

## INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN REGULAR SCHOOLS: STUDENTS ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

*Ludmila MALCOCI<sup>1</sup>, PhD in social sciences, Senior researcher,  
Legal and Political Research Institute,  
Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova*

*The Republic of Moldova started the process of deinstitutionalization of children with disabilities/and special educational needs and their inclusion in biological families and mainstream community based services. Alongside with the deinstitutionalization, inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular community schools became a strategic direction of the educational policies in Moldova.*

*In 2014, the Alliance of NGOs in the field of Social Protection of Family and Child conducted a research on assessment of inclusive education models implemented in pilot schools with the aim to identify positive practices, learned lessons and challenges in developing policies in the field of evidence-based education<sup>2</sup> The research was conducted in 20 pilot schools from 12 counties. There were interviewed 200 teachers, 20 school managers, 360 students (162 pupils with SEN, 112 students studying in classes with children with SEN and 86 children studying in classes with no students having SEN). 10 focus group discussions with caregivers, students, teachers, parents (all in total 100 participants) and 6 interviews with the general directorates of education and mayors were conducted.*

*The article is focused on comparative analysis of perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of students with SEN and typical students regarding the inclusion of children with SEN in regular schools. The author concluded that the implementation of inclusive education resulted in rather positive changes in respective schools: provision with materials, modern devices, improvement of teaching quality and methods, change in the behaviors of children with SEN and in typical children; the typical children have positive attitudes and perceptions regarding the inclusion of children with SEN in their regular community schools; the level of school satisfaction of both: children with SEN and typical children is pretty high; the social and learning environment in pilot schools is friendly and started to be adapted to children individual needs; the both: children with SEN and typical children have high level of self-esteem and confidence. However, there are still some differences in attitudes and perceptions as regarding the inclusive education of children with SEN: in focus group discussions some of typical children claim that sometimes the children with SEN feel uncomfortable at school because they are discriminated/ignored by their classmates; some of children with SEN have disruptive behaviors and disturb the attention of other children in classes. The children with SEN are less involved than their typical peers in classes and in extra-curricular activities and have less friends in schools and outside the schools.*

**Key words:** *education, mainstreaming, integration, inclusion, children with special educational needs, educational support services, attitudes, knowledge and behaviors.*

*Republica Moldova a început procesul de dezinstituționalizare a copiilor cu dizabilități/și cerințe educaționale speciale (CES) și incluziunea lor în familiile biologice și în serviciile sociale din comunitate. În acest context, incluziunea copiilor cu CES în școlile din comunitate a devenit o direcție strategică a politicilor educaționale din Republica Moldova.*

*În anul 2014, Alianța ONG-urilor din domeniul Protecției Sociale a Familiei și Copilului a efectuat o cercetare în vederea evaluării modelelor de educație incluzivă implementate în școlile-pilot cu scopul identificării practicilor pozitive, a lecțiilor învățate și a provocărilor pentru dezvoltarea politicilor educaționale bazate pe dovezi<sup>3</sup>. Cercetarea a fost efectuată în 20 de școli-pilot din 12 raioane. Au fost intervievați 200 de pedagogi, 20 de manageri școlari, 360 de elevi (inclusiv 162 elevi cu CES, 112 elevi tipici din clasele în care învață elevi cu CES și 86 de elevi tipici din clasele în care nu învață elevi cu CES). Au fost organizate 10 focus-grupuri cu părinții, studenții, pedagogii (în total 100 de persoane) și 6 interviuri cu reprezentanții Departamentelor Educație din raioane și cu primari.*

<sup>1</sup> © Ludmila MALCOCI, [lmalcoci@mail.ru](mailto:lmalcoci@mail.ru)

<sup>2</sup> The research was conducted with the financial support of EFA Global Partnership for education and SOIR Moldova.

<sup>3</sup> Cercetarea a fost efectuată cu suportul financiar al EPT Parteneriat Global pentru educație și SOIR Moldova.

