

# THE SCHOOL-FAMILY PARTNERSHIP FOR EFFICIENT TEACHING OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

CORNELIA STAN\*

**ABSTRACT.** Belonging to a particular social group or having a certain level of development should not be arguments for the exclusion of children from mainstream schools. The integrationist movement supports the contention according to which mainstreaming provides the most appropriate environment for quality educational achievements and for acquiring social and cognitive skills. To facilitate the integration of children with learning disabilities in mainstream schools, it is necessary that these schools ensure a friendly atmosphere and real integration. Yet, active family involvement in training and education of their own children should be considered as well.

**Keywords:** *school-family partnership, learning disabilities, inclusion, learning diary.*

**Zusammenfassung.** Die Zugehörigkeit zu einer bestimmten sozialen Gruppe oder ein individueller Entwicklungsstand sind keine Argumente für die Ausgrenzung von Kindern aus Regelschulen. Die integrationistische Bewegung unterstützt das Argument, dass die Regelschule der Rahmen und das am besten geeigneten Qualität Niveau für der Bildung und für das Erreichen von sozialen Kompetenzen und cognitive Eigenschaften versichert. Um die Integration von Kindern mit Lernschwierigkeiten in Regelschulen zu erleichtern, ist eine einladende Atmosphäre notwendig und die Integration im eigentlichen Sinne zu gewährleisten, aber die echte Einbindung der Familie in der Bildung den Kindern muss nicht vergessen sein.

**Stichworte:** *Schule-Familie Partnerschaft, Lernschwierigkeiten, Inklusion, Aufgaben-Tagebuch*

## Introduction

The 1994 World Conference on Special Education in Salamanca based its guidelines on a new statement developed and launched by UNESCO. This statement asserts that the community rehabilitation of people with disabilities is part of community development and involves the combined efforts of persons who have these difficulties, their families, the members of the community, together with health, educational, professional and social services on the basis of *modern principles of*

---

\* PhD Lecturer, Education Sciences Department, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, BBU, corneliassv@yahoo.com

***inclusive education***, required by the new guidelines in assisting people with special needs and in line with the UN resolution no. 48/96 from 1993: *the principles of normalization, equal rights, deinstitutionalization, development, equal opportunities in education, ensuring support services, early intervention, cooperation and partnership*.

The latter principle refers to the practical experience where it was found that the normalization and integration can be achieved if there is a permanent collaboration between stakeholders: students, teachers, parents, NGOs, counselors, etc. In inclusive education, cooperation among children in the learning process, between teachers and other professionals, as well as between family and school is a decisive factor for achieving academic success.

### **Aspects of the relationship between inclusive education and learning disabilities**

Even in countries where inclusive education is provided by law (in Italy and Norway for 25 years, in Britain for 10 years and recently in the Netherlands), there is still a great discrepancy between the adopted projects and actual results. The difficulties stem from insufficient teacher training aimed at providing help for children with special needs, poor organization with too many children in mainstream schools and rigid conceptions on the part of teachers and of some parents.

According to the Salamanca Statement (1994), "The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school." (Article 7)

As every child belongs to a family, to a community or a school, each school in its turn belongs to a particular local culture, particular to the community the child belongs to, a fact which allows the formation of an "inclusive circle" of the three main agents of education, family - school - community, with an emphasis on family involvement and support.

Learning disabilities are more often found in early and middle childhood, because during this period social learning is strongly supported by academic learning, which is quite demanding. Signs of learning disabilities may be encountered at all ages, including the adult, when they may be less visible.

The first recognized definition of learning disabilities was proposed by Samuel Kirk: "A learning disability refers to a retardation, disorder, or delayed development (...) resulting from a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disturbance and not from mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural or instruction factors." (Quoted in Ungureanu 1998, p.22).

This definition established a relationship between learning disabilities and the term "a disorder in psychological processes" focusing on the problems of processing and how they interfere with school performance.

Agencies and various organisations were set up to deal with learning disabilities, triggering a vast conceptualization process, which resulted in increasingly complex definitions. Such a definition, more extended and clearer, was given by the U. S. Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities: "Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction." (ICLD Journal 1987, p. 222).

Later, this definition was extended again to the conclusion that "learning disabilities refer to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities." They are assumed to be caused by "central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability." (<http://special.edschool.virginia.edu/information/uvald/lddef.html>)

There is an remarkable correlation between learning disabilities and instrumental disorders as defined by Haim (1963) as "complex neurobiological data involved in human adaptation to the material environment through motor skills, and to the human environment through language" (1963, in Vrășmaș, E., 2007, page 25). In other words, it is about all functional mechanisms that may be considered as learning tools or facilitating learning. Increasingly, numerous studies support the idea that, in a fairly high proportion (two out of three cases), failure to adapt to school and problems faced by students in learning are due to instrumental and mood disorders.

