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**PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL PARADIGMS FOR THE
INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN THE
EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

SPECIALTY: 531.01 – GENERAL THEORY OF EDUCATION

Doctoral Thesis Abstract

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SEN – special educational needs

ASD – autism spectrum disorder

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

The Relevance of the Research Topic

Integrated education represents a viable solution to the educational problems of children with physical, sensory, intellectual deficiencies, aiming at the implementation of remedial programs that stimulate the remaining potential. The problem of integration in the preschool educational environment is and will remain a current problem in the conditions where there is a number of important unresolved issues related to the educational failures of the child with special educational needs (SEN).

The current situation demonstrates a legislative framework with many reference points, indicating an awareness and promotion of integrated education. However, there are a series of inconsistencies in the implementation of this process of change and development at the level of educational practices, highlighting the need for innovation in this field. There is a constant concern at the legislative level and, only partially, at the practical application level. The desired changes are not sufficient, well-defined, or well-founded, as there are many elements that block this process, stemming from the lack of a coherent construction for step-by-step consolidation of the results.

The relevance of research arises from the education system's inability to create the necessary conditions for real integration, aiming to enhance the independence of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Ongoing efforts are being made to find viable solutions for promoting an educational culture in schools based on the democratic principle of equal opportunities. In the context of preschool education, **the importance of the subject** emerges from the need to develop the organizational capacity of early education services and the teaching staff's ability to work with preschool children with ASD. This involves clarifying conceptual understanding and providing essential information to comprehend the challenges of diversity in the socio-educational context, focusing on methodological aspects aimed at integrative practices within this age group.

Description of the situation in the research field and identification of the research problem. In the specialized literature, there is an intense activity in clarifying **the issue of integration** and all the concepts in the sphere of the education of children with special needs. Referring to the concept of education, in general, we highlight the contribution of the authors I. Gh. Stanciu [24], S. Cristea [9], V. Guțu [14], and regarding the concept of preschool education, in particular, researchers such as: L. Stan [23], E. Vrăsmaș [28], Z. Stanciu and V. Clichici [7], T. Vasian and G. Bulat [25], W. Gormley [35], E Laloumi-Vidali [36], Y. Sinai-Gavrilov [40].

The phenomena of integration and inclusion have been the subject of research by several international authors, including N. Rousseau, G. Bergeron, R. Vienneau [46], V. Benoît [43], and Romanian researchers, among whom we mention: D Popovici [20], L. Manea [16], A. Gherguț [13], but also important contributions made by researchers from the Republic of Moldova such as A. Cara [6], G. Bulat, R. Solovei [4], V Balan L. Bortă and V. Botnari [1], N. Bucun and S. Vrabie [3], A. Cucer [11].

Regarding **the paradigm concept**, it was a topic debated by various authors who showed a special interest in its analysis. Among the researchers who have made significant contributions, we highlight S. Cristea [10], M.-D. Bocoş [2], T. Callo and L. Cuznetov [5], T. Kuhn [15], L. Pogolşa and V. Perliman [19].

The research was based on a series of theories and models of approach to the integration of children with ASD offered by the specialized literature. In this sense, two categories have been identified that include classic psychological models and current theories applied in pedagogical practice. From the first category, a substantial contribution was made by the authors: S. Baron – Cohen, A. Leslie and U. Frith [31], S. Ozonoff and S. J. Rogers [38], etc. Personalities such as P. Hobson [47], K. Chawarska, A. Klin and F. Volkmar [34], V. Ramachandran [21], G. Rizzolatti, L. Fogassi and V. Gallese [39], elucidated new approaches regarding the current theories of autism.

The analysis of theories promoted by specialized literature in this field supports different viewpoints, opinions that focus on certain directions but do not provide an overall picture that clarifies autism-related issues. However, there is a consistent and persistent concern in clarifying aspects related to the adaptation of autistic individuals by reducing anxiety levels and actively participating in social life with the aim of normalization.

At the ideological level, there is a growing interest in integrating children with special educational needs (CES) and involving educational institutions and teachers in achieving optimal outcomes. However, among the factors affecting smooth functioning, we note the specialized professional training of preschool educators and the lack of material conditions. The early attempt to ensure the participation of all children in educational activities is closely interdependent with the degree of assimilation and adaptation of children to a system where policies, educational practices, and curriculum undergo changes, but the school remains largely unchanged.

Currently, we are facing a series of barriers that affect the quality of optimal integration, manifested in learning difficulties, with the emphasis placed on children's deficiencies rather than creating the necessary conditions to ensure active participation in the educational process within the preschool environment. Several barriers or factors that hinder the proper functioning of this process have been identified, obstacles stemming from the conditions children have in the family environment and at kindergarten/school, from the cultures of the community from which the child comes, from the attitude manifested by the child within the preschool/school group, from the level of competence development of teachers in adapting to the educable needs, from the level of adequacy of the integrative curriculum based on focusing on the educational needs of the child with disabilities, from the use of teaching materials that are inadequate for instruction, from the insufficient provision of means not in line with the type of disability.

The education of children with disabilities remains a complex issue that depends on a multitude of analysis factors aimed at educational policies, ensuring access to education and respecting this right, training professionals in this field, the involvement of families in different educational programs and, finally, the attitude regarding the education of children with disabilities at the level of society in general.

Currently, education is undergoing prolonged reform and only covers children's education,

without extending to education for parents and families. The main cause is the lack of real collaboration between governmental and non-governmental organizations, expressed through disinterest in programs that support children with disabilities by providing them with independence and dignity.