Articolul analizează percepțiile, atitudinile și comportamentele elevilor cu CES și cele ale elevilor tipici referitor la incluziunea educațională a elevilor cu CES în școlile din comunitate. Autorul conchide următoarele: implementarea educației inclusive a condus la schimbări pozitive în școlile respective, și anume: asigurarea cu material didactic și echipament modern, îmbunătățirea metodelor de predare și a calității predării, îmbunătățirea comportamentului copiilor cu CES și al copiilor tipici; elevii tipici manifestă atitudini și percepții pozitive privind incluziunea educațională a copiilor cu CES în școlile comunitare; gradul de satisfacție de școală a elevilor cu CES și a elevilor tipici de școală este destul de înalt; mediul social și de învățare în școlile-pilot este prietenos și în continuă adaptare în funcție de nevoile individualizate ale elevilor; ambele grupuri de copii – cu CES și tipici – au un nivel înalt de autoapreciere și încredere în forțele proprii.

Cu toate acestea, continuă să existe anumite diferențe în atitudinile și percepțiile elevilor referitor la incluziunea educațională a copiilor cu CES în școlile din comunitate: unii elevi tipici au menționat în focus-grupuri că uneori elevii cu CES nu se simt confortabil la școală, deoarece sunt discriminați de către colegi; unii elevi cu CES manifestă un comportament deviant la orele de clasă și întrerup lecțiile. Cercetarea, de asemenea, a evidențiat faptul că elevii cu CES sunt implicați mai puțin la lecții, precum și în activitățile extracurriculare și au mai puțini prieteni în școală și în comunitate.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** educație, integrare, incluziune, copii cu cerințe educaționale speciale, servicii de suport educațional, atitudini, cunoștințe, comportamente.

Республика Молдова начала процесс де-институционализации детей с ограниченными возможностями/и особыми образовательными потребностями (ООП) и их включения в биологические семьи и основные услуги на уровне сообщества. Наряду с де-институционализацией, включение детей с особыми образовательными потребностями в обычных школах стало стратегическим направлением образовательной политики в Республике Молдова.

В 2014 году Альянс НПО в области социальной защиты семьи и ребенка провел исследование по оценке моделей инклюзивного образования, реализуемых в пилотных школах с целью выявления положительных практик, извлечения уроков и выявления проблем для разработки политики в области образования на основе доказательств. Исследование было проведено в 20 пилотных школах с 12 районов. Были опрошены 200 преподавателей, 20 руководителей школ, 360 студентов (162 учеников с ООП, 112 студентов, обучающихся в классах с детьми с ООП и 86 детей, обучающихся в классах без студентов с ООП). Были проведены 10 фокус-групп с учениками, учителями, родителями (всего – 100 участников) и 6 интервью с представителями районных отделов образования и мэрами, мэров.

Автор анализирует восприятия, отношения и поведения учащихся с ООП и типичных учеников относительно включения детей с ООП в обычных школах. На основе анализа, автор пришел к выводу что реализация инклюзивного образования привело к довольно позитивным изменениям в соответствующих школах, включительно: обеспечение нужными дидактическими материалами и современными устройствами, улучшение качества и методов преподавания, изменение поведения детей с ООП и обычных детей. Типичные дети относятся и воспринимают положительно включение детей с ООП в обычные школы. Дети с ООП и обычные дети имеют довольно высокий уровень удовлетворенности школой. Пилотные школы характеризуются дружественной социальной и образовательной средой; в пилотных школах начался процесс адаптации образовательной среды к индивидуальным потребностям детей. Дети с ООП и обычные детей имеют высокий уровень самооценки и уверенности в себе, что касается достижения высоких результатов в учебе.

Вместе с тем, автор доказывает, что еще существуют некоторые различия в восприятиях относительно инклюзивного образования детей с ООП. Некоторые типичные дети высказались во время фокус групп, что иногда дети с ООП чувствуют себя некомфортно в школе, потому что они подвергаются дискриминации, игнорированы своими одноклассниками. Некоторые дети с ООП имеют разрушительное поведение и нарушают дисциплину на уроках, мешают работать другим ученикам. Дети с ООП меньше вовлечены на уроках и во время внеклассных мероприятий и имеют меньше друзей в школах и вне школы.

