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Challenges and benefits of inclusive education for children with disabilities

Pădeanu Luciana¹, Mladin Ionuț²

¹ Educational Assistance and Resources Center "Speranța" Timișoara, ²Associate professor, West University of Timișoara, Timiș County Center for Educational Resources and Assistance,
padeanu.luciana@gmail.com¹, imladin@gmail.com²

Abstract. The integration of students with disabilities in mainstream education is an important and necessary process to give them the opportunity to have access to education and to develop in a normal environment. This is an approach that is based on the principle that all students should have access to quality education and equal opportunities, regardless of their differences. To facilitate this process, it is important that schools provide adequate resources and support for students with disabilities, including early assessment and diagnosis, counseling services and specialized educational support, as well as physical and technological facilities adapted to their needs. It is also important that teachers and school staff are trained and prepared to work with students with disabilities and be sensitive to their needs and differences.

Keywords: integration, children with disabilities, segregation, inclusive education, inclusion

Introduction

In recent years, more and more countries have adopted policies and laws that encourage the integration of students with disabilities into regular schools, but there are still many challenges in this process. Integrating them into mainstream school can have a positive impact on their social, emotional and academic development. Students with disabilities who are integrated into regular schools are more likely to develop their communication and relationship skills with their non-disabled peers, improve their self-esteem and develop a broader perspective on the world.



Mainstreaming can also provide students with disabilities the opportunity to learn alongside their non-disabled peers and benefit from the same resources and opportunities. However, integrating students with disabilities into the mainstream school can be a difficult process.

The integration of students with disabilities in mainstream education has become a priority for society in recent years, especially due to the fact that it can have a positive impact on their social, cognitive and emotional development. Studies have shown that integrating students with disabilities into mainstream education can be beneficial for both them and their non-disabled peers. Students with disabilities can learn new social skills and develop a positive attitude towards people with special needs, while their peers without disabilities can learn to be more tolerant and accepting of diversity.

A study published in the "Journal of Educational Psychology" (2000) showed that integrating students with disabilities into mainstream education can have a positive impact on their academic performance. Integrated students with disabilities showed better academic performance than students with disabilities who were educated in separate classes. Likewise, another study published in the "Journal of Disability Policy Studies" (2010) shows that the inclusion of students with disabilities in the mainstream school has a positive impact on their self-esteem, reducing the occurrence of negative behaviors.

Some of the challenges associated with integration are:

- physical accessibility - schools must be accessible to students with disabilities, which may include facilitating access to buildings, classrooms, bathrooms and other facilities;
- accessibility to information and resources - students with disabilities need access to information and resources adapted to their specific needs, as well as people to provide them with the necessary support;
- resistance of parents and teachers - parents and teachers may be reluctant to integrate students with disabilities into the regular school, because they fear that this process can be difficult and that it can have a negative impact on other students.
- stigmatization and discrimination - students with disabilities may be stigmatized and discriminated against by their non-disabled peers, which can lead to socialization problems and a feeling of isolation and non-acceptance;
- lack of teacher training - teachers and school staff may need additional training and preparation to be able to provide the necessary support to students with disabilities and to ensure that they benefit from the same opportunities as other students;
- costs - integrating students with disabilities into regular schools can be expensive, as it may require additional resources and services, as well as adaptations to infrastructure and equipment.

To address these challenges and encourage the integration of students with disabilities in regular schools, researchers and experts in the field have proposed various solutions, such as:

- ensuring physical accessibility and information and resources adapted to the needs of students with disabilities;
- creating an inclusive and respectful environment towards the diversity of students and promoting the values of tolerance and acceptance of differences;



- adequate training of teachers and school staff to enable them to provide the necessary support to students with disabilities and to ensure that they benefit from the same opportunities as other students;
- the involvement of parents and the community in the integration process, to increase their degree of acceptance and involvement;
- ensuring adequate financial support to cover the costs associated with the integration of students with disabilities in regular schools (Avramidis et al., 2000, Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

1. Inclusive education and children/pupils with disabilities

Despite significant progress over the last decade, millions of people are denied the right to education and learning opportunities remain unequally distributed. Globally, 1 in 5 children, adolescents and young people are completely excluded from education. The right to education aims to protect the human right to quality education throughout life. A comprehensive approach to education means that the needs of each individual are considered and all children participate and achieve together, recognizing that every child can learn and that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) focuses on inclusion throughout the education system rather than trying to remove barriers one by one; the focus is on how to transform existing systems, rather than how to integrate some students. Promote an educational system based on gender equality, respecting different needs, abilities and characteristics and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the learning environment (<https://www.unesco.org/en/education/inclusion/need-know>).

Inclusive education is a concept that focuses on integrating children with disabilities into regular classrooms and providing them with the same learning opportunities as children without disabilities. This approach is based on the idea that all children deserve to be included and respected, regardless of their abilities. We can define inclusive education as a model of teaching in which all students, regardless of their abilities and special needs, learn in the same equal way alongside typical students and aims to ensure that all students are treated equally in terms of opportunities or social exposure, so that, in the environment in which this education is carried out, the diversity and uniqueness of students must be respected without discrimination (<http://www.europeanagency.org>).

Inclusive education is a continuous process of improving the school institution, which aims to maximize the use of all available resources, especially human resources, to ensure the participation of all people in the community in the educational process (Verza, 1997). This process involves a holistic and integrated approach to education, which takes into account the needs, abilities and individual differences of students, in order to provide them with equal opportunities for learning and development. Inclusive education involves creating a safe and non-discriminatory school environment that promotes access and participation for all students, regardless of their cultural, linguistic, social, economic or ability differences. This process also involves the development of teaching and assessment strategies and methods that are flexible and adapted to the needs and particularities of each student, in order to ensure equal opportunities for academic success.

Salend (2011) provides a definition of inclusive education, referring to inclusion as a philosophy that brings students, families, teachers and community members together to create



schools based on acceptance, belonging and community. Inclusive schools welcome, acknowledge, affirm and celebrate the values of all students through education, bringing them together in the classroom. Therefore, it is clear that the foundations of inclusive education and special education are different. The philosophy developed for various reasons offers an alternative approach to educating students with disabilities. For inclusive education to be successful, teachers need a deep understanding of inclusive education, both the content of the curriculum and the diversity of students. This knowledge allows them to anticipate and remove barriers in: what they teach (curriculum), the ways in which they teach it (pedagogy); and how learning should be demonstrated (assessment). They cannot achieve this if they believe that the barriers are within the student and that the student must overcome those barriers.

