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EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH ON THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN MASTER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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This article addresses general aspects related to the concept of inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream education classes, at a general level, as well as in particular, the benefits that the actors involved. Also important are the challenges that the inclusion of students with special educational needs requires, both in the school environment, in the instructional-educational process, and out of school, in the social context. Aspects from Romania are presented regarding the degree of integration of students of inclusion of students with special educational needs, in academic, social and behavioral aspects, both from a theoretical point of view and concrete praxiological examples, by highlighting the level of inclusion, within the own research, respectively of the scientific experiment, by comparing the results obtained in the initial diagnosis and recording the final successes, noting the differences and the degree of improvement of some aspects related to the inclusion process.

Keywords: *students with special educational needs, inclusion, social, school, behavioral level.*

CERCETAREA EXPERIMENTALĂ PRIVIND INCLUZIUNEA ELEVILOR CU CERINȚE EDUCATIONALE SPECIALE ÎN INSTITUȚIILE DE ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNT DE MASĂ

Acest articol abordează aspecte generale legate de conceptul de incluziune a elevilor cu nevoi educaționale speciale în clasele de învățământ de masă, la nivel general, precum și, în particular, beneficiile pe care le au actorii implicați în procesul de incluziune. De asemenea, importante sunt provocările pe care le necesită incluziunea elevilor cu nevoi educaționale speciale, atât în mediul școlar, în procesul instructiv-educativ, cât și în afara școlii, în contextul social. Sunt prezentate aspecte din România privind gradul de integrare a elevilor în incluziunea elevilor cu nevoi educaționale speciale, sub aspect academic, social și comportamental, atât din punct de vedere teoretic, cât și prin exemple praxiologice concrete, prin evidențierea nivelului de incluziune, în cadrul cercetării proprii, respectiv al experimentului științific, prin compararea rezultatelor obținute în diagnosticul inițial și înregistrarea succeselor finale, notând diferențele și gradul de îmbunătățire a unor aspecte legate de procesul de incluziune.

Cuvinte-cheie: *elevi cu nevoi educaționale speciale, incluziune, social, școală, nivel comportamental.*

Introduction

Inclusive education is an essential pillar of modern educational systems, aiming at the efficient integration of students with special educational needs in mainstream education institutions. The inclusion process goes beyond the simple physical presence of students in the classroom and involves active participation, the development of social and cognitive skills, as well as the strengthening of self-esteem and a sense of belonging to the collective.

Conceptually, inclusion goes beyond the integration paradigm, as it does not only involve adapting the student to the requirements of the education system, but also transforming the school environment so that it responds to the diversity of needs of all students.

In this context, special educational needs are defined as additional or different needs from those of the majority of students, generated by disabilities, learning disorders, socio-emotional difficulties or socio-cultural factors, which require curricular, methodological and evaluative adaptations [7, p. 26].

Inclusion involves creating a positive school environment, based on acceptance, cooperation and mutual respect. The aim is to prevent stigmatization and facilitate the social integration of students with special educational needs in the classroom [3, p. 72].

Recent research highlights the complexity of interactions between individual, contextual and pedagogical factors that influence the degree of integration of students with SEN. In this context, the development and application of effective psycho-pedagogical strategies become imperative for optimizing inclusion, ensuring both academic progress and the socio-emotional development of students.

Access to assistive technologies, adapted materials and accessible infrastructure (ramps, appropriate furniture) contribute to the elimination of physical and functional barriers [5, p. 112].

Stigmatization, social isolation or the student's low self-esteem can negatively influence school adaptation and educational progress [4, p. 88].

This paper presents the results of an experimental approach structured in three stages – observational, formative and control – which aims to investigate the particularities of the inclusion process of students with SEN in primary grades and propose a methodology to facilitate educational and psychosocial inclusion.

Through the multidimensional analysis of the academic, social and emotional-attitudinal dimensions of inclusion, the study contributes to deepening knowledge on the determinants of the success of inclusive education and to the development of tools and interventions applicable in practice.