**Ключевые слова:** образование, интеграция, инклюзия, дети с особыми образовательными потребностями, услуги в области инклюзивного образования, отношения, знания, поведение.

**JEL Classification:** I28; I21; N3; J0.

**Introduction. Mainstreaming, integration or inclusion.** There are different opinions regarding the meaning of the words: mainstreaming, integration and inclusion. Nevertheless, all of them support the idea of differences in the meanings of terms when it comes to education. As per the literature review, **mainstreaming** is “associated primarily with the physical assimilation of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers. This may be more a matter of “connotative baggage” rather than intent. Nevertheless, mainstreaming assumes that students with disabilities may share the same physical space (classroom, playground etc.) with those who have no disabilities only when they are able to do the same activities as everyone else with minimal modifications. Further, the primary responsibility for these students' education remains with their special education teacher” [4]. **Integration** means the placement of children with disabilities/or of those with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream education settings “with some adaptations and resources, but on condition that the disabled person and/or the learner with “Special Educational Needs” labels can fit in with pre-existing structures, attitudes and an unaltered environment” [4]. **Inclusion** is considered a step ahead comparatively with the integration. Thus, according to Harman, “the biggest clue for determining whether a school is integrating or including students is in the language that is being used. If school personnel talk about extra adaptations or services to help the child fit into a classroom, it is integration. References to overcoming problems, acquiring functional abilities and support worker for the child will be used. Look at the Individual Education Plan (IEP). If the IEP focuses on strategies to help a child fit into a classroom, this is integration. Inclusive schools and classrooms talk about helping everyone. School personnel will emphasize how the classroom/school will be changed to support the success of a child. The talk will be about how the extra adaptations and services will benefit everyone. Celebrating diversity, helping everyone and having a support worker for the class are key. When looking at the IEP, strategies will be used to adapt and improve the classroom so that all students achieve success. Inclusion is about helping everyone” [3].

*“Children with special educational needs have a right to education. In June 1994 representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organizations formed the World Conference on Special Needs Education, held in Salamanca, Spain. They agreed a new Statement on the education of all disabled children, which called for inclusion to be the norm. The Conference adopted a new Framework for Action, the guiding principle of which is that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. All educational policies, says the Framework, should stipulate that disabled children attend the neighborhood school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability” [6].*

Articles 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child cover the right of children with Special educational needs to education. It states that “States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular: a) make primary education compulsory and available free to all; b) encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need; c) make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means; d) make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to *all* children; e) take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates...” [8].

The right to inclusive education is enshrined in article 24 of the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities: “(1) States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. (2) In realizing this right, States Parties shall ensure that: a) persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability; b) persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live; c) reasonable accommodation of the individual’s requirements is provided; d) persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education; e) effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion” [7].

*Moving toward inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova. Being a former soviet country, the children with special educational needs in the Republic of Moldova were segregated in separate educational environments for many decades. Despite the fact that in 2004 the Education for All National Strategy and Action Plan were approved and the key purpose of the documents was to assure the access of all children to quality education, in 2006, around 12000 children with special educational needs were still studying in boarding schools.*

The real movement toward the inclusive education of children with special educational needs started alongside with the process of deinstitutionalization in 2007, after the approval of the National strategy on reforming the residential institutions. Several NGOs (Lumos, Every Child, CCF Moldova, Keystone Moldova, Speranta, Femeia si copilul – protective si sprijin) started to work closely with the Ministry of Education on implementation of the strategy by supporting the families to deinstitutionalize the children and to move them in regular community schools. Several models of inclusive education were developed and approved by the Ministry of Education. The models included the following stages: evaluation of children educational needs and development of plan of interventions to support those needs, development of school physical and teaching environment, development of educational support services, capacity building of parents and teachers and changing discriminatory attitudes and behaviors of typical children and other community members toward inclusive education of children with SEN. The NGOs piloted the models of inclusive education in 60 communities' schools, covering more than 50% of the districts of Moldova.