Another author who has written about the inclusive education of children with disabilities is Thomas Hehir. It states that inclusive education is not just an opportunity to put children with disabilities in regular classrooms, but is an opportunity to improve all children by creating a more diverse learning environment (Hehir, 1996). Also, the inclusive education of children with disabilities is an important approach to their learning and development, which is based on inclusiveness, respect and equal opportunities.

Inclusive special education involves the implementation of practices that have established solid foundations for supporting effective inclusive education, such practices are identified by Salend and Whittaker (2012):

- promoting the acceptance of difference and diversity;
- adopting an approach based on strengths, with an emphasis on skill development;
- using the individualized educational plan to focus on students' strengths and challenges;
- organizing interventions using an intervention response system;
- using universal design for learning to differentiate education;
- behavior management using interventions and positive behavioral supports;
- using a variety of assessment strategies to monitor progress and inform training;
- using a variety of support and instructional techniques to facilitate learning;
- use of peer-mediated learning such as peer tutoring and collaborative learning;
- teaching students to use effective learning approaches, for example, metacognition;
- ensuring that interventions and processes are culturally appropriate and engaging;
- working closely with parents and professionals of children with disabilities.

From a philosophical perspective, we consider four hypotheses of inclusive education (Peters, 2007):

1. All students who come to school have diverse needs and abilities, so no student is different from others in this respect;
2. The education system has the mission of responding to the needs of all students;
3. The education system is responsive, offering high expectations and standards, flexible, relevant curricula, an accessible environment, and well-trained teachers to meet the educational needs of all students;
4. Advancing education is a process where schools and communities work together to prepare citizens for an inclusive society, being educated to enjoy the benefits, rights and experience of a full social life.



However, there are numerous studies showing that inclusive education can have positive effects on children with disabilities as well as on children without disabilities. These may include: improving socialization and communication skills, increasing self-confidence and independence, developing empathy and respect for diversity.

2. The transition from segregation to inclusion

Segregation and inclusion are opposite concepts in society and refer to how groups and individuals are treated and integrated into society. Segregation refers to the practice of separating children with disabilities from children without disabilities, either by placing them in separate classes or by placing them in separate schools or institutions. Inclusion refers to the integration of these groups and individuals into society by recognizing and capitalizing on their differences and ensuring access to the same opportunities and resources (Brown, Palmer, 2014).

Segregation of children with disabilities has been a controversial topic in modern society, and this issue has been addressed in numerous researches and studies. One of the most important studies on this subject was carried out by the US National Commission on Human Rights, which found that the education of children with disabilities in separate schools is a form of discrimination and a violation of their rights to education (National Commission on Civil Rights, 1982). According to studies, children with disabilities are frequently separated from their peers and sent to special schools or separate classes, instead of being integrated into regular schools. This phenomenon can be motivated by various causes, such as prejudices and negative attitudes of society towards children with disabilities, as well as problems related to the accessibility and adaptation of the school for them.

In the article "Inclusion or exclusion: Is there a definitive choice in special education?" published in the *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, Rouse (2016) discusses the ongoing debate over inclusion versus exclusion in special education. The author argues that while both inclusion and exclusion have their advantages and disadvantages, there is no definitive choice that is universally applicable to all situations. Inclusion refers to the practice of educating students with disabilities in the same classroom as their peers without disabilities. Proponents of inclusion argue that it promotes socialization, fosters a sense of belonging, and gives students with disabilities access to the same academic opportunities as their peers. However, opponents of inclusion argue that it can disrupt the classroom environment, does not always provide adequate support for students with disabilities, and can negatively impact the academic progress of both students with and without disabilities.

Exclusion, on the other hand, refers to the practice of educating students with disabilities in separate classrooms or schools. Proponents of exclusion argue that it provides students with disabilities with specialized support and services that they might not receive in an inclusive setting and that it allows for a more individualized approach to education. However, opponents of exclusion argue that it can lead to stigma and social isolation for students with disabilities and limit their access to academic and extracurricular opportunities.

The same author concludes that the choice between inclusion and exclusion should be made on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the individual needs and preferences of the student, the resources available to the school and the goals of the educational program. The author suggests that a hybrid approach, combining elements of both inclusion and exclusion, may be the most



effective way to meet the needs of all students. Ultimately, the decision should be guided by a commitment to providing the best possible education for each individual student.

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) had a profound impact on the education of students with disabilities, mainstream schools assumed responsibility for educating all children, therefore fewer students with disabilities attended segregated schools. However, a dual system of educating students in mainstream schools has emerged. This was based on the assumption that there are inherent differences between students with and without disabilities that require different educational "treatments" (Turnbull et al., 2013).

Methods of research

The overall objective

We proposed as a general objective the identification of perception teaching staff participating in the study on the *identification of obstacles and the application of appropriate strategies found in the integration process for students with disabilities*.

Assumptions and specific objectives

Hypothesis number 1: The integration of children with disabilities in regular schools can be achieved by identifying obstacles and applying appropriate strategies, which will lead to improved academic performance.

Objective 1.1. Identifying barriers and applying appropriate strategies to improve school outcomes in mainstream school children with disabilities

Variables entered

The hypothesis has as an *independent variable*: **the integration of children with disabilities in regular schools**, and as a *dependent variable*: **the improvement of the academic performance of these children**.

Research tools

To verify the hypothesis, we used the questionnaire method, developing an opinion questionnaire, consisting of 12 items. The items of the questionnaire include, in the majority, closed questions with multiple answers, through which I tried to identify the perception of teachers regarding the integration of students with disabilities in mainstream education, identifying obstacles and implementing appropriate strategies to facilitate this process.

The batch of subjects

The questionnaire was offered to be completed by a group of 56 classroom teachers who have or had at least one integrated disabled student in their class.