Vrășmaș (2007) talks about the fact that in specialist literature there are several approaches to learning disabilities, namely:

- The existence of learning problems in some students who can not keep up with others, have difficulties in understanding and gaps in knowledge acquisition and skills training.

These may be called *learning problems* and are mainly due to inappropriate ways to deal with learning at school. Furthermore, these problems are encountered only by some children during the school learning process and can be attributed mostly to the child because it is assumed that they should not have difficulties in the learning process when preparing and participating adequately. Thus, teachers consider the cause of these problems as arising from the lack of effort and participation of the learners and from particularities of their development. In all classes there are children with poor results due to learning disabilities and teachers should take this into account

when organising teaching situations. However, the success of learning is given only by the effort of these children and by the manner they prepare for work. Therefore, according to this assumption, learning is primarily the responsibility of children.

- Difficulties/ deficiencies/ disabilities related to the *learning process itself*, which are issues studied by special education. A new type of disability (disorder or development issue), which has not been previously included in recognized categories (mental, sensory, language, communication, psychological and motor) is thus acknowledged and may be recorded. Certain disorders/ disabilities are identified which refer to the general learning process, namely difficulties encountered by children in the complex process of their development and which manifest themselves in the academic and social integration in spite of no other problems or intellectual, motor or sensory disabilities. The field of study specific to this approach focuses on the general and specific mechanisms of learning with emphasis on the basic psychological and social dimensions of the difficulties/disorders encountered during the learning process. A particular set of problems is thus formed based on a large variety of manifestations related to individual and social learning.

- *General, non-categorical difficulties* of the learning process, which may occur with all children, regardless of their learning manner or style, in a perspective that brings together all children, not only those considered deficient. This research direction is a curricular perspective and is a reconstruction of the field of concepts, practices and intervention methods set forth by special education. This perspective relies on the assumption that all individuals have learning disabilities at a certain moment in a particular domain of their development. This should not entail a process of labelling or marginalisation or including children in set categories. Based on the idea that all children can learn and learning is a general method of adaptation and development, this field of study reconsiders the social value of learning. By approaching learning disabilities as a non-categorical domain, the identification, assessment and specific intervention in learning disabilities can be performed in terms of problems common to all children, including the assumption that deficiencies, disabilities and/or incapacities are also specific learning styles. All these are approached as features of the learning process instead of being considered permanent states. The curricular process emphasizes individuals' uniqueness, their life experience and learning support by adequate and stimulating inter-relations. Efficient learning is the goal of any educational activity, accepted methods are interactive whereas the deficiencies/incapacities are considered as disabilities, different manners of approaching the learning experience. In this perspective, both the process and the contents of learning are important.

### **The Impact of Family Environment on Learning disabilities**

Several learning disabilities are derived from family or school issues:

- Low interest of the family towards the child's learning activity;
- Low intellectual level, low expectations of family members;

- Lack of collaboration between family and school;
- Negative family emotional climate;
- Issues related to the teacher: bias, not using teaching strategies that meet age and learner features, inflexibility, use of teaching styles that do not fit learners' personality, lack of cooperation with other specialists;
- Issues related to the educational process: high requirements, work overload, overcharged curricula and difficult textbooks, overcrowded classes;
- Issues related to the classroom and school relationships - relationships between students, and between teachers.

Research shows that parents have a stronger reaction to the diagnosis of learning disabilities than to any other diagnosis. It should be noted that if a child has mental retardation or a disability, parents usually become aware of the problem during the first weeks of the child's life. During preschool years, there are usually no signs as to learning disabilities and parents do not suspect a problem. When informed of the problem by school / kindergarten staff, parents' first reaction is to deny the problem. Of course, this denial is not beneficial for the child, but nor is it for the parents who tend to maintain it for a longer period, which is a source for further frustrations for the child.

For these reasons, it is necessary for parents to be advised by the teacher or the support teacher, who must first consider family behavior out of school, both in terms of practical help in carrying out tasks and of the development of a truthful self-image of the child.

As parents are part of the intervention team, discussions with them or even other family members involved in teaching / supervising children are especially useful for establishing children's progress, and to design the correct approach for an accurate customization of the program.

Research on learning disabilities indicates that the parents of such children undergo a range of emotions before accepting the child and their specific problem. These can result in a series of stages which, however, are totally unpredictable. A parent can pass from one stage to another at random, some skip stages, while others remain in a single stage for a long time. Each stage may be described by a word, in a range of rational or irrational beliefs: denial, guilt, fear, envy, pain, negotiation, anger, blame, isolation, escape.

The pattern of these reactions is unpredictable. The situation often worsens as the mother and father are being involved in different and contradictory stages at the same time (for example, guilt vs. denial, anger vs. blame). This can make the communication with the family become very difficult.