The experimental approach of the research was oriented towards the systemic investigation of the particularities of the inclusion process of students with special educational needs in general education institutions, with a focus on the primary school level. At the same time, the experiment aimed at the scientific validation of a Psychopedagogical Model for optimizing inclusion, as well as a methodology for facilitating/accelerating the educational and psychosocial integration of students with SEN in regular classes.

In accordance with the general purpose of the research, the following experimental objectives were formulated: determining the current level and particularities of the inclusion process of students with SEN in mainstream education; identifying and analyzing psychopedagogical, organizational and psychosocial factors that influence the dynamics of inclusion; highlighting the evolution (dynamics) of the level of inclusion under the conditions of the formative intervention; development and validation of the Psychopedagogical Model for the inclusion of students with SEN in general education, including the methodology for facilitating and optimizing the inclusion process at the primary level.

The selection of educational institutions included in the research was carried out based on the following criteria: the existence of an institutional policy favorable to inclusive education; the manifestation of managerial and pedagogical openness for the integration of students with SEN.

The experiment involved students with SEN from grades 3 and 4, aged 9-11, 32 boys and 16 girls. The status of a student with special educational needs was confirmed based on the initial and complex psychopedagogical assessment, carried out according to the regulatory framework in force. The sample structure included students diagnosed with the following types of disabilities (moderate intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties - 35 students, autism spectrum disorders (ASD) - 8 students and Down Syndrome - 5 students).

The experimental research was structured in three successive stages: the observation experiment (diagnostic approach), the training experiment (formative approach) and the control experiment (evaluative approach).

The ascertaining stage (2022-2023) aimed to assess the initial level of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education and analyze the influence of psychosocial and educational factors on this process. The following actions were carried out during this stage: selecting and substantiating the psychological and pedagogical tools for evaluating inclusion; establishing target groups; applying evaluation samples (tests, questionnaires, rating scales, systematic observation sheets); analyzing and interpreting the results obtained; determining the level of development of teachers' competencies regarding inclusive education; identifying the facilitating and inhibiting factors of inclusion. The results of this stage allowed the establishment of the initial profile of inclusion and substantiated the subsequent formative intervention.

The formative stage aimed at implementing and validating the Experimental Program designed to facilitate the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream educational institutions.

The activities carried out during the 2023–2024 academic year included: identifying the target group of students with SEN as participants in the formative experiment; designing an experimental Program to facilitate the inclusion of students with SEN; establishing a target group of parents, teachers, and school psy-

chologists who participated in the formative intervention; implementing the formative experiment through the application of the Program for facilitating the inclusion of students with SEN; adjusting the formative experiment, including the introduction of new elements determined by the specific characteristics and dynamics of the implementation process.

The evaluative control stage consisted of carrying out retesting and comparing the results obtained with the initial ones, in order to determine the dynamics of the level of inclusion.

The research used theoretical and empirical methods specific to the field of educational sciences: analysis and synthesis of specialized literature; systematic pedagogical observation; psychological and pedagogical testing; questionnaires; analysis of students' activity products; pedagogical experiment method.

The data obtained were processed using appropriate statistical methods, including: calculation of average values and percentages; one-way analysis of variance (One-Way ANOVA) for comparing means; Spearman correlation coefficient for analyzing relationships between variables; quantitative and qualitative interpretations differentiated by experimental groups.

The interpretation of the results was carried out based on the hypothetico-deductive method, ensuring logical coherence between the hypothesis, empirical data and the formulated conclusions.

To validate the hypothesis, standardized and adapted techniques were selected and applied, capable of measuring the inclusion process multidimensionally (academic, social, relational and attitudinal dimensions). The tools used allowed both the quantification of the level of inclusion and the qualitative analysis of the transformations produced following the formative intervention.

Description of the research methods used

In this article, we briefly present some of the research methods employed. In order to systematically record the behaviors relevant for the inclusion of students with special educational needs, a school behavior **observation** sheet was developed [6, p. 31]. The instrument aimed to identify and record the behavioral manifestations and skills of the child with SEN, related to three fundamental areas of inclusion:

Table 1. The behavioral manifestations and skills of the child with SEN

Domain of educational participation (academic inclusion):	Relational-social domain (social inclusion):	Emotional-attitudinal domain (psychosocial inclusion):
- active involvement in learning activities; - accomplishment of school tasks; - manifestation of autonomy in learning; - development of cognitive and functional skills.	- interaction with colleagues; - cooperation in group activities; - respect for the rules of the collective; - initiation and maintenance of positive relationships.	- self-esteem; - feeling of belonging to the collective; - emotional self-regulation; - attitude towards school and towards oneself.