Alongside with the deinstitutionalization and educational inclusion of children with SEN, the NGOs supported the Government of Moldova to make the sustainable reforms, by advocating for the development of the legal framework related to inclusiveness of children with disabilities in communities and in regular educational institutions. In this regards, the Government of Moldova ratified the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2010); approved the Law on Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (2012), the National Program for Inclusive Education (2011-2020), the Law on Equal Opportunities (2012) and the new Code of Education (2014). The institutional structures and support services for inclusive education were developed and established nationwide as a consequence of developed legislation and NGO advocacy. The National Center for Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance was established under the Ministry of Education with the scope of promotion and supporting the process of inclusive education of children with SEN nationwide. The Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance services were developed in all districts of the Republic of Moldova. The purpose of those services is to assess the educational needs of children with SEN and to make recommendations for development of Individual Educational Plans for those children. The new inclusive education support services, like Resource centers for inclusive education, pedagogical support staff, and extracurricular mediation hours were introduced in all schools as needed. Starting with 2012, the Government of Moldova made available public financial resources for inclusive education<sup>1</sup>.

The reforms made in the field of deinstitutionalization and social inclusion of children with SEN contributed to decreasing of number of children with SEN in special schools from 3550 in 2009 to 1807 in 2013. According to the data of the National Department of Statistics, 66% of children with SEN were studying in regular communities' schools and 34% - in special schools in 2013-2014 school year.

#### **Attitudes and perceptions of students toward inclusive education**

**Schools satisfaction.** According to the survey, the majority of students show a high degree of satisfaction with the school. The share of students who said they like school very much is 86% higher than the percentage of those who disagreed with this statement. The proportion of pupils who said they cannot wait to go to school in the morning is 69% higher than of those who did not agree with this statement. Per groups of students, the share of students highly satisfied with the school is higher among both groups of typical students (from classes with and without pupils with SEN) and is lower in pupils with SEN.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2012, the state allocated 1.6 million MDL for development of inclusive education in three districts (Criuleni, Floresti and Ialoveni). In 2013, the Government of Moldova allocated 89.3 million MDL for inclusive education and in 2014 – 67.5 million MDL.