Consequently, **the scientific problem** addressed in the research is outlined: What are the theoretical-applicative paradigms of the integration of children with ASD in order to ensure an optimal cognitive, socio-emotional development and their adaptation to the preschool educational environment?

The object of the research is the process of integrating children with ASD into the preschool educational environment, by ensuring the interdependence between human resources, methodological resources and material resources.

The aim of the research was to identify and validate effective paradigms for integrating children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) into the preschool educational environment.

The research objectives were:

1. Determining the psychopedagogical foundations regarding the integration of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) into the preschool educational environment.
2. Establishing the conceptual and methodological framework for the integration of children with ASD into the preschool educational environment.
3. Evaluating the specific competencies of preschool teachers in working with children with ASD.
4. Identifying the psychopedagogical particularities of children with ASD integrated into the preschool educational environment and investigating the intensity of interpersonal relationships of integrating preschoolers towards integrated atypical children.
5. Developing and validating the Psychopedagogical Model for enhancing the integration of children with ASD into the preschool educational environment.

The research hypothesis: we assume that the integration process in the preschool environment is optimized under the conditions of the implementation of the psycho-pedagogical model, contributing to increasing the level of development and integration of children with ASD within the integrative group, but also the level of professional skills of the teaching staff involved.

The scientific research methodology utilized a dominant concept throughout the study, focusing on tailored school integration according to the individual and age-specific characteristics of preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The conceptualization of integration was grounded on a series of psychological and pedagogical landmarks contributing to the development of the psychopedagogical model for enhancing the integration of preschoolers with ASD. Authors from international specialized literature were referenced, such as E. Plaisance et al. [45], J-P. Moulin[44], as well as Romanian authors like E. Verza [27], O. Secară [22], D. Popovici [20], T. Vrăsmaş [29], among others. Additionally, authors from the Republic of Moldova were mentioned, including A. Cara [6], T. Vasian și G. Bulat [25], V. Mîslițchi [17], and others.

Another fundamental concept underlying the research and guiding the experimental approach is the concept of paradigm, as discussed by S. Cristea, with applicability in the field of pedagogical sciences. We also mention the contribution of the author Y. Bertrand, who refers to

the psychological and pedagogical paradigm, concepts that are of major importance and support the theoretical foundation of the research. Among the specific learning models within the psychological paradigm addressed in the research and applied in early education, we highlight the following: the constructivism model, the connectionism model or learning through trial and error, the Piagetian constructivism model, the instrumental conditioning model, and the social constructivism model by L. Vygotsky [9].

The Scientific research methods

The present study is based on a set of complex methods that are systematically organized and are oriented towards achieving the proposed objectives. In this sense, the methods were classified as follows:

Theoretical: analysis of specialized literature from a pedagogical, psychological and methodological perspective related to the research theme and its exploitation.

Scientific and empirical based on: the utilization of methods for collecting experimental data through the application of established tools in the specialized literature, as well as proprietary sociometric instruments. These instruments measure, on one hand, the level of development based on scores of the development coefficient and, respectively, the level of acceptance or rejection within the group of preschoolers.

Statistics: the use of statistical-mathematical methods and the organization and interpretation of data with the help of diagrams and tables.

The experimental research was carried out in two school units in the city of Galati: Kindergarten with Extended Program no. 9 and Kindergarten with Normal Program No. 40.

The experimental sample used to carry out the research was composed of three representative samples consisting of 20 teachers, who work in preschool education, at the mentioned educational units, 12 preschoolers with ASD and a number of 74 integrative preschoolers.

The scientific novelty and originality of the research focus on:

1. Conducting a theoretical and empirical study focused on exploring the less-researched age group, the preschool age, as a crucial stage in the subsequent development of children with ASD.
2. Determining fundamental concepts in the context of integrating children with ASD into the preschool educational environment: integration, ASD characteristics, and early intervention.
3. Analyzing psychopedagogical paradigms at the level of theories, models, and educational practices.
4. Redefining the concept of educational integration for children with ASD.
5. Configuring and validating the Psychopedagogical Model for enhancing the integration of children with ASD and implementing the Training Intervention Program.

The obtained result that contributed to the solution of the important scientific problem lies in the conceptualization of the *Psycho-pedagogical model for streamlining the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment*, determining the facilitation of integration of preschoolers with ASD in the preschool educational environment.

The theoretical significance of the research lies in:

- the theoretical foundation of the psycho-pedagogical paradigms of approaching the education of children with SEN, based on the analysis and interpretation of the literature;
- the comparative analysis of the notions of educational integration and inclusion of children with special needs;
- the identification of ASD's specific features and its manifestations in the preschool educational environment;
- the establishment of the reference framework for the formation of professional skills within the integration of children with ASD in the group;
- the elaboration of the *Psycho-pedagogical model for streamlining the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment*.

The practical value of the research lies in the applicability of the Psychopedagogical Model for enhancing the integration of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) into the preschool educational environment, developed at the level of early education services.

The implementation of the scientific results has been carried out through presentations at various national and international scientific conferences, in various scientific publications authored by the researcher, as well as through practical teaching activities conducted within the preschool education system. These activities have been conducted at Preschool Kindergarten No. 9 and Preschool Kindergarten No. 40 in Galați, Romania.

Approval of the research results took place during the meetings of the Guidance Committee and the Department Committee. Additionally, the results were presented in specialized publications, articles, and at national and international scientific conferences through various institutions, including the State University of Moldova, Ion Creangă State Pedagogical University, University of Bucharest, Institute of Logopedics in Bucharest, and Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu State University in Cahul.

Publications on the topic of the thesis: the obtained results are published in 13 scientific papers.