The form allowed the analysis of the student's behavior in natural contexts of the school environment – during teaching activities, during breaks and in relationships with colleagues – ensuring an authentic assessment of the level of integration and participation.

The School Inclusion Study Scale (adapted from C. Crețu) is presented in two versions: one for *parents* and one for *teaching staff*.

The School Inclusion Study Scale addressed to *parents* includes the following criteria:

- success in completing learning tasks;
- effort required by the child to complete learning tasks at school;
- independence in performing learning tasks at school;
- emotional state when attending school;
- relationships with peers;
- overall assessment of inclusion.

The School Psychosocial Inclusion Scale, addressed to *teachers, psychologists, or support teachers*, focuses on four main criteria (adapted from C. Crețu) [1, p. 168]:

Table 2. Inclusion criteria for students with SEN

Criterion 1. Learning Effectiveness	Criterion 2. Compliance with Behavioral Norms	Criterion 3. Success in Social Relationships	Criterion 4. Emotional Well-Being
- engagement in learning activities; - acquisition of knowledge.	- behavior during lessons; - behavior during breaks.	- relationship with class-mates; - attitude toward teachers.	- emotional state

Thus, the identified instruments for studying the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in educational institutions ensure the collection of valid information regarding the following variables: learning effectiveness, school behavior, relational framework, and emotional well-being.

The **psychopedagogical assessment** includes the analysis of psychomotor development, cognitive processes and work style, targeting dimensions such as thinking, memory, language and communication, attention, motivation for learning, receptivity, degree of participation and involvement, social relationships, as well as the level of school acquisitions (skills, interests) [2, p. 25].

In addition, the student's school and extracurricular results are analyzed, the subjects in which he/she has recorded outstanding performances, involvement in extracurricular activities, as well as the explanatory factors of success or difficulties encountered during schooling. The educational path of the student with SEN is also taken into account, in order to ensure continuity and coherence of educational interventions.

The **Inclusion Study Scale** (adapted from C. Crețu) [1, p. 167]. The research instrument aims to assess the level of training of primary school teachers for the implementation of the principles of inclusive education in the case of students with special educational needs. It is structured in the form of a questionnaire that includes multiple-choice and open-ended items, with the aim of investigating previous participation in training programs in the field of inclusive education, interest in continuous professional development, the typology of S.E.S. encountered in the classroom, as well as the modalities of interprofessional collaboration. The tool also explores the existence of relevant institutional resources (support teacher, specially designed spaces for support services), the types of teaching strategies used, the ways of organizing and designing learning activities, the evaluation methods applied, as well as perceptions regarding the benefits of continuous training and the transfer of theoretical acquisitions into pedagogical practice.

Diagnostic approach to the level of inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream education institutions

Within the framework of the observation experiment, aimed at identifying the particularities of the inclusion of students with special educational needs, the research hypothesis was operationalized through the following theses:

The degree of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education institutions is influenced by a complex of interdependent factors: *individual factors* (age, category and severity of disability, level of cognitive and socio-emotional development); *contextual factors* (psychosocial climate in the school and family environment, quality of interpersonal relationships, attitude of the student body); *educational-pedagogical factors* (competence of teachers in the field of inclusive education, applied teaching strategies, curricular adaptation, use of differentiated and individualized methods). There are differences in the manifestation of inclusion depending on the interaction between individual and environmental factors, as well as the level of educational support provided to the student.

A favorable educational climate, characterized by acceptance, cooperation and adequate pedagogical support, contributes significantly to increasing the degree of participation and social integration of students with SEN.

To verify the formulated hypothesis, a detailed analysis of the particularities of the inclusion of students with special educational needs, by reporting to a set of specific inclusion indicators, was carried out. Comparing the indices obtained for each investigated parameter allowed identifying differences in the manifestation of learning difficulties, as well as determining the level of inclusion corresponding to each experimental group, consisting of students with different types of disabilities.