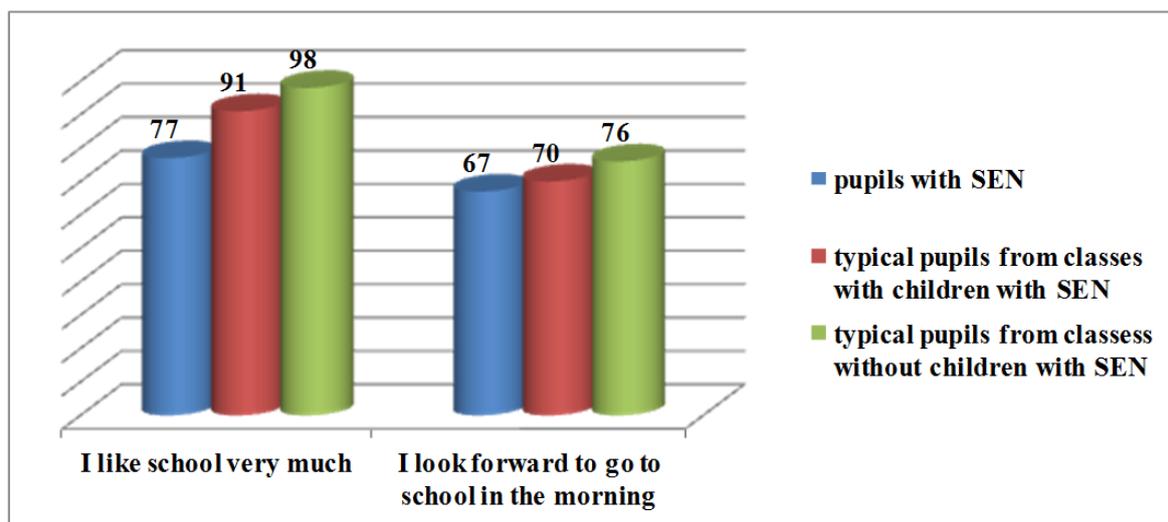


Chart 1. The pupils attitudes toward the school, DPOI<sup>1</sup>, %

The students involved in focus group discussions said that the high level of satisfaction with the school is determined by the changes occurred at the school level alongside with inclusive education processes: “renovation of some classes”, “equipment of classes with modern technologies and furniture”, “improvement of quality of teaching”, “diversification of teaching methodologies”, “improvement of attitudes and behaviours of both typical children and children with SEN”. They like to go to school, because they “learn new things”, “get new abilities”, “are preparing for their carrier”, “interact with friends”, “play with friends’ afterschool” etc. Some of the students said that they are acquainted with the situations, when some of the children with SEN do not go regularly to the school due to “lack of their parents support”, “limited understanding of of school attending benefits by their parents”, “poverty and limitations in daily life”, “bad attitudes of their peers and of teachers” etc. All of them agreed with the need to support the children with SEN to go regularly to schools through prevention of discriminatory attitudes, improvement of teaching methodologies, especially when involving the children with SEN, developing positive school environment for all children, supporting the children and their families to overcome poverty” etc.

**Social environment in the schools.** Research has revealed that the social environment is quite friendly in pilot inclusive schools. Thus, the share of students who said they have many friends in the school (DPOI = 74%), that they feel difficult to say good bye to their friends at the end of classes (DPOI = 42%), that they are invited often by peers during the recreations to play (DPOI = 49%), that they are invited by colleagues to participate in various extra-curricular activities (DPOI = 62%), that they like to participate in various extra-curricular activities (DPOI = 78%) is higher than of those who disagree with those statements. Per groups of students, the situation is different. The percentage of pupils with SEN who have positive views about the social environment in the school is 1.5-2.0 lower than in case of typical students, both in classes with and without students with SEN.

Some typical pupils believe that students with SEN do not feel good in school due to the fact that “some of them are forced to come to school by parents or teachers”, “sometimes the regular students discriminate them, they laugh on them, they pay no attention and even encourage other children to behave in the same way”. The discriminatory attitudes of typical students towards students with SEN are due to their families’ high level of poverty: they cannot always afford to buy good clothes and more expensive things for their children and are not always careful enough. Some students said their peers “are afraid of students with SEN, especially of those who have aggressive behavior”. They said that pupils with SEN “should be kept under control”.

<sup>1</sup> Dominant Personal Opinion Index (DPOI) determines the rate of dominant opinions regarding certain phenomena, processes and is calculated according to the formula  $(p-n)X(100-ne):100$ , where  $p$  is the rate of positive opinions,  $n$  is the rate of negative opinions and  $ne$  – the rate of neuter opinions. The Index ranges on a scale from -100 to +100. The closer to 100 the index is, the more positive opinions/perceptions/attitudes there are.