Most of the respondents teach in the urban environment, being teachers at the primary level (58%), and a percentage of 16% teach at the secondary school level.

Among the 56 teaching staff, 27 of them, i.e. 48%, have between 0 and 10 years of experience, 12 of them, which represents 22%, have more than 10 years of experience, and another 12 teaching staff, also 22% have over 20 years of experience. 38 of these cadres work in urban areas, while 18 work in rural areas. Of the total respondents, 55, that is 98%, are women, while only one answer, which represents 2%, belongs to men. More than half, namely 57% of the teachers are under 40 years old, while the rest are over 40 years old. Also, 71% of the teaching staff have completed higher studies in the fields of: Letters, History, Theology, Communication Sciences, Psychology and Education Sciences, specializing in Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, and 29% have only the Pedagogical High School.

Verification of the working hypothesis

The hypothesis focuses on the idea that the integration of children with disabilities into regular schools can be successfully achieved, provided that obstacles are properly identified and managed, which can lead to improved school outcomes. To verify this hypothesis, we statistically analyzed items: 1-12 of the opinion questionnaire addressed to teaching staff.

We will present the statistical analysis and interpretation of these items below.

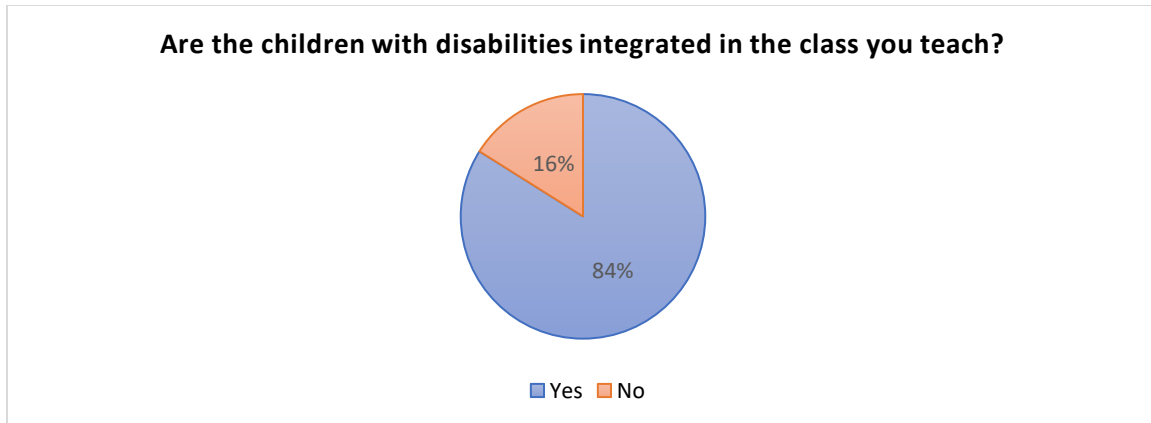


Fig. 1. The existence of students with disabilities integrated in the classroom

In the figure above (no. 1.1), we notice that out of the total of 56 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 47 (84%) stated that there are children with disabilities integrated in the respective class, i.e. these children were integrated within the class of students without disabilities, and 9 (16%) of the respondents stated that there are no integrated disabled children in the class where they teach.

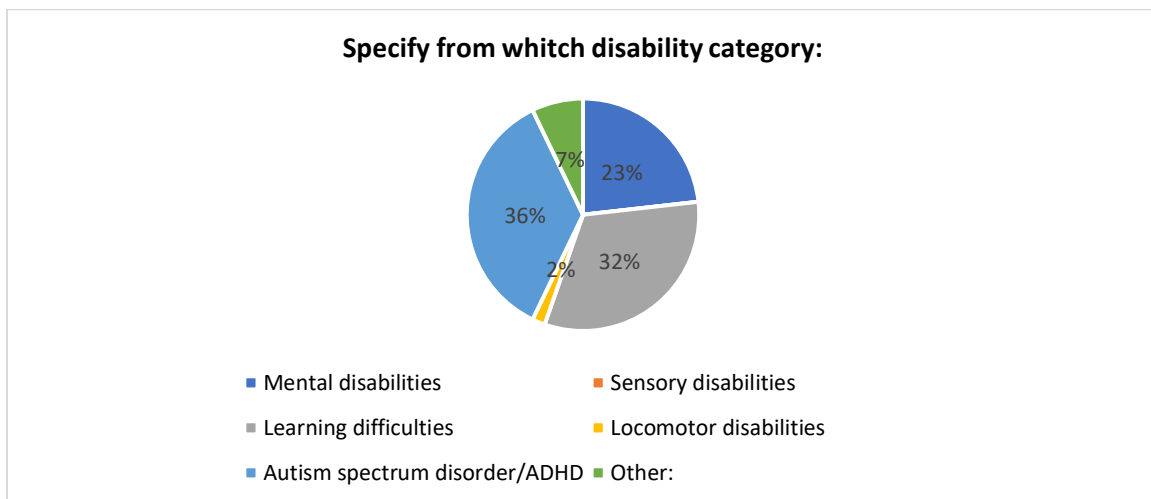


Fig. 2. Categories of disabilities



In the figure above, it can be seen that out of a total of 56 teachers, 20 (36%) have students with autism spectrum disorder in their class, 18 (32%) teachers have students with learning difficulties, and 13 (23%) of the respondents have students with mental disabilities.