The Intervention Program highlighted the fact that the inclusion process of students with SEN has made significant progress in correlation with indicators of inclusion, the educational environment has become friendlier and more accessible, through the contribution of the actors involved in this process.

The intervention had a significant and positive effect on the performance of students with educational needs integrated into mainstream education institutions. In order to assess the impact of the educational intervention, the level of student performance was compared at the pre-test and post-test time.

Results Obtained from the Assessment of the Level of Inclusion of Students with SEN

In this article, we briefly present some of the results obtained from the assessment of the level of inclusion of students with special educational needs.

According to the centralization of the responses of the participants in this experiment among students with SEN, helped by their parents, when completing them, in the initial phase it was deduced that 31% are fully integrated into the educational institution, 54% of students with SEN are partially included in the school units, have a flexible schedule in the school unit, and occasionally 15% of the participating students are involved in only part of the educational activities. Which reveals the fact that 26 of the participating students with SEN are only partially included within the mainstream education institutions.

Table 3. Initial analysis of the degree of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education institutions

Level	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
total	15	31%	31%
partially	26	54%	54%
occasional	7	15%	100.0%

The final diagnosis reveals that the degree of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education institutions has improved, and 79% of participating students with SEN are fully integrated alongside typical students, while 13% of students with SEN are partially integrated and 8% of students with SEN are occasionally integrated, participating only rarely in a few educational activities.

Table 4. Final analysis of the degree of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education institutions

Level	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
total	38	79%	79%
partially	6	13%	21%
occasional	4	8%	100%

The final results regarding the degree obtained attest to the fact that the number of students who are fully integrated in mainstream education classes has increased and a significant change has occurred following the intervention on the inclusion process of students with SEN in mainstream education institutions.

Following the parents' application of the questionnaire to assess the level of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education institutions to identify the initial diagnosis, we obtained the following results regarding aspects related to psycho-pedagogical conditions 20%, facilitating an inclusive environment 7%, adapted and individualized training 33%, ensuring support services 38%, relationships and collaboration with those around them 31%, behavioral conduct 29%, involvement in extracurricular activities 23%, edu-

cational partnership 19%. The study of the continuous professional training needs of teachers participating in the experiment was examined from the perspective of the inclusive education approach based on a theoretical and methodological support that facilitates the efficient planning and structuring of the learning process.

Table 5. Initial analysis of the degree of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education institutions

Indicators	Criteria	Yes	Partially	No
educational instructional approach	psycho-pedagogical conditions	5 (20%)	7 (28%)	36 (75%)
	inclusive environment	4 (7%)	19 (32%)	25 (61%)
	adapted and individualized training	16 (33%)	24 (50%)	8 (17%)
	support services	18 (38%)	21 (44%)	9 (19%)
behavioral-affective dimension	relationships and collaboration with others	15 (31%)	30 (63%)	3 (6%)
	behavioral conduct	14 (29%)	24 (50%)	10 (21%)
social integration	involvement in extracurricular activities	11 (23%)	20 (42%)	17 (35%)
	educational partnership	9 (19%)	27 (56%)	12 (25%)

In the end, we obtained the following results regarding the aspects related to psycho-pedagogical conditions 25%, facilitating an inclusive environment 44%, adapted and individualized training 92%, ensuring support services 75%, relationships and collaboration with those around them 88%, behavioral conduct 81%, involvement in extracurricular activities 69%, educational partnership 60%, noting considerable improvements in all the aspects presented.