If parents accept the difficulty and guidance from specialist staff and are actively involved in the educational process, chances are that at least part of the child's learning disabilities fade away, diminish and can even be solved entirely.

### **Family involvement in overcoming children's learning disabilities**

In the context of the above considerations, we set out a research in collaboration with a support teacher in a mainstream school to highlight the effects of academic activities in the home on reducing learning disabilities.

The assumption of this study is that academic activities consistently done in the home, with the full involvement of parents in the learning activities of children with learning disabilities integrated into mainstream school, contribute significantly to children's academic achievement.

To this end we developed a systematic program of academic family activities performed by students with learning disabilities together with their parents. The program was monitored via an assignment diary .

The research included 10 students enrolled in the second grade, namely 3 girls and 7 boys with learning disabilities, integrated into a mainstream school.

Following the initial specialist assessment conducted at the beginning of the school year, all subjects were diagnosed with learning disabilities. Their psychological development shared common features such as: medium or low learning potential, diffuse perception of learning material and auditory method of information reception, low level written language, phonemic hearing deficit, slow speech, lack of oral narrative strategy, short attention span. Their thinking was characterized by lack of planning behavior, difficulties in understanding the task, resulting in a slow uneven erratic work style with difficulties in meeting the deadlines.

These students came from different backgrounds, with different family circumstances and parents' educational level generally below average. Even educated parents do not have time and do not have specific ways to help their children.

Unfortunately, most parents do not keep a close connection with the school, and much perseverance is needed to persuade them to talk with the teacher or support teacher.

Therefore, we considered necessary to apply such a program for the parents to learn how to and actually help their children in turn.

To make it easier for parents to learn methods to support their children in the home, weekly meetings were proposed and conducted to discuss issues arising during the process and to find effective solutions. For these meetings, a discussion guide for parents was proposed, with the following topics:

- Promoting active learning;
- Encouraging reading;
- Encouraging children to be responsible and work independently;
- The importance of homework, monitoring homework and providing support and guidance on assignments;
- Providing emotional support;
- Monitoring children on TV or computer use.

The aim was to implement the guide for parents to be able to help and work with their children on their academic tasks at home. In this respect, weekly meetings with parents to discuss problems encountered from week to week and finding ways to overcome difficulties played an important role.

The instrument used was an *Assignment Diary*, which was filled on a daily basis. The diary was a notebook with six rubrics which are filled in by the teacher and/or support teacher at school and by the parents at home.

**Figure 1. Assignment Diary**

Date	Assignment	Child's Difficulties	Parent's difficulties	Suggestions 1	Suggestions 2

Parents filled in the date on which the assignment was done, the discipline and the related subject matter, any difficulties their child should encounter in carrying out the task, but also difficulties they had in supporting their child. The class teacher or support teacher would fill suggestions box 1 the day the task was assigned, providing clues on how parents could help their child learn. Suggestions box 2 was completed after the homework had been done and parents had noted the difficulties faced in achieving it by them and the child. This second suggestion box was aimed at giving feedback to the parents, providing them with general clues for doing the following assignment or even appreciation for their work.

The idea of such a log is not original, being taken from a guide for teachers: *School, family and community partnership* prepared by Godfrey Claff (G. Claff, 2007). However, its structure, and the monitoring of its completion was different: while the original diary was a simple notebook where homework was recorded and which was signed at each weekend by the parent and the class teacher to mark its completion, the diary we created is more interactive, involving parents through self-reflection on their ability to provide child support for academic tasks and on the real potential of the child.

Furthermore, the suggestion rubric was designed to facilitate parents' work, to cater to their needs regarding support for their children's assignments and various other learning activities.

The weekly meetings where the topics proposed for the *parents guide* were discussed, did not have a specific order of approach, being guided by the parents' needs and the difficulties they encountered in dealing with assignments during the respective week. During these meetings, the manner to fill in the diary was discussed, with parents suggesting their own approaches and ideas to fill in the rubrics based on positive and negative experiences.

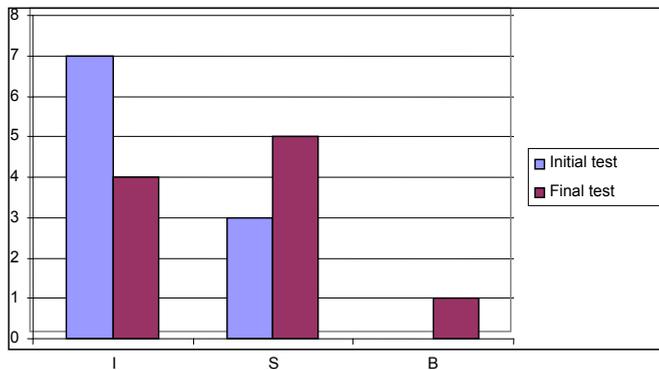
Children's academic achievements after a school semester varied greatly in accordance to family involvement. There were extremely different situations: four parents attended the meetings regularly and filled in the assignment diary on a daily basis; three parents attended only one meeting and filled in the diary only occasionally; finally, three parents attended about half of the meetings and filled in the diary on and off.

