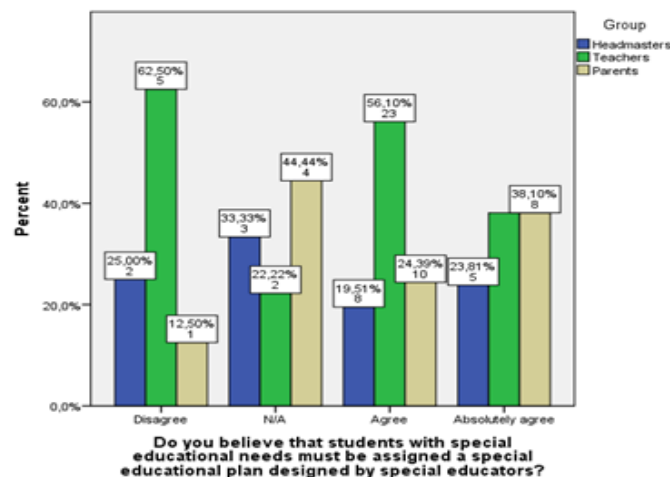


Table 5

Romania answer - Question Do you believe that students with special educational needs must be assigned a special educational plan designed by special educators

ROMANIA

Question - Answer	Group			Total
	Headmasters	Teachers	Parents	
Do you Absolutely disagree	3	10	17	30
believe that students with special educational needs must be assigned a special educational plan designed by special educators?	4	41	13	58
Disagree	7	15	21	43
N/A	27	148	26	201
Agree	9	156	24	189
Absolutely agree				
Total	50	370	101	521

If we analyse all the answers obtained in Romania, we can see that 201 participants agree and 189 absolutely agree with the necessity of the personalized education plans for students with SEN. 43 of the respondents have chosen the answer option N/A, 58 disagree and 30 absolutely disagree with the necessity of these personalized education plans.

Figure 6

Comparisons answers from Romania and Greece

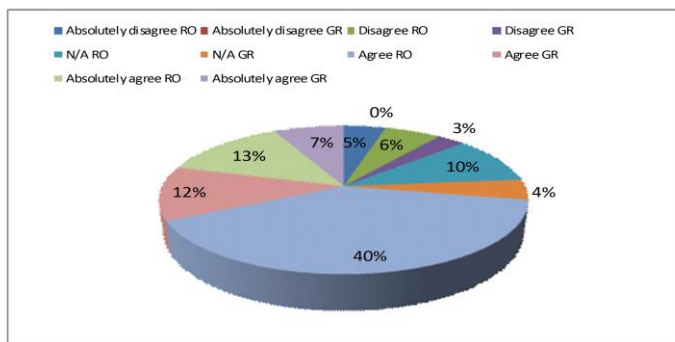
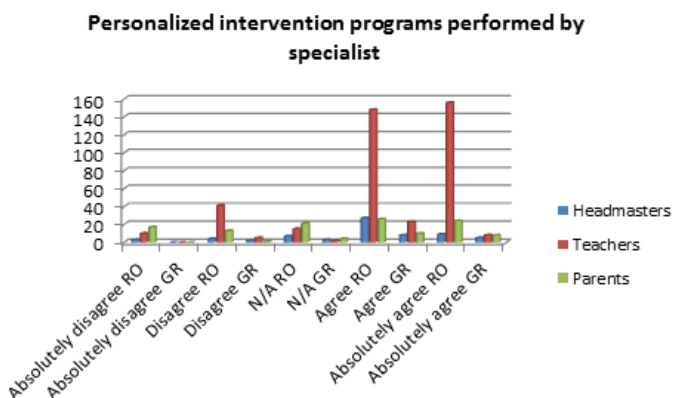


Figure 7

Answer - Question Do you the personalized intervention programs performed by specialist?



The following item compares participants' options on the education of children with SEN in mainstream schools.

Table 6

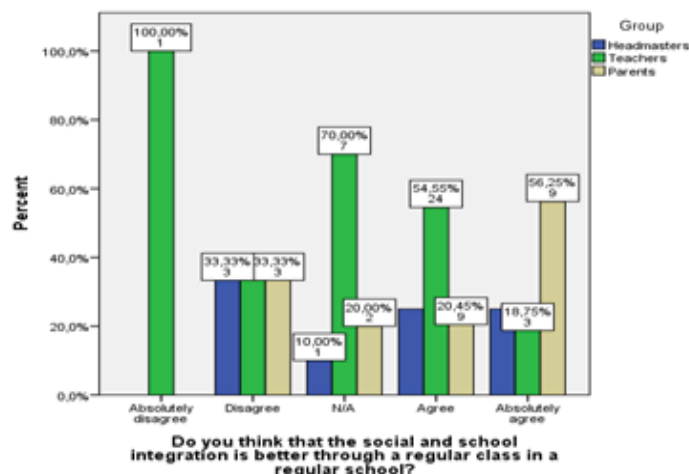
Greece answer Do you think that the social and school integration is better through a regular class in a regular school?