Table 6. Final analysis of the degree of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education institutions

Indicators	Criteria	Yes	Partially	No
educational instructional approach	psycho-pedagogical conditions	12(25 %)	22 (46%)	14 (29%)
	inclusive environment	21 (44%)	25 (52%)	2 (4%)
	adapted and individualized training	44 (92%)	3 (6%)	1 (2%)
	support services	36 (75%)	8 (17%)	4 (8%)
behavioral-affective dimension	relationships and collaboration with others	42 (88%)	5 (10%)	1 (2%)
	behavioral conduct	39 (81%)	4 (8%)	5 (10%)
social integration	involvement in extracurricular activities	33(69 %)	8 (17%)	7 (15%)
	educational partnership	29 (60%)	10 (21%)	9 (19%)

Thus, the final results highlight the high positive impact on the inclusion process of students with SEN. in mainstream education institutions, in accordance with the mentioned indicators, on the educational, behavioral-affective and social dimensions, regarding psycho-pedagogical conditions, inclusive environment, training and support services, relationships and collaboration with those around them, behavioral conduct, degree of involvement in extracurricular activities, degree of development of educational partnership, and all of these lead to the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education institutions, to the recording of school progress and to the improvement of the learning outcomes of the student with SEN.

The results obtained in the initial stage, by the teachers with parents, regarding the instructional-educational process of students with SEN: the initial situation in terms of psychomotor development 42%, cognitive processes 25% related to thinking, memory, language and communication, attention, learning motivation, receptivity, participation and involvement, social relations; the level of school acquisitions - skills, interests, 31%; managing emotions in different situations 21%, behavior during school breaks 23%, results obtained in extracurricular activities 17%, the educational path of the student with SEN, in terms of school success 31% of their development.

Table 7. Initial analysis of the results obtained following the application of the psychopedagogical sheet

Indicators	Scale	Develo- ped	Under- develo- ped	Unde- veloped
educational instructional approach	psychomotor development	20 (42%)	26 (54%)	2 (4%)
	cognitive processes	12 (25%)	32 (67%)	4 (8%)
	level of academic achievement	15 (31%)	30 (63%)	3 (6%)
	academic achievement	15 (31%)	28 (58%)	5 (10%)
behavioral-affective dimension	managing emotions in different situations	10 (21%)	29 (60%)	9 (19%)
	behavior during school breaks	11 (23%)	24 (50%)	13 (27%)
social integration	results recorded in extracurricular activities	8 (17%)	16 (33%)	24 (50%)

In the end, psychomotor development improved by 71%, cognitive processes by 84% related to receptivity, participation and involvement, social relationships; the level of school acquisitions (skills, interests), 79%; management of emotions in different situations 83%, behavior during school breaks 65%, results recorded in extracurricular activities 75%, the educational path of the student with CES, in terms of school success 88%.

Table 8. Final analysis of the results obtained following the application of the psychopedagogical sheet

Indicators	Scale	Develo- ped	Under- develo- ped	Unde- develo- ped
educational instructional approach	psychomotor development	34 (71%)	13 (27%)	1 (2%)
	cognitive processes	41 (84%)	5 (10%)	3 (6%)
	level of academic achievement	38 (79%)	8 (17%)	2 (4%)
	academic achievement	42 (88%)	4 (8%)	2 (4%)
behavioral-affective dimension	managing emotions in different situations	40 (83%)	5 (10%)	3 (6%)
	behavior during school breaks	31 (65%)	11 (23%)	6 (13%)
social integration	results recorded in extracurricular activities	36 (75%)	10 (21%)	2 (4%)

After completing the school performance observation sheet recorded by the 48 participating students with SEN, we obtained the following initial results regarding the degree of involvement in lessons/activities 40%, achievement and completion of the teaching task 27%, level of school knowledge 38%, level of practical knowledge 23%, well-being 46%, communication 31%, attitude towards other classmates 58% and relationships with adults 29%.

Table 9. Initial analysis of the results obtained following the application of the observation sheet

Indicators	Criteria	Develo- ped	Under- develo- ped	Unde- develo- ped
educational instructional approach	level of involvement in lessons / activities	19 (40%)	21 (44%)	8 (17%)
	completing learning tasks	13 (27%)	24 (50%)	11 (23%)
	level of academic knowledge	18 (38%)	23 (48%)	7 (15%)
	level of practical knowledge	11 (23%)	21 (44%)	16 (33%)
behavioral-affective dimension	well-being	22 (46%)	22 (46%)	4 (8%)
	communication	15 (31%)	31 (65%)	2 (4%)
	attitude towards other colleagues	28 (58%)	15 (31%)	5 (10%)
	adult relationships	14 (29%)	22 (46%)	12 (25%)
social integration	degree of adaptation in social context	17 (35%)	21 (44%)	10 (21%)

The results obtained indicate a significant improvement in student performance following the intervention, which suggests that the personalized educational program had a positive effect on the overall progress of students with SEN. Regarding the degree of involvement in lessons / activities by 73%, the achievement and completion of the didactic task by 79%, the degree of personal autonomy of students with SEN, socialization, the level of school knowledge by 73%, the level of practical knowledge by 71%, the products of the activity of students with SEN, which relate to the completion of tasks and worksheets, respectively the development of the student's personal portfolio.