By comparing children's academic results at the end of the second semester with those obtained at the end of the first semester for the disciplines *Romanian language and literature* and *Mathematics*, a significant progress was noted in the

four children whose families got involved regularly in the home-based learning activities and no change in the case of those whose parents got involved a little or not at all. A particular situation was recorded for a child whose parents did not help very much at home, but who made significant progress that could be attributed to his hard work and to the school contribution.

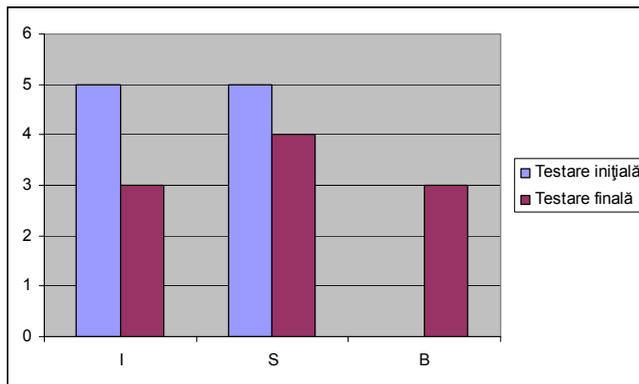
Consequently, by comparing with the initial test, results for *Romanian language and literature* show that only four pupils achieved academic progress, namely three progressed from I (insufficient/fail) to S (satisfactory/ pass) and one from S to B (good).

**Figure 2. Comparative results of the initial and final tests for Romanian language and literature**



The analysis of the comparative results for initial and final tests for Romanian language and literature shows a slight increase in academic achievements of the pupils who carried out learning activities at home, where parents got more involved.

**Figure 3. Comparative results of the initial and final tests for Mathematics**



The comparative analysis of the results for the initial and final tests for Mathematics show that five pupils progressed: three progressed from S (satisfactory/pass) to B (good) and two from I (insufficient/fail) to S (satisfactory/pass). In this case, progress was also made by a pupil whose parents did not get involved in his learning, but was very diligent at school and had less learning difficulties in Mathematics. Analyzing the chart of the comparison between the results of the initial and final tests in math, school performance shows an increase greater than that recorded for Romanian language and literature, with three grades B, which is encouraging.

Mention should be made that the time interval dedicated to our psychological and pedagogical experiment was relatively short, but we intend to continue it next academic year by including parents of the new children from the support group (2<sup>nd</sup> grade). We anticipate more significant progress, especially in the case of children who received support from their families during the experiment described above.

### **Conclusions**

There are obviously differences between the knowledge of pupils engaged intellectually in the family environment, with supervised homework activities and support from their parents, playing different games and chatting with them and so on and the knowledge of pupils who do not perform any structured activity outside the school environment, do not attempt to do their homework, do not discuss with parents and are not supported by them.

Unfortunately, few parents were really receptive and eager to be actively involved in their children's education. These children recorded academic progress, their self-esteem and confidence increased while the perception of school improved, expressing particular enjoyment and satisfaction to perform so many interesting activities with their parents, including home assignments.

The other parents, whose children did not register any progress, were very little involved, always found excuses not to attend weekly meetings, forgot to fill in the *Assignment diary* or did not read at all the instructions of the support teacher regarding strategies and activities for doing the homework for the following day. Unfortunately, this was present mainly in the case of parents or grandparents who did not work and who should have had more time available for their child.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Ausubel, D., Robinson, F. (1981) - *Învățarea în școală*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București;  
Gherguț, A. (2001) - *Pedagogia persoanelor cu cerințe speciale. Strategii de educație integrată*, Editura Polirom, Iași;

- Gherguț, A. (2005) - *Sinteze de pedagogie specială*, Editura Polirom, Iași;
- Godfrey Claff (2007) - *Parteneriat școală-familie-comunitate*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București;
- Ungureanu, D. (1998) - *Copiii cu dificultăți de învățare*, E.D.P., București;
- Vrășmaș, T. (2001) - *Învățământul integrat și / sau incluziv*, Editura Aramis;
- Vrășmaș, E., Nicolae, S., Oprea V., Vrășmaș, T. (2005) - *Ghid pentru cadre didactice de sprijin*, Editura Vanemonde, București;
- Declarația de la Salamanca și direcțiile de acțiune în domeniul educației speciale. Conferința mondială asupra educației speciale: acces și calitate* (1994), Salamanca, Spania;
- <http://special.edschool.virginia.edu/information/uvald/lddef.html>).