GREECE

Question - Answer	Group			Total
	Headmasters	Teachers	Parents	
Do you think Absolutely that the social disagree	0	1	0	1
and school Disagree	3	3	3	9
integration is N/A	1	7	2	10
better through Agree	11	24	9	44
a regular class Absolutely	4	3	9	16
in a regular school? agree				
Total	19	38	23	80

Figure 8

Comparisons answers from Romania and Greece Do you think that the social and school integration is better through a regular class in a regular school?



All participants agree that children with special educational needs are better taught in regular classes. Most N/A answers come from teachers.

Table 7

Romania & Greece answers

Group	Abs. disagree RO	Abs. disagree GR	Disagree RO	Disagree GR	N/A RO	N/A GR	Agree RO	Agree GR	Abs. Agree RO	Abs. Agree GR
Headmasters	4	0	12	3	7	1	23	11	3	4
Teachers	33	1	74	3	26	7	186	27	51	3
Parents	5	0	14	3	18	2	28	9	36	9

In Romania, and also in Greece, the majority of the respondents agree or absolutely agree with the

education of children with SEN in mainstream schools, considering that they represent a favourable educational context for their rehabilitation.

Figure 9

Comparisons answers from Romania and Greece- Regular school is a better context for children wits SEN?

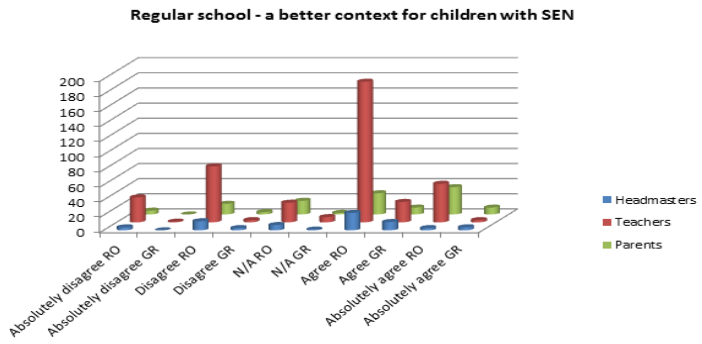
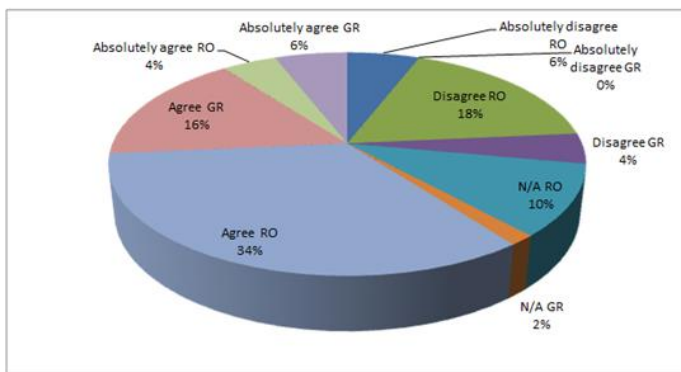


Figure 10

Comparisons answers from Romania and Greece



Thus, in Romania, we have the following results: 34% agree, 4% absolutely agree and in Greece 16% agree and 6% absolutely agree. 10% of the respondents in Romania and 2% in Greece have chosen the answer option N/A. For the disagreements, we have the following values: in Romania 18% disagree and 6% absolutely disagree, while in Greece 4% disagree and 0% absolutely disagree.

Question:

Do you believe that a successful education relies on the communication between the school and the family?

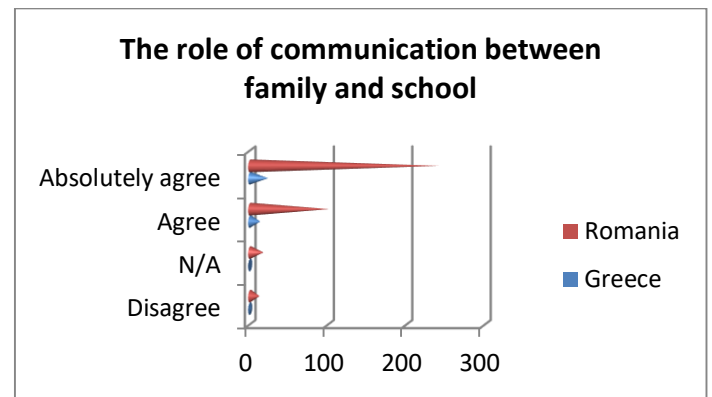
Table 8

Romania & Greece answers

Country	Disagree	N/A	Agree	Absolutely agree
Greece	2	0	13	23
Percentage	5,3%	0%	34,2%	60,5%
Romania	12	17	101	241
Percentage	3%	5%	27%	65%

Figure 11

Comparisons answers from Romania and Greece



We have obtained the following response rates: Romania – ”Absolutely agree” (65%), ”Agree” (27%); Greece – ”Absolutely agree” (60,5%), ”Agree” (34,2%).