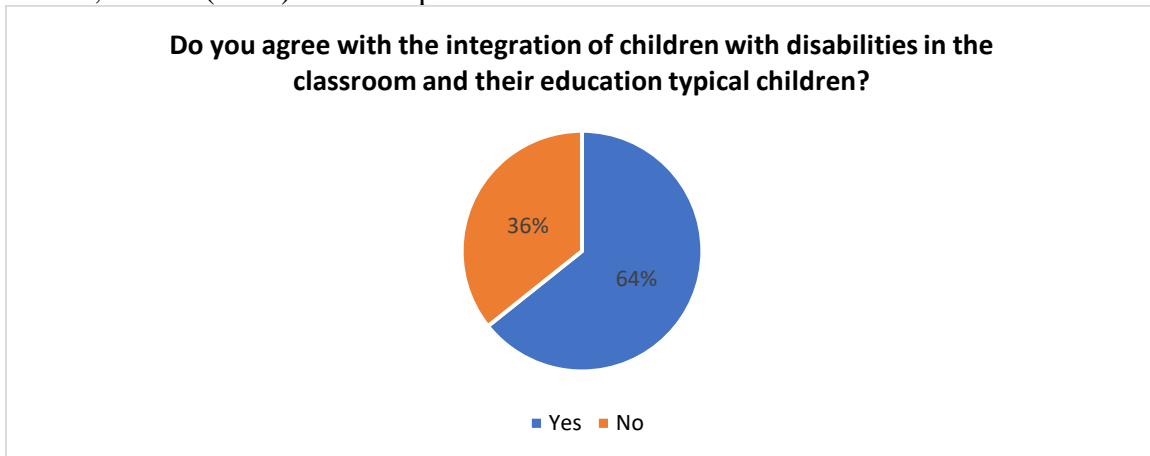


Fig. 3. Integration of children with disabilities alongside other typical children

Out of a total of 56 teachers, 64% (36) answered "Yes" indicating agreement on including children with disabilities in the classroom and educating them alongside their peers without disabilities, and 36% (20) of respondents answered "No" indicating that they do not agree with their inclusion in the class.

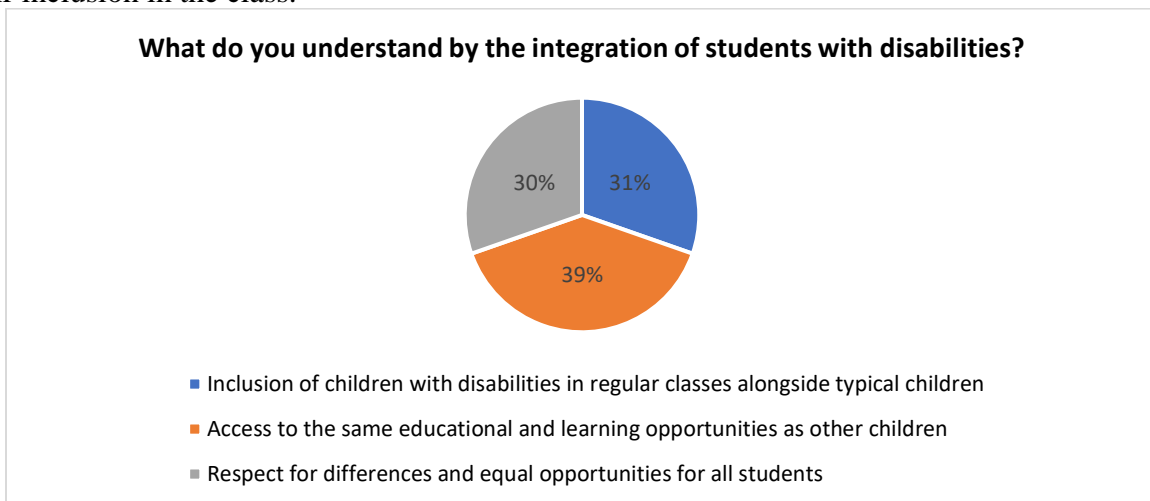


Fig. 4. Definition of integration

From the figure above (no. 1.4), it can be seen that the respondents distribute their answers as follows: 31% (17) state that school integration of students with disabilities refers to their inclusion in regular classes, together with typical students, 39% (22) emphasize the importance of providing the same educational and learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their situation, 30% (17) also mention the need to respect differences and equal opportunities for all students.

Inclusion of students with disabilities refers to efforts to ensure that students with special needs, who may have various types of disabilities, are included in the mainstream school environment and receive access to education in the same way as other students. The ultimate goal of inclusion is to create an inclusive school environment that allows all students to develop their skills and achieve their educational goals.

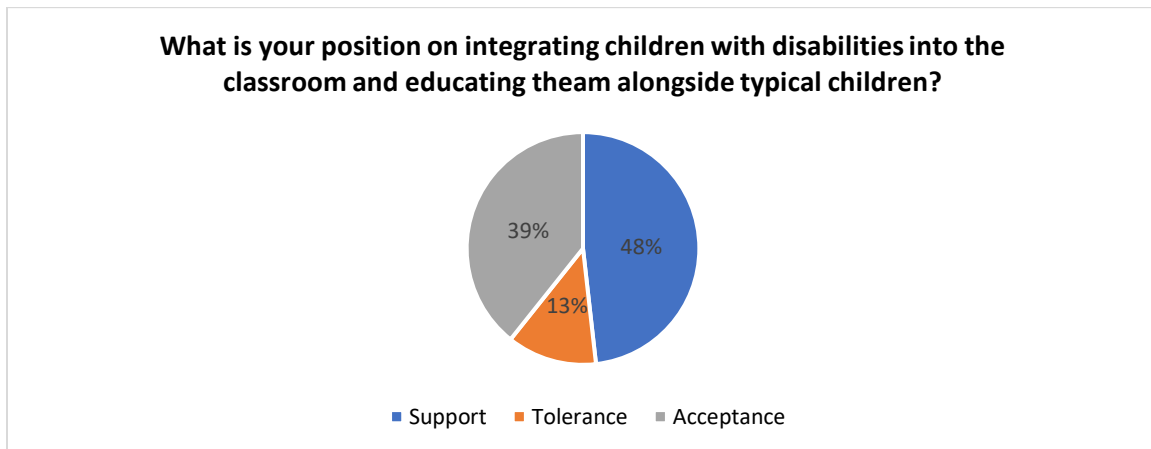


Fig. 5. The attitude of teaching staff towards integration

As a result of the interpretation of the item that refers to the attitude of teachers regarding the integration of children with disabilities alongside non-disabled colleagues, a percentage of 48% affirms that they support their integration alongside typical children, 39% accept them alongside disabled children, and the remaining 13 % are tolerant of them.

The attitude towards the integration of children with disabilities may vary depending on experience, training and knowledge in the field. The positive attitude implies an openness and a willingness to work with children with disabilities and to integrate them into the school environment. Attention must be focused on the individual needs of children with disabilities and on finding appropriate solutions to enable them to learn and develop alongside other children.