Volume and structure of the thesis: the thesis includes introduction, three chapters, general conclusions and recommendations, 270 bibliographic sources, 143 pages of basic text, 9 appendices, 24 tables and 16 figures.

Keywords: preschool educational environment, special educational needs, autism spectrum disorder, teachers, psycho-pedagogical paradigm, socio-educational integration, individualized instruction.

THESIS CONTENT

In the **Introduction**, the relevance of the topic, its importance, and its current status were presented, both theoretically and practically. Additionally, the purpose, objectives, and hypothesis of the research were outlined. The scientific novelty and originality of the obtained results, the theoretical significance, the practical value of the research, the approval of the results, and the methods and research methodology were described.

Chapter 1. *Comprehensive Approach to the Integration of Children with Autism in the Preschool Educational Environment* presents theoretical landmarks regarding the educational integration of preschoolers with autism in mainstream education. It analyzes the pedagogical context of integrating atypical children at the preschool level and details the specific aspects of integration in the conditions of early education. The study of specialized literature focused on the concept of paradigm, which is a widely accepted theoretical construct in the scientific community, based on which information in a particular field is organized and interpreted. The analysis of the concept was conducted from an etymological perspective [5], a praxiological perspective [2], and at the level of fundamental concept [10]. The contribution of the author T. Kuhn, considered the initiator of this concept, as well as the contribution of author S. Cristea, was highlighted by presenting in detail the opinions related to the studied issue.

In relation to the educational paradigm concept and the specific approach of the research topic, we identify two types of paradigms on which the experimental approach is based: pedagogical and psychological. In this regard, we highlight the classification made by Y. Bertrand (1993), according to which the structuring of paradigms can be done based on several categories as follows: spiritualist and humanist, academic, social, constructivist, socio-cognitive, and technological.

Based on the classification made by the author, we can extract the paradigms that were the basis of the research considering them relevant in the development of children with ASD. From the first category, we mention the humanistic paradigm because it is the basis of the development of the person - the preschooler with ASD, in our case. The academic paradigm is the basis of the professional training of teachers aiming at teaching knowledge, perceived as objective and independent mechanisms. Regarding the social paradigm, we identify the connection between education and the sociocultural systems that underlie the transformation and evolution of children with ASD. From the last category, we highlight the constructivist paradigm that allows the analysis of the cognitive processes of preschoolers with CES, the socio-cognitivist paradigm with a role in ensuring the favourable conditions of knowledge, through interaction with it, and the technological paradigm that refers to the computerization of the educational environment through access to the resources made available by the website dedicated to teachers.

Throughout Chapter 1, the concept of children with special needs [13, pp.15-31] was conceptually clarified based on the analysis of specialized literature, leading to the abandonment of rigid and stigmatizing terminology that included groups of disabilities of children or terms such as invalid, uneducable, irrecoverable, unfit/incapable, and reaching the conclusion that these denominations are detrimental to human dignity. In close connection with the mentioned aspect, the notions of normalization and integration were clarified based on models for approaching the education of children with special needs, thus creating a table presenting their evolution. Remaining within the conceptual sphere, an analysis of integrated education systems was conducted both in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. In this regard, we mention the Education for All Paradigm [25], which involves the obligation of general education to adapt to new conditions in accordance with the new intrinsic values of education based on special requirements,

transforming into a new type of school characterized by general access to studies, equal opportunities, respect for the right to normalization, individualization of the educational process, disciplinary complementarity, and the development of the child in line with their potential, all aimed at preparing them for life.

Treating **the phenomenon of integration** constituted an important, significant, and relevant aspect for our research. The concept involves a complex, multidimensional analysis, establishing itself as a priority in the current educational context. According to authors N. Bucun and S. Vrabie, "school integration expresses the favorable attitude of the student towards the school they attend: the mental condition in which instructional-educational actions become accessible to the child; consolidating a strong motivation that supports the child's effort in the learning process" [3, p. 68]. From the multidimensional analysis, favorable factors that determine the integration of children with ASD are deduced, optimizing it with benefits in terms of development based on the interconnections between individual, familial, educational/school-related factors, and at the community level. Equally, the notion of **inclusion** is promoted, offering a broader vision than the very restrictive notion of integration as presented above [41, pp.17-35]. The term and its derivatives (inclusive schooling, inclusive pedagogy, inclusive education, inclusive school) are seen as more comprehensive descriptors, covering a range of aspects and questions that are not necessarily new, but to which integration and integrative policy have paid little attention [46, pp.71-90]. In order to highlight the differences between the two concepts, a comparative analysis was conducted based on the analysis of specialized literature and the authors who have significantly contributed to clarifying them.

The overarching complex framework for approaching autism involves a series of specific theoretical explanatory models for this disorder. The specialized literature divides them into two categories: classical psychological models and current theories. The classical ones emerged in the 1980s and were based on the Theory of Mind, the Executive Function Theory, and the Central Coherence Theory. The Theory of Mind, represented by Premack and Woodruff, posits that having a Theory of Mind entails attributing mental states to both oneself and others in order to anticipate and explain behavior. This idea was also applied to autism by authors such as S. Baron-Cohen, A. Leslie, and U. Frith in 1985 [31]. Additionally, we have Hobson's Emotional Theory [47], the Implicit Learning Theory promoted by L.G. Klinger, M.R. Klinger, and R.L. Pohlig [48], the Mirror Neuron Theory developed by G. Rizzolatti, L. Fogassi, and V. Gallese [39], and the Prominent Landscape Theory formulated by Ramachandran [21].