Table 10. Final analysis of the results obtained following the application of the observation sheet

Indicators	Criteria	Developed	Undeveloped	Undeveloped
educational instructional approach	level of involvement in lessons/ activities	35 (73%)	10 (21%)	3 (6%)
	completing learning tasks	38 (79%)	6 (13%)	4 (8%)
	level of academic knowledge	35 (73%)	11 (23%)	2 (4%)
	level of practical knowledge	34 (71%)	8 (17%)	6 (13%)
behavioral-affective dimension	well-being	41 (85%)	6 (13%)	1 (2%)
	communication	35 (73%)	12 (25%)	1 (2%)
	attitude towards other colleagues	44 (92%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)
	adult relationships	42 (88%)	3 (6%)	3 (6%)
social integration	degree of adaptation in social context	24 (50%)	17 (35%)	7 (15%)

Conclusion

The analysis highlights the fact that inclusive education is not just a direction of educational reform, but a complex and continuous process of transforming the entire education system. The positive results observed following the implementation of specific interventions indicate the real potential of inclusion to improve not only the performance of students with special educational needs, but also the general educational climate. By promoting diversity and mutual respect, the inclusive school contributes to the development of more open, empathetic and equitable educational communities.

The dynamic nature of inclusion derives from the constant interaction between the factors that support it and the barriers that limit it. Among the facilitating factors are the positive attitudes of teachers, the existence of coherent educational policies, access to adequate resources and effective collaboration between specialists. In turn, barriers can include social prejudices, the lack of adequate professional training, insufficiently adapted infrastructure or curricular rigidity. In this context, the success of inclusion depends on the system's ability to reduce these obstacles and to leverage existing resources in a strategic way.

Achieving authentic inclusive education requires interventions at the systemic level. It is not enough to physically integrate students into mainstream schools; a profound change in the way the educational act is conceived is necessary. This involves adapting the curriculum, using differentiated teaching methods, flexible assessment focused on individual progress, and creating a safe and stimulating learning environment for all students. In parallel, the development of teachers' professional skills becomes essential. Teachers must be prepared not only from a methodological point of view, but also from the perspective of managing diversity, empathetic communication and interdisciplinary collaboration.

A change in mentality is another fundamental pillar of inclusion. Acceptance of diversity must become a central value in the school's organizational culture. This involves moving beyond traditional models based on uniformity and selection, and adopting a perspective that values the uniqueness of each student. In this regard, educational leadership plays a crucial role, by promoting an inclusive vision and supporting innovative initiatives.

Also, the adequate allocation of resources – human, material and financial – is indispensable. The presence of specialists (speech therapists, psychologists, support teachers), access to adapted teaching materi-

als and the use of assistive technologies can make the difference between formal and real inclusion. At the same time, interdisciplinary collaboration and partnership with families and the wider community contribute to the creation of a coherent framework of support for the student.

The legislative dimension cannot be neglected. A clear, coherent and applicable normative framework provides the necessary basis for the effective implementation of inclusion. Educational policies must be aligned with international standards and reflect a commitment to children's rights and equal opportunities.

In essence, inclusion goes beyond the pedagogical sphere and becomes an expression of social responsibility. It reflects the way in which society assumes diversity and promotes equity. The inclusive school is not only a space for academic learning, but also an environment in which responsible citizens are formed, capable of respecting differences and actively contributing to a democratic society.

Therefore, building a school for all requires an integrated approach, in which policies, practices and values converge towards the same goal: ensuring a quality education for every student, regardless of their particularities. Inclusion thus becomes not just an educational ideal, but an essential condition for the development of an equitable and sustainable society.

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