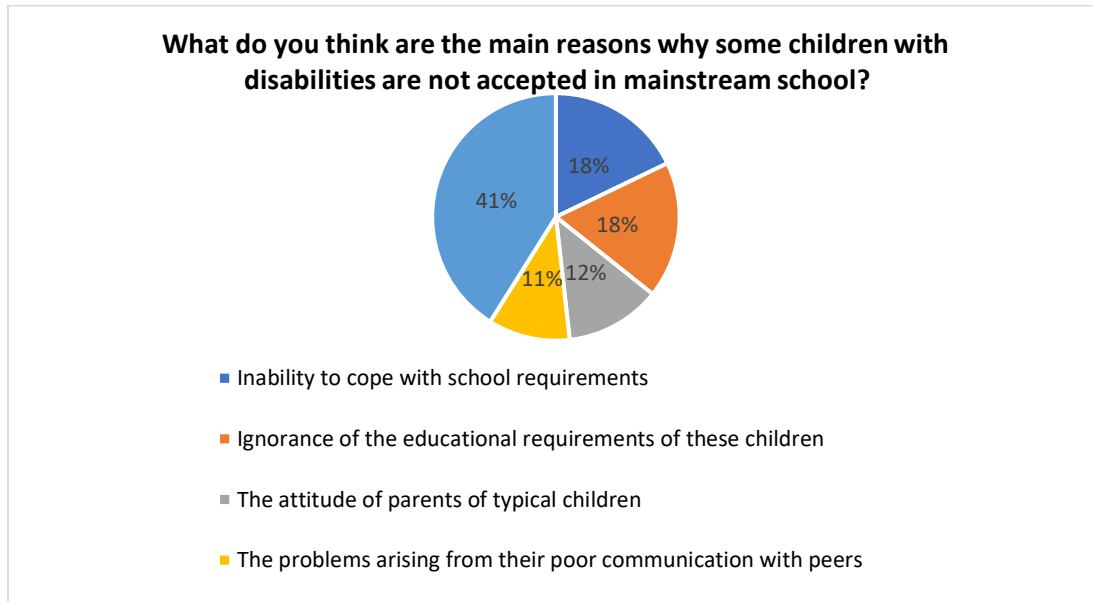


Fig. 6. Reasons for non-acceptance of children with disabilities in mainstream school

This item gives respondents the opportunity to opt for one or more answer options. In the opinion of 41% of the respondents, one of the main reasons why children with disabilities are not accepted in mainstream school is that they cannot keep up with the other children, 18% believe that another reason is the inability of the educational system to offer them support necessary to cope with school requirements, 18% admit that this is due to a lack of knowledge of the educational requirements of these children, 12% state that the negative attitude of the parents of typical children can also contribute to their non-acceptance.

There are several causes that can contribute to the non-acceptance of children with disabilities in the regular school, namely: teachers and parents are not sufficiently informed and do not understand the needs of children with disabilities. This can lead to a lack of support and adequate adaptation of the learning environment for these children. Also, many schools lack the resources to provide additional support for children with disabilities, such as support/traveling teachers or adaptive technologies. Children with disabilities may be treated as different or inferior by other students and even by teachers. This can lead to social isolation and make it difficult for them to integrate into the school environment. Therefore, parents may be concerned about their children's potential difficulties and may believe that special school is the best option for them. This can make it difficult to accept children with disabilities in mainstream school.

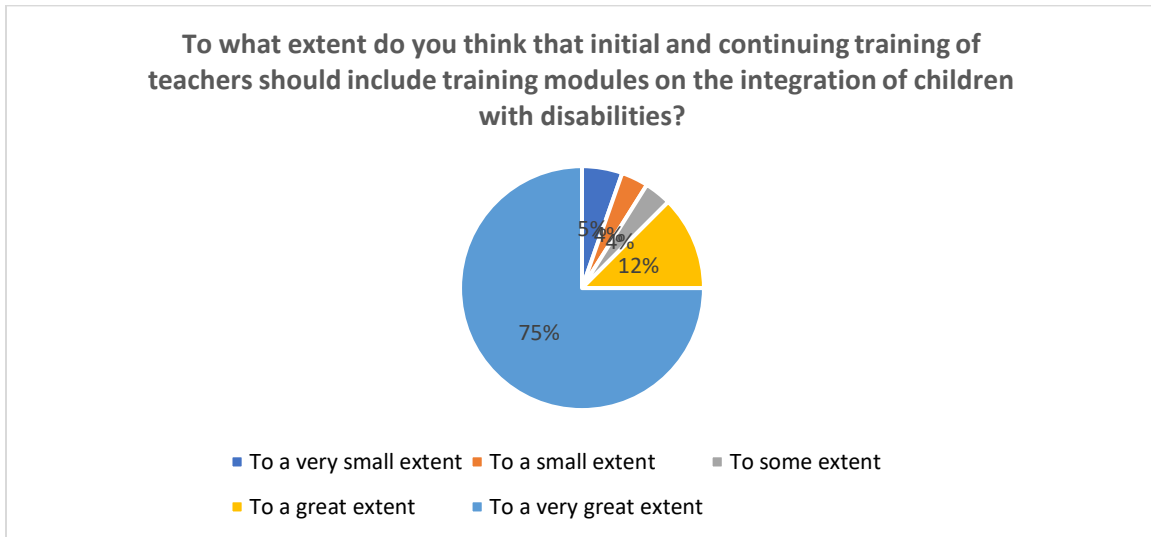


Fig. 7. Initial and continuing training courses for teachers

The surveyed respondents (87%) believe (to a very large extent and to a large extent) that the initial and ongoing training of teachers should pay special attention to their training to integrate children with disabilities in the learning environment.

It is important that initial teacher training includes modules on the integration of students with disabilities to provide them with the knowledge and skills to teach and support these students. Teachers must have a deep understanding of the special needs of students with disabilities and be prepared to provide appropriate support during the learning process.

Initial training should also include instruction in the use of assistive technologies and other tools and resources to help students with disabilities participate in the learning process effectively. By training teachers to teach and support students with disabilities, we can improve access and quality of education for all students.