Based on the specific theories of this disorder, learning models are outlined, explaining general and functional mechanisms, as well as approaches to autism pathology: *Connectionism Model or Learning by Trial and Error*, *Instrumental Conditioning Model*, *Piagetian Constructivism Model*, *Social Constructivism Model* by L. Vygotsky, *The Sociocultural Constructivism Model* by J. Bruner, *The Social Learning Model*, *The Theory of Experiential Learning* [8].

Against the backdrop of educational changes, the essential role of teachers in facilitating and producing these changes is highlighted. In this regard, we mention **the theory of**

empowerment or attribution [38, 42], which focuses on teachers and their decision-making and instructional activities in the classroom to enhance organizational efficiency and improve students' performance. Additionally, the **ecological systems theory** [33] developed by U. Bronfenbrenner (1974) is utilized to establish connections between psychological theory and programs in educational practice.

Throughout the chapter, **the pedagogical paradigm** of children's integration into the preschool educational environment was analysed in the conditions in which it constitutes the foundation of children's education, early childhood representing the most important stage in an individual's development. The main purpose of early education is to form the basis for children's further development and involves providing specific conditions for optimal general development in accordance with individual age characteristics. In a modern vision, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of early education by highlighting the importance of the educational experiences offered to children and the training of educators for early childhood.

Studies on the role of early education through a substantial volume of research have demonstrated that the influences of preschool education are mixed [30, pp.25-50, 32, 35], an aspect that led researchers to give more attention to the influence of preschool quality. In the current pedagogical conditions, educational integration at the preschool level is carried out on three levels: spatial (expresses the need to be present and involved in the educational activity), social (presupposes compliance with the condition to interact with others) and school (aimed at the relationship with group mates/ class).

Regarding the psychological paradigm, we highlight the specificities in the psychological development of children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) at the preschool age, detailing all these aspects for a comprehensive understanding, aiming to establish measures to counteract the negative effects caused by specific dysfunctions. We identify a series of specific traits in children with autism, such as: **restricted and stereotyped interests, behavioural problems, difficulties in social interaction, repetitive behaviour, lack of eye contact, communication challenges, and highly significant behaviours that are classified in various ways: aggressive, disruptive, inappropriate, in the form of challenges, or even problematic** [18].

The analysis of the peculiarities of the autistic child at preschool age gives us the general picture on the basis of which the intervention plan is built, through which psychological and pedagogical actions are taken to reduce functional deficits and open the way to normalization.

Chapter 2. *The Conceptual and Methodological Framework of Integrating Children with Autism into the Preschool Educational Environment* addresses the issue of educational integration in the current context, with a focus on the preschool age group at the conceptual and methodological level, highlighting the interdependent relationships between the specific processes of the integrative phenomenon. The context of integrating children with autism into the preschool environment confers key importance to preschool education, highlighting its close relationship with early childhood education. Additionally, it relates to the idea that awareness or diagnosis of these dysfunctions occurs at this stage of development.

An important aspect to consider in the early intervention for children with autism is the quality of teacher training and their ability to adapt to the requirements, needs, and specific psycho-individual characteristics for successful integration. The professional development of teachers to ensure high standards of specialized services focuses on several areas and involves specific actions for a comprehensive and complete approach as follows: **identifying and diagnosing children with autism, enhancing activities with the family, increasing interactions within the intervention team, selecting individualized methods for early intervention for children with autism, and analysing specific functional competencies.**

The analysis of specialized literature in the field of integrated education and the functioning mechanisms at the level of mainstream educational units has led us to formulate a definition according to which *the educational integration of children with autism represents a complex activity manifested through specific actions aimed at improving teaching methods, aligning with the developmental level and educational needs of the learner to shape behaviours and attitudes, as well as develop skills and capacities necessary for social adaptation.*

The conceptualization of the phenomenon of integration of children with autism, in general, and in the preschool environment, in particular, is based on a deep analysis of the psychological and pedagogical components for a complete and complex approach and on synthesizing the essential aspects that influence its optimization and determine educational success (figure 2.1).