The vast majority of the answers suggest that the parents totally agree that the communication between family and school is very important for the succes of inclusive education.

In Romania, 5% of the respondents have chosen the answer N/A.

3% of the respondents in Romania and 5,3% of those in Greece do not agree that the success of inclusive education is ensured by the communication between family and school.

Often, the teachers who work with classes where there are integrated pupils face various problems.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the European program Comenius Regio 2013 -2015 gave Romania and Greece the opportunity to cooperate and exchange views and experiences on the social and school integration of children with special educational needs.

A definite outcome is that both countries school and social services are making significant efforts. Nevertheless, our research shows that there is room for more to be done, from local authorities as well as the State.

If we analyse the results obtained in the two countries for the item investigating participants' opinion on the education of children with SEN in special schools / inclusive education centres, we can notice the following: in Romania, the highest percentage belongs to the answer option which agrees with the education of children with SEN in such institutions, considering that they represent a

favourable educational context for their rehabilitation (29% agree and 28% absolutely agree).

The situation is different in Greece, where the majority of the respondents disagree with the schooling of children with SEN in such institutions (12% disagree and 6% absolutely disagree). The percentage of those who could not answer this question is also different: 9% in Romania and 3% As for the number of subjects in the study, we can observe that in Greece, the personalized education plan has been presented to a very large extent to the parents, the percentage being of 43.5%, while in Romania the same variant has recorded a response rate of 23%.

We must underline the fact that in Romania, as well as in Greece, the answer options “A little” and “A lot” have obtained rather high values ((31%, 41% in Romania and 13% si 26% in Greece), which indicates that in both countries there are support teachers who do not inform the parents of the children with SEN about the child’s personal education plan which guides their activity in Greece.

The highest percentages obtained in Greece and in Romania prove that the majority of the respondents believe that the pupils with SEN should be assigned personalized education plans and that these plans should be designed only by specialists (in Romania, 40% agree and 13% absolutely agree and in Greece 12% agree and 7% absolutely agree). As for the disagreements, 5% absolutely disagree and 6% disagree in Romania, while in Greece 0% absolutely disagree and 3% disagree with these plans. 10% of the respondents in Romania and 4% in Greece have chosen the answer option N/A.

We can notice that in Romania, but also in Greece, the majority of the respondents agree that the personalized education plans for the pupils with SEN are important and that their design should be made by specialists. Relatively similar percentages – 5.3% in Greece and 4% in Romania - of the respondents could not give an answer to this item. The rest of the respondents have chosen the option proving that they do not agree that the personalized education plans should be designed only by specialists.

In Romania, the majority of the teachers agree that the children with SEN should be integrated in the mainstream schools: “Agree” – 50% and “Absolutely agree” – 14%. The option N/A has recorded 7% of the answers, “Disagree” – 20% and “Absolutely disagree” – 9%. We can notice that a considerable percentage of the respondents – about 29% - disagree with the

integration of the pupils with SEN in the mainstream schools.

We can notice a similar situation for the answers obtained in Greece: the majority of the answers are “Agree” (63,2%) and “N/A” (16,4%). The options “Absolutely agree” and “Disagree” have scored identical percentages – 7,9% - and the option of “Absolutely disagree” has obtained 2,6%.

The aim of the research carried out on samples from Romania and Greece approved the first surprise of how inclusive education is perceived.

The theme was focused on children with SEN children with disabilities in the context of transition to a school-type base integrativ. On general diagnosis would show which areas they need to act to facilitate and ensure better implementation of school and social integration in the educational process.

The results suggest the need to transform the school into an open institution, in which all actors (students, teachers, parents, local community representatives) were part of the due respect and support needed for personal development with emphasis on social integration of children / youth with SEN in society.

Hopefully our efforts will become a starting point for further research, activities and positive outcomes.

Authors note:

Elena Maria Ungureanu, Ph.D. student, research field special and special integrated education, educational sciences, relevant articles: Ukrainian refugees, identity and social challenges at the level of Bihor county, Online educational activities for preschoolers, Inclusion and special educational requirements, a methodological guide for the implementation of good practices acquired within the European training for psychologists project, Communicating with people with disabilities PECS, MAKATON.

Alina Felicia Roman, Ph.D., University professor, Doctor of Educational Sciences, research field: evaluation of the learning process; current approaches in education and the development of the state of the good of the students; integrated learning; curriculum design for early childhood education; formation initial and continuous training of teachers, relevant articles: The Relation Discourse–Text and Textuality. Pro-pragmatic Self-reference on Speech, Education, research, and development. Application

approaches in school, The role of intercultural values in the development of school environment, Emotional education and the development of prosocial behavior.

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