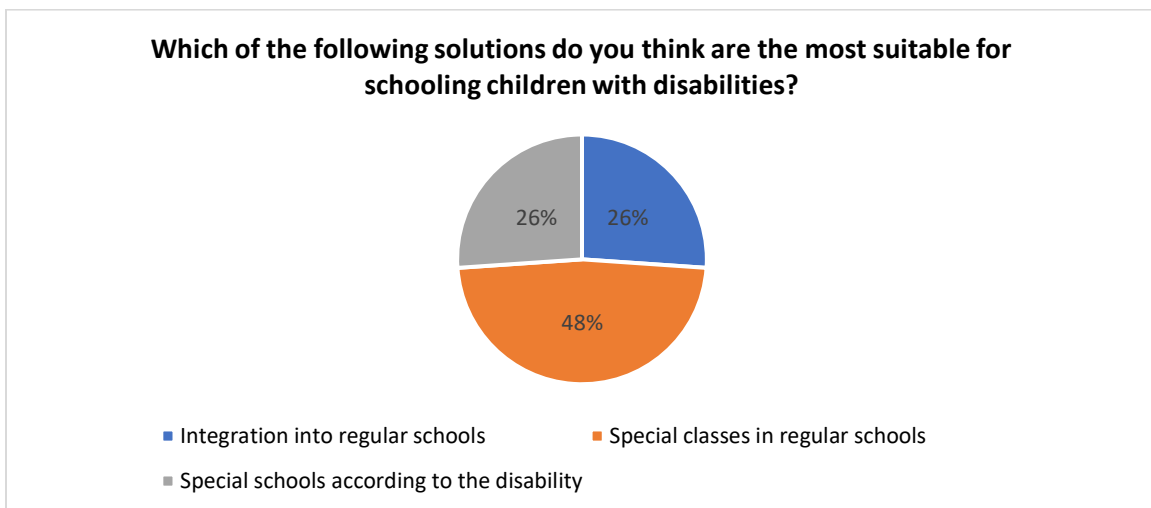


Fig. 8. Identified solutions for schooling children/students with disabilities



We find that in the figure above (no. 1.8), a number of 22 teachers (26%) believe that students with disabilities should be educated in special classes in regular schools because this approach can provide them with a safer and more personalized environment to learn, while also allowing them to interact with other students in the school, a number of 22 teachers (48%) state that the special school is beneficial for them, having the opportunity to learn alongside students who have similar disabilities, and 12 teachers (26%) believe that students with disabilities can be included in regular classes alongside their typical peers.

The schooling of children with disabilities must be done according to the needs and capabilities of each child. It is important to understand that the decision to educate children with disabilities in mainstream schools rests with the family and depends on the individual child's needs and available resources. It is also important to take into account the degree and type of the child's disability

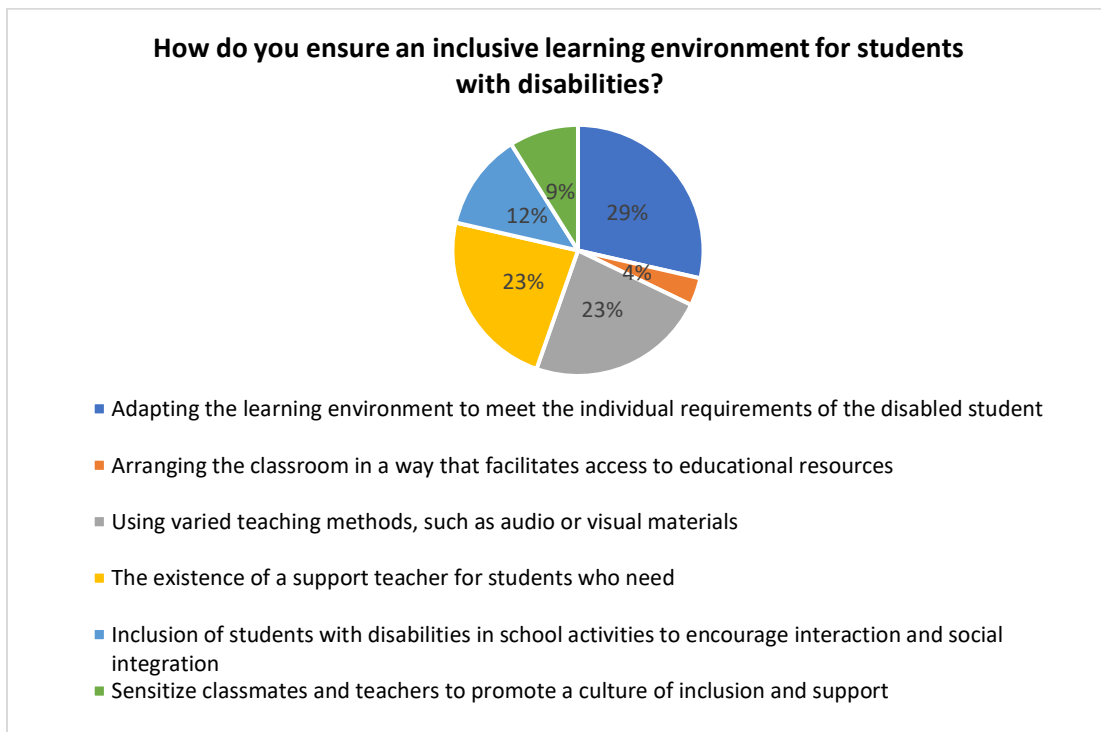


Fig. 9. Inclusive learning environment

The answers to this question found in the figure above highlight the following aspects:

- 16 teachers believe that in order to ensure an inclusive learning environment, it is important to adapt the learning environment to meet the individual needs of each student with disabilities;
- in the opinion of 13 teaching staff, it is necessary to use various teaching methods to allow access to information for all students, to help them meet their different needs;
- 13 teachers state that the existence of a support teacher in the classroom is essential, this can help students with disabilities to have access to additional support during class hours;

- 12 respondents agree that the inclusion of students with disabilities in school activities helps to develop social skills and self-confidence of students with disabilities.