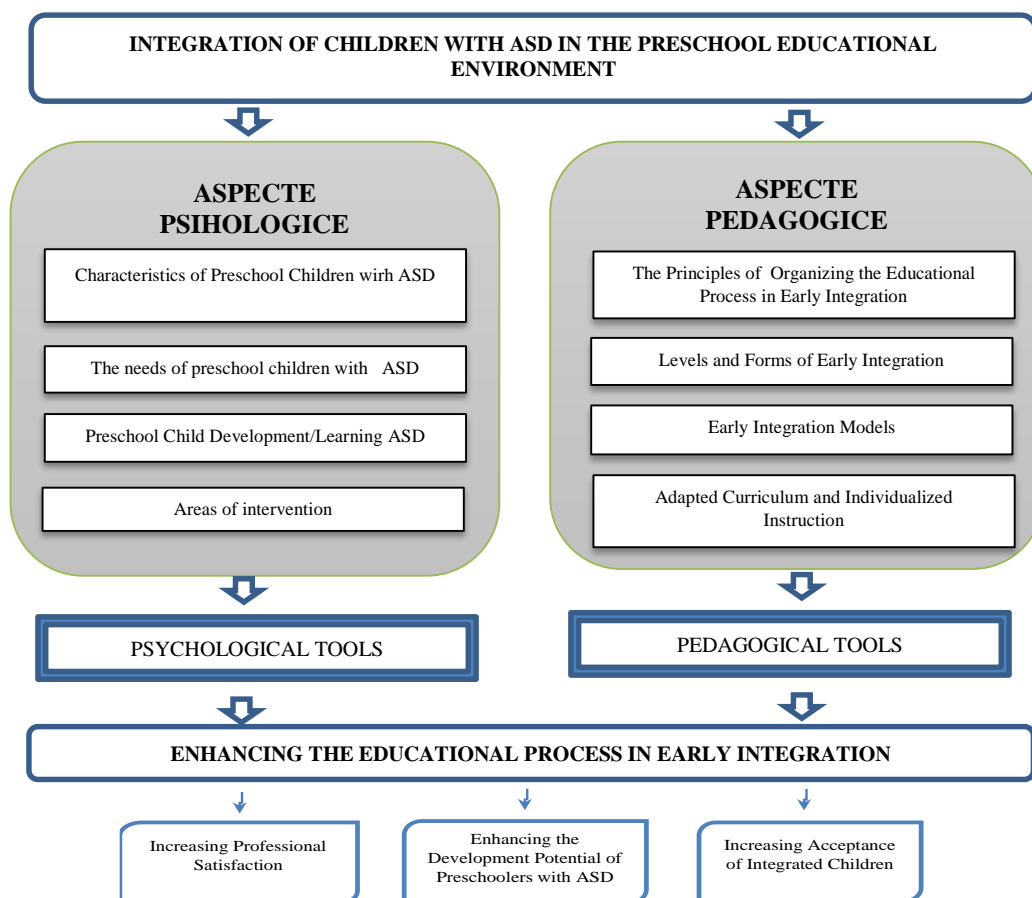


Fig.2.1. The conceptualization of integrated education in the preschool educational environment

The synthesis of the important aspects in the integration of children with autism in the educational process is carried out in the figure above and includes:

- **Psychological aspects:** the needs of children with ASD, integration levels, integration indicators;
- **Pedagogical aspects:** the basic principles of integrated education, the models and forms of integrated education, the application of adapted curriculum and individualized training.

The development of **psychological milestones** starts from knowing the profile of the child with ASD and the ways of manifestation at preschool age. From the same mentioned category, the needs of children with ASD are highlighted, which are based on the discovery and respect of individuality, particularities through the analysis of interests, passions, preferences, the manifestation of affection and the feeling that they are supported in their development by intensifying interactions and creating a space of security and emotional intimacy. The conceptualization of the integration process of children with autism spectrum disorders in preschool education also requires an analysis of **the pedagogical aspects** that contribute to the efficiency of this complex process. In the current conditions, the values of the education of children with special needs have evolved according to the changes produced by public policies.

Based on the specific aspects of integrated education, the need to develop an innovative curriculum adapted to the specific needs of preschoolers with ASD is configured. The approach to **the individualization** of the educational process involves adapting the school curriculum to the needs of preschoolers and not the other way around. In the current context, the school supports general or individualized curricular opportunities, ensuring access to a quality education. **Adapting the school curriculum** to the particularities of preschoolers with ASD can be achieved by highlighting the specific skills and needs of children with learning potential, on the one hand, and children with disabilities, on the other hand, subscribed to the same educational goals and fulfilled through adapted programs and offering of different educational opportunities.

On the basis of the mentioned aspects, the psycho-pedagogical model for the efficiency of the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment was developed based on the analysis of the theories and theoretical aspects presented in the specialized literature and by reference to the conceptualization of the component elements (figure 2.2).

The development of **the psycho-pedagogical model** aimed at enhancing the overall level of professional competence among preschool teachers and, consequently, improving the integration process of children with ASD. The model reflects the causal relationship among the actors involved in the integrative educational endeavor: teachers, children with ASD, and typically developing children, and it develops an action plan for each of them.

The structure itself consists of two components:

- **Theoretical component:** This is based on elements from the sphere of specific professional competencies of preschool teachers, grounded in theories, models, and principles well-established in the specialized literature. This includes: explanatory theories and models of approaching autism pathology and principles of instruction.

- Applied component:** This is synthesized into a Training Intervention Program, aimed at providing informational support for an appropriate approach to autism spectrum disorders and the application of specific educational strategies in practice, with examples for illustration.