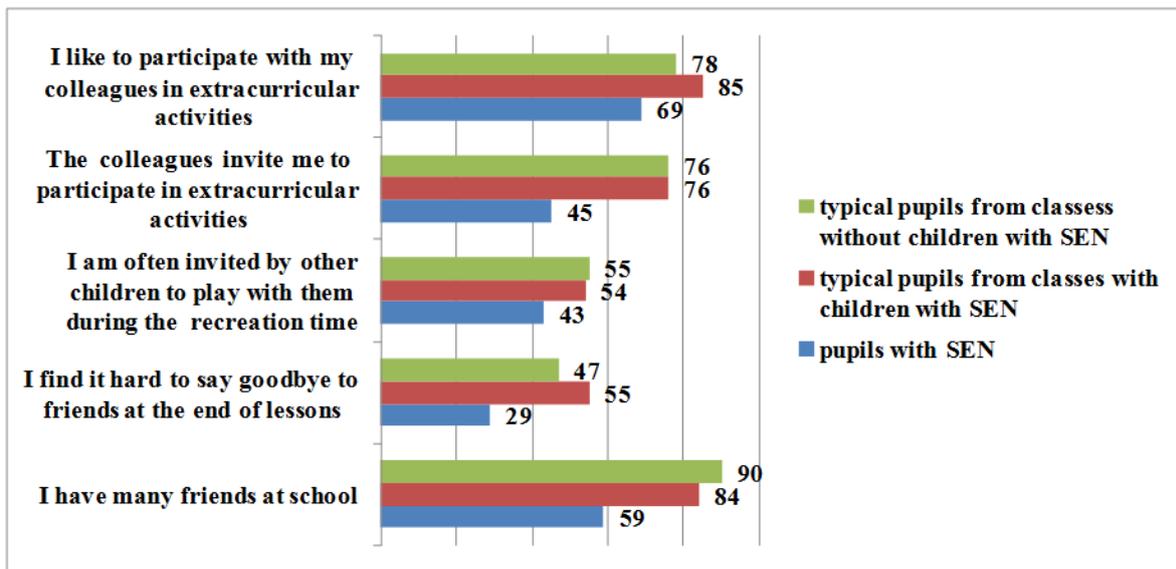


Chart 2. Pupils' perceptions regarding the social environment in the schools, DPOI, %

**Teaching-learning environment.** Most of the children believe that the teaching-learning-evaluation process in the school mostly corresponds to the requirements of the inclusive education. Thus, the rate of students who agreed with the statement that teaching activities during the classes are very interesting (DPOI=86%), that they work together with other classmates during the classes (DPOI=72%), that teachers encourage them to learn according to their capacities (DPOI=78%), that they may ask questions and receive answers during the classes (DPOI=74%), and that they often share their opinions about school and studies (DPOI=62%), that teachers and students in their school respect each other (DPOI=82%), that teachers speak well about all the children (DPOI=69%) is much higher than the rate of those who think otherwise.

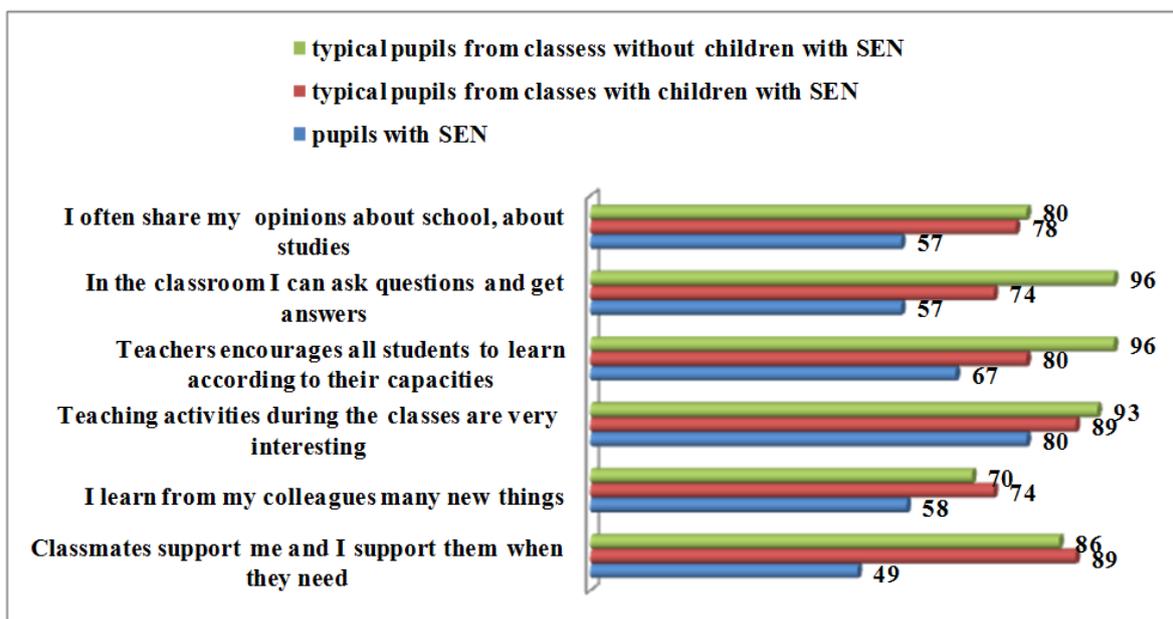


Chart 3. The students' perceptions regarding the content and the organization of classes, DPOI, %

Per group of children, we notice differences in the opinions. In case of typical children from classes with students having SEN and of students with SEN, the rate of those who support positive statements decreases and the rate of those who have contrary opinions increases.