Providing an inclusive environment for children with disabilities can be a complex process that requires the involvement of authorities as well as parents, school staff and the community. To ensure an inclusive environment, it is important to create an individualized plan for each child that takes into account their needs and abilities. In addition, it is necessary to ensure their access to all the resources and facilities necessary to be able to learn and participate in activities.

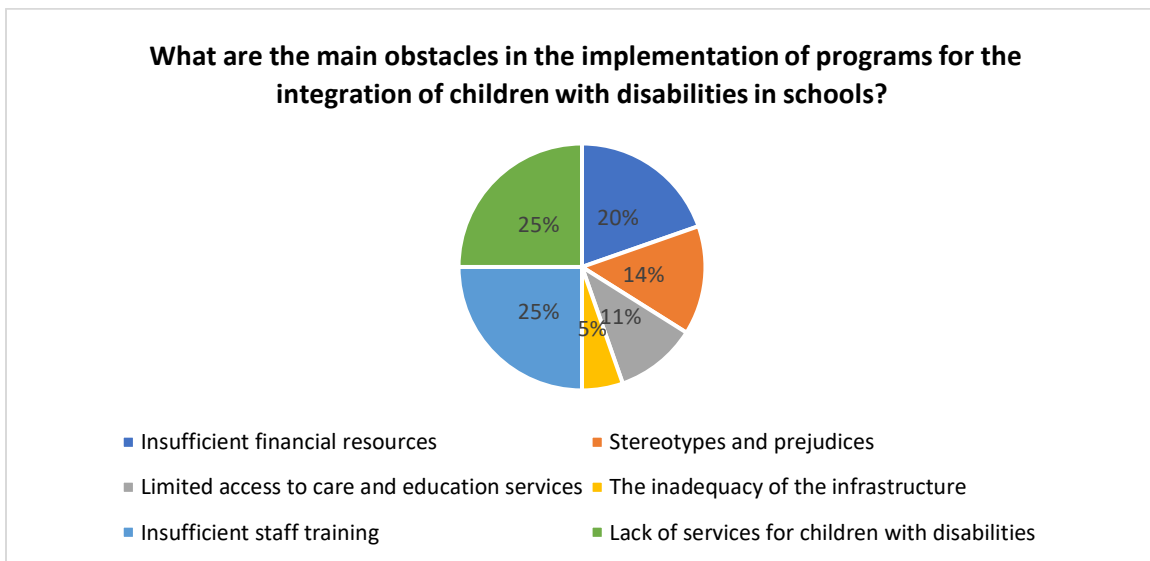


Fig. 10. Obstacles encountered in the implementation of integration programs

Regarding the obstacles encountered in the implementation of integration programs for children/students with disabilities, 25% of respondents state that the lack of appropriate services for children with disabilities can make their integration more difficult, 25% agree that staff can have insufficient training in this regard, which can make integration more difficult and require additional training, 19% say that limited budgets can prevent them from being carried out, 14% believe that people can have stereotypes and prejudices against people with disabilities disabilities, which can lead to discrimination and social exclusion, thus requiring an approach based on education and awareness.

Implementation of integration programs for children with disabilities can face a number of obstacles, some of which are: lack of additional resources, which are not always available, many children with disabilities need transportation to get to school, and adequate transportation can be difficult to find and expensive, teachers may need additional training to understand the needs of children with disabilities and to be able to implement successful integration programs, the generic approach may be inappropriate, and children with disabilities may need special attention individualized to be successfully integrated into the school environment.

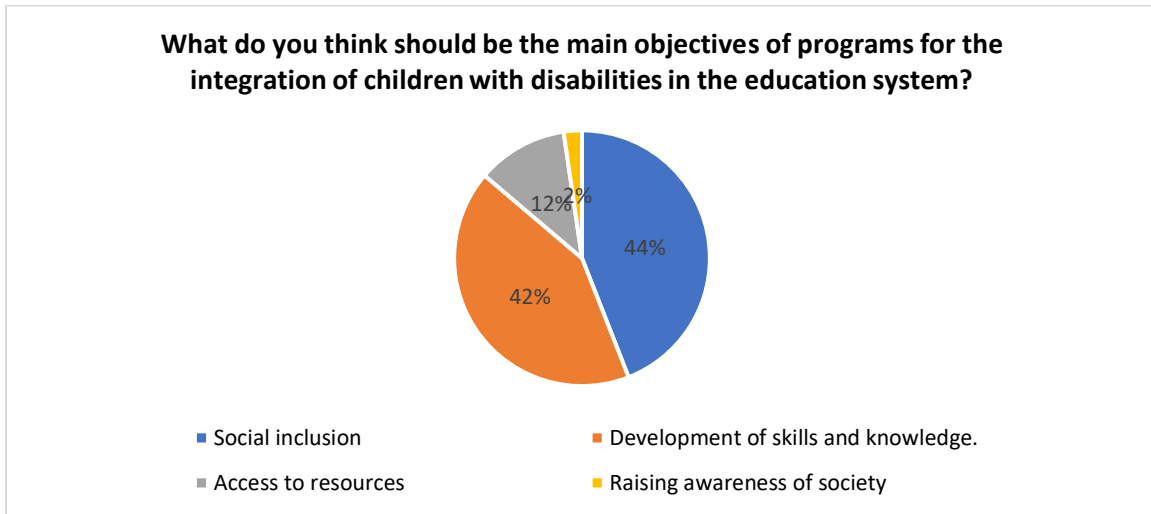


Fig. 11. The objectives of integration programs in the education system

From the figure above, it can be seen that the respondents distribute their answers as follows: 44% believe that social inclusion is crucial to allow children/students with disabilities to feel accepted and actively participate in the school community, 42% support that developing skills and knowledge is essential to enable children with disabilities to reach their full potential in terms of learning and personal development, 12% believe that access to appropriate resources is necessary to provide children with disabilities with the support they need to deal with the specific challenges they face in terms of learning, 2% believe that raising awareness of society is important to build an environment that is more inclusive and allows children with disabilities to feel welcome and accepted in the community school and in society in general.