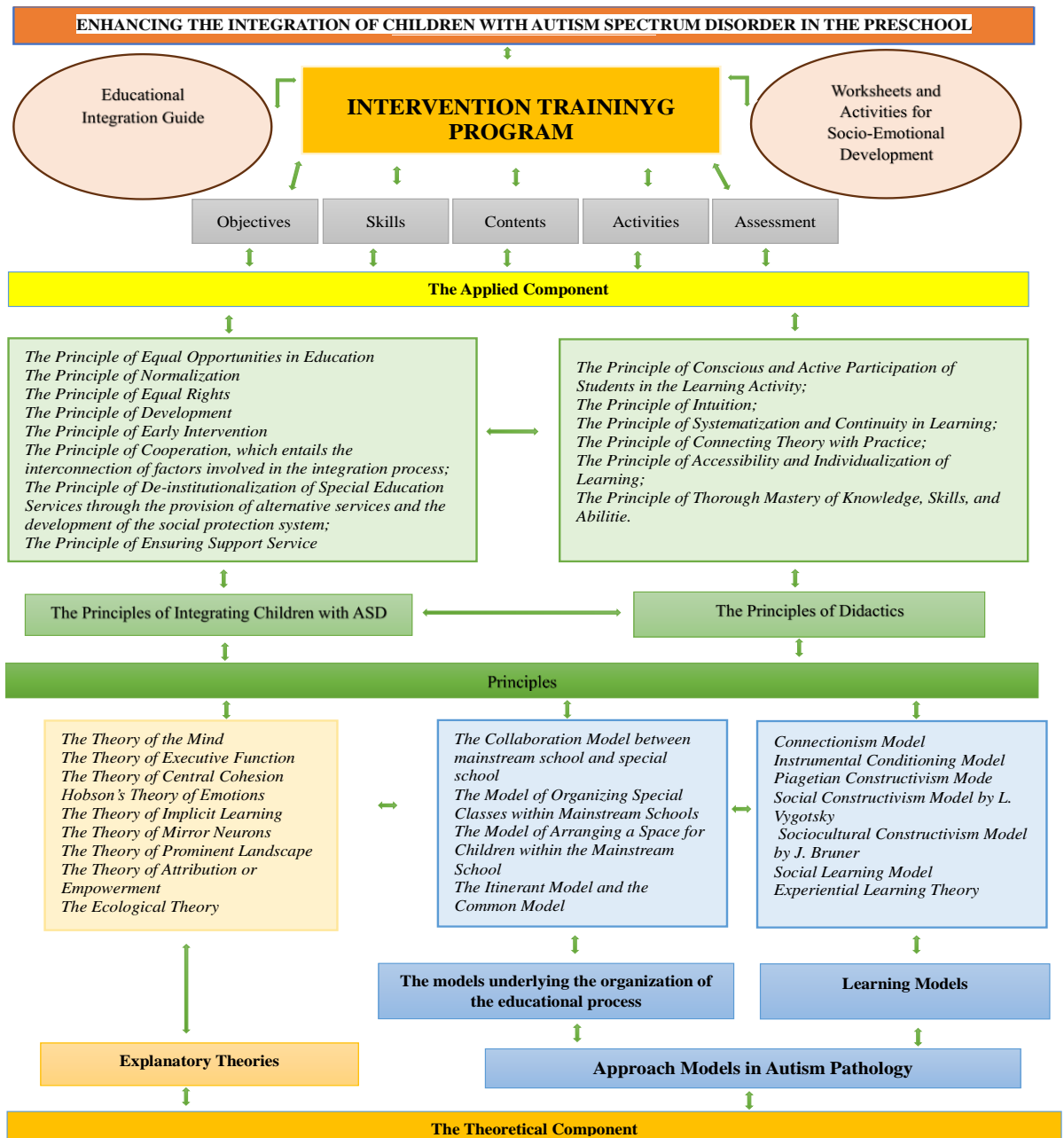


Fig.2.2. The Psychopedagogical Model for Enhancing the Integration of Children with ASD in the Preschool Educational Environment

The general objectives pursued in *the Training Intervention Program* were the following:

- developing the theoretical dimension of the training program based on the principles of integrating children with ASD, the theories and approach models specific to the pathology,

2. designing the application dimension by establishing the learning contents, the learning activities embodied in worksheets and activities aimed at the socio-emotional development of preschoolers with ASD.

The applied component is based on the goals of early education adapted to the characteristics of autism spectrum disorders, directing the learning process towards the harmonious development of the personality by addressing the needs of children with ASD, towards the development of social skills fostered by interactions with other children and adults in the immediate environment, towards personal autonomy development, and towards the assimilation of knowledge and abilities. The applied component is synthesized in the Educational Integration Guide, structured with general information about the pathology of autism spectrum disorders based on specific symptomatology, early diagnosis considerations based on manifestations in preschool-aged children, and from the perspective of implications for skill development based on learning difficulties.

The theoretical dimension focuses on the teachers and their activity, with educational efforts directed towards understanding the specific aspects of the disability. The educator's activity in the integrated educational environment involves managerial qualities reflected in the ability to plan and organize educational activities, respect for the uniqueness and individuality of preschoolers, encouragement and acceptance of diversity, openness to positive changes, elimination of personal labels, encouragement of positive behaviors, and promotion of self-respect in personal development.

The assimilation of informational support by teachers will be carried out through seminars and workshops organized systematically according to a well-established program in agreement with its beneficiaries. The target group consists of educators teaching in preschool education and aims at professional development, in order to approach and carry out the integration process of children with autism spectrum disorders and achieve maximum efficiency. The organization of training sessions allows for a deepening of information and reflection on the proposed content for discussion.

The applied component, embodied in worksheets and socio-emotional development activities, involves the methodological approach to the issue of integrating children with autism spectrum disorders by offering concrete examples of learning situations adapted to the specifics and particularities of the deficiency.

Chapter 3. ***The Experimental Approach to Enhancing the Integration of Children with Autism in the Preschool Educational Environment*** presents the design of the psycho-pedagogical experiment and details the purpose of the experiment, research objectives, the hypothesis underlying the research, and the structure of the experiment in representative stages. The working tools are selected in accordance with the research purpose and target three categories of subjects: teachers, preschoolers with ASD, and integrating preschoolers.

The premise is that, given that teachers lack the necessary competencies, tools, and pedagogical methods for working with preschoolers with autism but are willing to improve, it can result in increased development levels of children with ASD and increased acceptance of them within the integrated group. The emphasis should be on high-quality professional development for teachers. However, at the same time, the relationships within the integrated group and the progress of the child with ASD within this group are also analysed.

The experimental research was conducted in two preschool units in Galați: Kindergarten No.9 with Extended Program and Kindergarten No. 40 with Normal Program. In selecting the research samples, we chose a method commonly used in educational research practice, namely the class-sample method. The working method used involved working with preschool groups considered pre-existing samples for the research, formed based on age criteria and other random factors.