The share of students in the pilot schools who believes that teachers help students who have learning disabilities is 86% higher than that of students who have an opposite opinion. The share of

students who believe that teachers fully support them is 68% higher than of those who think differently. Per groups of students, the percentage of students who said the teachers help students with learning problems; communicate with them and help them learn; ask if students need additional help; fully support them is higher among typical students and lower in pupils with SEN.

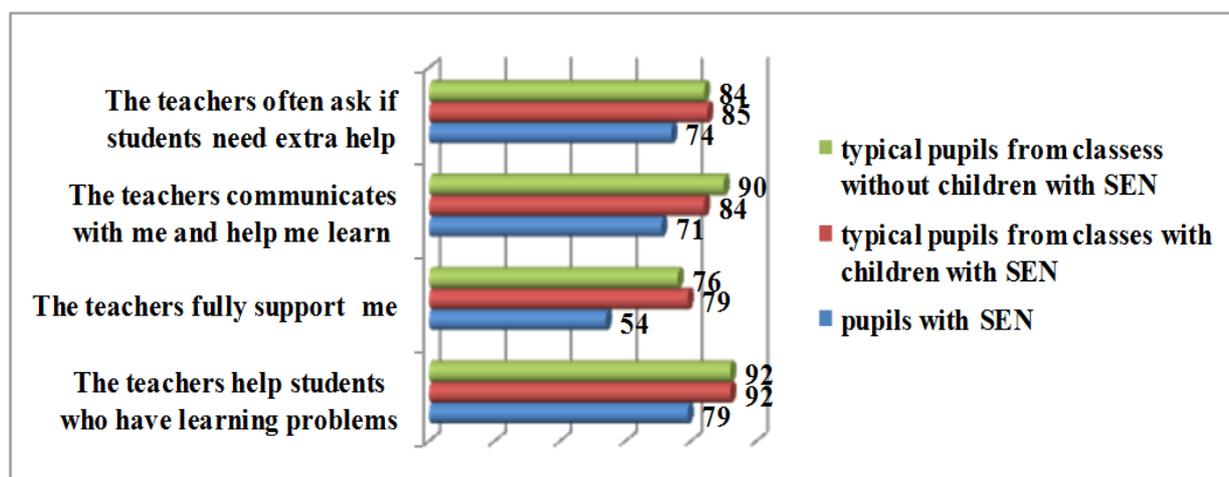


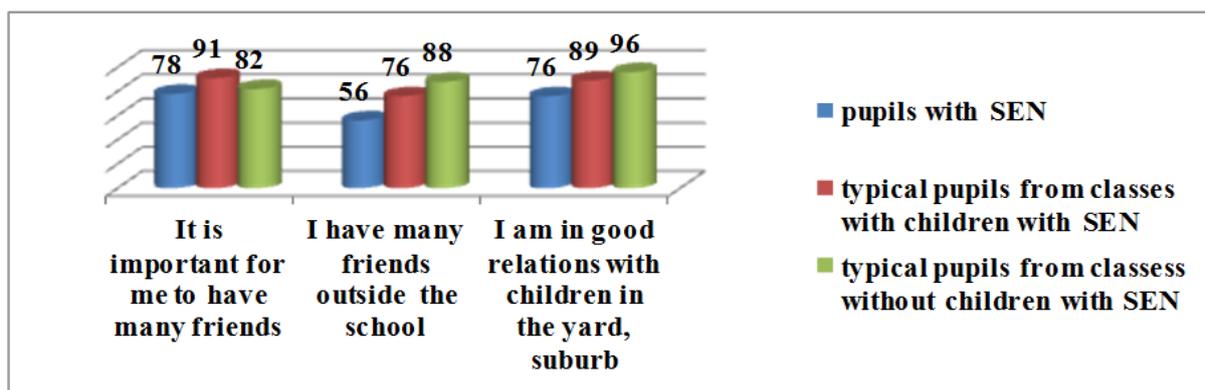
Chart 4. The pupils perceptions regarding the teachers support, DPOI, %