The goals of mainstreaming programs may vary depending on the context and specific needs of students with special needs, but generally include the following:

- ensuring access to education for all students, regardless of their special needs;
- promoting the participation of students with special needs in learning activities and processes, in an inclusive and fair environment;
- ensuring the progress of students with special needs by offering adequate support adapted to their individual needs;
- supporting the development of autonomy and independence of students with special needs by providing adequate resources and opportunities;
- promoting social inclusion and the integration of students with special needs in the school community and society in general.

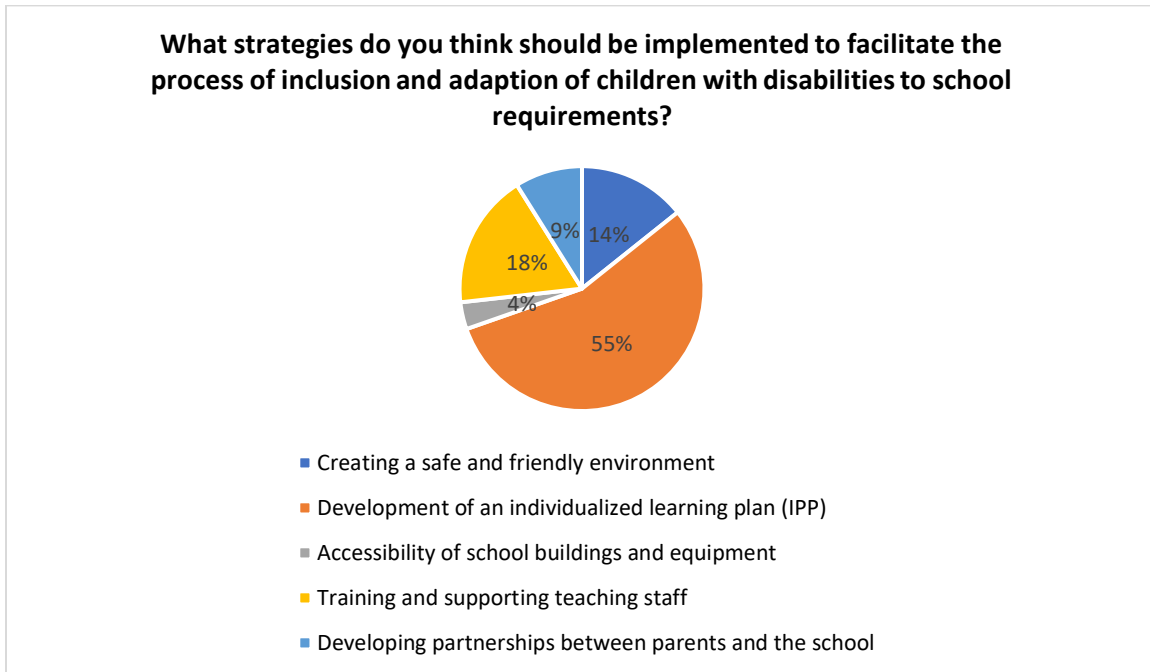


Fig. 12. Strategies implemented to facilitate inclusion/adaptation

Analyzing item 12 statistically, it is found that 55% of respondents participating in the study believe that the development of an individualized learning plan could help ensure that children receive personalized assistance for their specific needs, 18% state that training and supporting teachers could help ensure they understand the needs of disabled children and have the skills to help them learn, and 14% believe creating a safe and friendly environment could help children feel comfortable in school and feel safe.

In order for inclusion to be achieved more easily, it is important that educational institutions are inclusive and provide access and support for all students, regardless of their differences. This may include curriculum adaptations, the use of assistive technology, the development of special mentoring programs and teacher training.

Summarizing, the results obtained in the section related to hypothesis number 1 are:

- more than 80% of teachers have integrated children with disabilities in their class;
- more than half of the respondents state that they agree with the integration of children with disabilities alongside other children;
 - for the majority of teachers involved in the research, integration means access to the same learning opportunities as other children, including them in regular classes, but also respect for differences and equal opportunities;
 - in the opinion of 41% of respondents, a major cause of non-acceptance of children with disabilities is the fact that these children do not keep pace either physically or mentally with their peers;
 - 25% of respondents believe that the lack of adequate services for children with disabilities can make their integration more difficult;



- students with disabilities who are integrated in regular schools perform better academically and socially than those who are not integrated. Inclusion can also help reduce the stigma and marginalization of students with disabilities and promote a more inclusive and empathetic school environment.

Based on the information presented, hypothesis number 1 can be confirmed that *the integration of children with disabilities in regular schools can be achieved by identifying obstacles and applying appropriate strategies, which can lead to improved academic performance*. Study participants believe that this approach can be beneficial for students with disabilities as well as their regular peers by enabling interaction with other students and developing social skills and self-confidence.

However, there are obstacles to implementing integration programs, such as lack of adequate services, insufficient staff training, limited budgets, and stereotypes and prejudices. To overcome these obstacles, the development of an individualized learning plan, the training and support of teaching staff and the creation of a safe and friendly environment are suggested.

Overall, study participants believe that social inclusion, skills and knowledge development, access to appropriate resources and societal awareness are essential to enable children/students with disabilities to feel accepted and reach their full potential in terms of learning and personal development.

Conclusions

Following the data analyses, we can conclude the following aspects: the integration of children with disabilities in regular schools is possible and can be beneficial for their educational and social development. However, there are obstacles that must be identified and overcome to make this possible. Common obstacles include a lack of resources and adequate support from educational institutions, as well as stigma and discrimination from classmates or teaching staff. Appropriate strategies can be applied to overcome these obstacles. Also, improving the training and support of teaching staff and other employees in educational institutions can promote a culture of inclusion and respect for human diversity, increasing the funds and resources allocated to the education of children with disabilities, so that they can benefit from the support and the equipment needed to learn and develop properly is needed in schools.

Regarding the application of differentiated teaching-learning-assessment activities for students with disabilities integrated in mainstream education by teachers, there are differences that can be influenced by the level of training and experience of teachers, the degree of understanding of the needs of students with disabilities, the resources available and the level of support provided by the school management and colleagues.

Although there are policies and rules that promote the integration of students with disabilities in mainstream schools and emphasize differentiated activities, their implementation can be difficult in practice. Teachers may need additional training and support to successfully implement differentiated activities in the classroom.



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