We note that the experimental samples from the Ladybugs Group (Kindergarten No. 40 with Normal Program) have the following composition: one teacher, 24 preschoolers, including 4 with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), and 20 integrators. The Smurfs Group (Kindergarten No. 9 with Extended Program) with two teachers has a total of 21 preschoolers, including 2 with ASD and 19 integrators, representing the experimental group. The control group includes the Bees Group (Kindergarten No. 40 with Normal Program) with one teacher and 21 enrolled children, including 3 with ASD and 18 integrator children, and the Warriors Group (Kindergarten No. 9 with Extended Program) with two teachers and 20 children, including 3 with ASD and 17 integrator children. In addition to the teachers conducting activities in the groups included in the sample, the other 14 teachers from the two school units were also surveyed. Furthermore, the children with ASD included in the sample were selected based on medical diagnosis.

The experimental design includes three stages distributed as follows:

1. The pre-experimental stage (September 17, 2018 – October 12, 2018) – diagnosing the professional training needs of teachers in the work with preschoolers with ASD, the level of development of children with ASD from the experimental samples as well as identifying the number of choices and rejections at the level of children integrators.

2. Experimental Stage (October 15, 2018 – April 19, 2019) – implementation of the Training Program for enhancing the integrated educational process in preschool settings, through organizing training sessions for teachers and practical application of knowledge using open educational resources made available through the website (www.autismgalati.ro), in close coherence with the current curriculum content provided for early education.

3. The post-experimental stage (May 2019 – July 2020) – analysis, measurement and comparison of research results in order to highlight the effects produced.

The instruments that formed the basis of the experimental approach were tailored to the experimental samples and aimed at specific diagnostic and interrelationship aspects. Their purpose was to determine the connections between the subjects involved in enhancing the integrated

educational process in the preschool environment. In this regard, the following tools were used: the questionnaire for evaluating the level of training of teaching staff for the integration of children with ASD and the feedback questionnaire, applied to teaching staff; the Portage test, applied to preschoolers with ASD and the sociometric questionnaire regarding the level of interest in the social interaction of typical preschoolers compared to those with ASD - the pretest stage and the sociometric questionnaire regarding the level of interest in the social interaction of typical preschoolers compared to those with ASD - the stage posttest, applied to integrative preschoolers.

The application of the research tools in **the pre-experimental stage** aimed at specific objectives according to the experimental samples and sought to obtain the initial results necessary for the actual experiment, providing the coordinates and directions of action in this regard. The questionnaire applied to teaching staff sought to identify the level of professional training skills useful in approaching the educational process, as well as the existing perceptions and barriers at the attitudinal, actional and behavioural level regarding the phenomenon of integrating children with ASD. The application of the Portage test to children with ASD provided us with relevant information regarding the level of the general development coefficient by relating the mental age to the chronological age, highlighting the deficient areas that will be acted upon in the formative stage. In the case of integrative children, the use of the sociometric questionnaire was aimed at identifying the relationships within the collective and the dynamics by analysing the manifestations of acceptance/ rejection towards integrated atypical children.

The experimental stage started with the results obtained in the initial stage and aimed to develop and implement the Training Program for enhancing the integrated educational process within the preschool educational environment for the experimental sample structured into two applicative components: firstly, addressing the teaching staff by providing informational support regarding general aspects about autism and addressing significant aspects in teaching activities, and secondly, consisting of the design and implementation of a set of activities for cognitive, socio-emotional, knowledge, self-awareness development with the purpose of optimizing learning and improving deficient aspects of children with ASD in direct interaction with integrative children.

The post-experimental stage followed the interpretation of the results obtained through a comparative analysis between the experimental and control groups to highlight the effects of the application of the psycho-pedagogical model and establish the relevance of the differences found. The same research tools were applied to all the studied populations, as in the post-experimental stage, the difference being that, in the case of teachers from the control group, there will be no questionnaire applied in the post-experimental stage and, in the case of integrative children, the questionnaire items will be changed.

In concrete terms, the experimental design was carried out through a series of **steps** or stages aimed at consistently improving the integration activities of preschool children with Autism

Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the educational environment. These steps were organized and rigorously planned as follows:

1. Initial diagnosis of significant aspects of the preschool educational environment.
2. Implementation of the Training Program for Enhancing the Integration of Children with ASD in the preschool educational environment, through organizing professional training sessions for participating teachers and applying the acquired knowledge in practice by accessing educational websites and open educational resources.
3. Measurement of the impact resulting from the implementation of the psychopedagogical model and formulation of conclusions.

The stage of diagnosing relevant elements of the preschool educational environment and assessing their level began with the administration of a questionnaire to teachers. This questionnaire aimed to identify intellectual and attitudinal perceptions regarding the integration of preschoolers with autism. It also aimed to determine the level of knowledge possessed by teachers relative to the established sample, identify obstacles and needs of teachers necessary for the successful integration of children with autism, and highlight their opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the integration process for children.

The questionnaire includes 29 questions and summarizes all the essential aspects regarding the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment. The first questions (I1–I4) aim at the opinion of the responding teaching staff on the educational policies promoted by the current education system regarding integrated education. The recording of respondents' answers revealed a high level of distrust in the ability of the current educational system to achieve the transition towards a real integrated education with positive effects on the evolution of children with ASD.

Analyzing the recorded responses reveals a low level of knowledge among teachers regarding inclusive education policies. Additionally, there is a small percentage of familiarity among teachers with strategies and teaching methodologies for working with preschoolers diagnosed with ASD, with only one teacher possessing the necessary information.

A significant aspect in the education and integration of children with ASD in preschool education requires an appropriate attitude shown by the teachers involved. In this sense, the respondents' opinion was analysed regarding the access to education of all categories of children: all children, physically and mentally healthy children, institutionalized children and children from vulnerable families.