Discussions held in focus groups revealed certain issues/aspects related to the learning environment that requires a special attention. Thus, students mentioned that certain teachers focus during the classes on other activities than teaching activities; they tend to use only the method of children reading and writing, they repeat the same task for several lessons. Many children stressed the fact that teachers do not always evaluate them objectively and that their relation with the teacher influences the marks they get. Students have also mentioned that even if they are allowed to state their opinions during the lessons, teachers do not always accept such opinions and that, sometimes, accepting students' opinions depends on the teacher's mood. Speaking about teachers' attitude towards students with SEN, participants in focus groups had split opinions: some of them believe teachers' pay less attention to them and focus more on the students who study well; others stated that teachers pay too much attention to students with SEN, which, they think, is disadvantaging typical students.

**Students' self-esteem and self-confidence.** The survey revealed that students in pilot schools have a high level of self-esteem and enough self-confidence. Thus, the rate of children who believe the things they study at school are useful (DPOI=90%), they are able to obtain good school results if they prepare their homework (DPOI=78%), they can study in different ways (70%) is higher than the rate of those who believe otherwise. Per groups of children, the rate of children that have self-esteem and self-confidence is higher in typical children, both in classes that have students with SEN and in classes that do not have students with SEN and is lower in students with SEN.

**Pupils' participation in social life.** According to the survey, most students said that for them is very important to have many friends (DPOI = 82%), that they have good relationships with the children in the yard, slums (DPOI = 86%) and that they have many friends outside of school (DPOI = 70%). Per groups of children, the share of pupils with SEN who agreed with the above statement is lower than the share of typical students.

To see the intensity of student participation in community life, they were asked about the frequency of their participation at various events in the community, visits with relatives ,visits at various museums, theaters etc. Research has revealed that the social life of students is reduced mostly to visits to relatives (DPOI = 65%), and less – in participation at various community events (DPOI = 32%) and visits to museums, theaters, zoo etc. (DPOI = 38%). Per groups of children, the share of pupils with SEN visiting relatives (DPOI = 51%) is 1.5 times lower than in case of typical students (DPOI = 75% DPOI = 80%). The share of pupils with SEN taking part in local events is about two times lower (DPOI = 19%) than in case typical students (DPOI = 45% DPOI = 39%). The share of pupils with SEN visiting museums, theaters, exhibitions in the city is 8-10 times lower than in case or typical students (DPOI = 77% DPOI = 54%).



**Chart 5. Pupils perceptions regarding the friendships, DPOI, %**

**Results and conclusions.** Both: the typical children and the children with SEN from pilot inclusive schools feel comfortable at school and have high level of school satisfaction. The majority of typical students show positive attitudes and perceptions toward inclusion of children with SEN in regular schools. As per their perceptions, the implementation of inclusive education resulted in rather positive changes in respective schools: provision with materials, modern devices, improvement of teaching quality and methods, change in the behaviors of children with SEN and in typical children. The social and learning environment in pilot schools is friendly and started to be adapted to children individual needs. The both: children with SEN and typical children have high level of self-esteem and confidence. They believe the things they study at school are useful and they are able to obtain good learning results if they prepare their homework.

However, in focus group discussions with typical children, some of them claim that sometimes the children with SEN feel uncomfortable at school because they are discriminated/ignored by their classmates. The discrimination is caused mostly by the high level of poverty of children with SEN families and less possibilities to have nice modern clothes, mobile devices etc. Some of typical children said that some of children with SEN have disruptive behaviors and disturb the attention of other children in classes. The research showed that children with SEN are less involved than their typical peers in classes and in extra-curricular activities and have less friends in schools and outside the schools.

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**Recommended for publication: 25.08.2015**