According to the recorded responses, it can be concluded that the respondents demonstrate a favourable, open attitude of acceptance towards children with ASD alongside typically developing children. This aspect represents an educational advantage regarding their integration and is an essential condition for initiating responsible and tolerant teaching practices.

Regarding the established contact with children with ASD throughout their professional experience, it was found that two respondents had integrated preschoolers with this condition. Another aspect of the questionnaire concerns the attitude exhibited by teachers in their interactions with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ranging from acceptance, support, and tolerance to indifference, disgust, or displeasure. It was observed that the respondents generally adopt an open attitude of support towards children with ASD, which could be interpreted as acceptance due to a lack of alternatives.

The analysis of the opinions of the participating teachers regarding the perception of successfully integrating children with ASD into the preschool educational environment revealed that this integration is not achieved due to factors affecting the functionality of the educational and adaptive processes of these special children. The questionnaire aims to identify the level of utilization of integration techniques for children with ASD during the integration process. The inadequate application of these techniques is interrelated with the quality of professional training in working with special children. In this regard, it was found that the experimental sample lacks these competencies or possesses them to a very limited extent because the initial training was aimed at educating children with normal physical and mental development, without customization for special education.

The aspects presented lead us to conclude that: although teachers currently work with such children, they tend to agree with the idea of special education and segregationist forms; the level of practical knowledge of integrated education influences how teachers act and perceive it. The lack of professional training leads to an inability to approach the educational process from the perspective of special education, inducing feelings/ attitudes of rejection and resistance.

The application of the questionnaire intended for teaching staff highlighted the inability of the current educational system to manage the problem of effective integration of children with ASD, registering a series of dysfunctions. The experimental approach is based on clarifying them and removing the factors that disrupt the integrative process and increasing the degree of effective approach to the activity with children with ASD.

Diagnosticating the initial significant aspects of the preschool educational environment also targeted the sample of children with ASD. The pre-test stage aimed to assess the abilities of the research participants in order to gather information about their level of development. In this regard, the Portage Test was administered. The test was conducted individually, in the school's psycho-pedagogical assistance office, without disruptive stimuli, and the administration time varied from case to case, depending on each child's abilities. The results highlighted major difficulties in the two main areas: socialization and language, and the score close to the chronological age was in the motor skills area. The deficiencies in the social sphere affect the activities within the preschool group, with relationships and interactions among members being an important factor that requires specialized psycho-pedagogical intervention aimed at reducing these gaps and promoting educational integration.

The analysis of the scores obtained in terms of the difference between chronological age and mental age highlights that the subject with the highest degree of impairment is V.N.N from the Bees group, with a delay of 25 months, while at the opposite end is D.B. from the Smurfs group with a delay of 11 months. The results obtained from the application of this instrument serve as a reference point in the development and implementation of the psycho-pedagogical model within the context of integrating children with autism into the preschool educational environment.

Another aspect targeted and initially evaluated was the sample children's perception of integrating preschoolers with ASD within the group. In this regard, a sociometric questionnaire was developed and applied to analyze the types of interpersonal relationships from the perspective of acceptance/rejection of children with disabilities within the group. The sociometric test questions were as follows: *"If you were to invite three classmates to your house to play, who would you invite? Why?"* and *"Name three classmates you wouldn't take to your house to play! Why?"*

The results were recorded on the two representative samples - the experimental group and the control group. In the case of the experimental group, it was found that there is just one choice for C.D.A. and high scores are recorded in the sphere of rejections.

The conclusions drawn from the application of the sociometric test highlighted the social relationships within the preschool group, expressing a tendency of non-acceptance towards children with ASD. Among the causes or arguments cited were the following: their egocentric behavior, isolation from the group, violent behavior when their needs are not met, excessive anxiety, manifestation of stereotypes affecting group harmony, lack of collaboration with the teacher and other classmates, defective language leading to misunderstanding of transmitted messages.

Throughout the administration of the sociometric test, several indicators from the socio-emotional sphere and the degree of their manifestation were established. The synthesis of the observed behaviors was compiled in the table below (Table 3.1):

Table 3.1. A grid for observing socio-emotional indicators in the initial stage for preschoolers from the experimental samples

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Socio-emotional manifestations</i>	<i>Number of manifested behaviours</i>	
		<i>Experimental lot</i>	<i>Control lot</i>
I1	Recognition of basic emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, anger)	14	12
I2	Understanding the causes of basic emotions	7	6
I3	Understanding that events cause emotions	7	8
I4	Using emotional self-regulation strategies	14	12
I5	Manifestation of anxious states in various situations	5	7
I6	Manifestation of anger	3	4
I7	Adaptability to the kindergarten environment	15	16

The initial diagnosis provided relevant information that will constitute important sources in the development and implementation of the psycho-pedagogical model for the efficiency of the integrated educational process in preschool education for the experimental sample.

The specificity of the psycho-pedagogical experiment derives from the complexity of the theme and the psychological and pedagogical milestones, as well as its applicability in educational practice within integrated preschool education.

The psycho-pedagogical model for enhancing the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment is structured into components: *theoretical component* – based on elements from the sphere of specific professional competencies of preschool educators, grounded in theories, models, and principles established in the specialized literature; *applied component*, materialized in a Formative Intervention Program.

The applied component encompasses two relevant themes: characteristics of autism spectrum disorders and educational-behavioral interventions in the process of integrating preschoolers with ASD. This was realized through the organization of professional development sessions for educators from the experimental samples.

A training session consists of 3 hours within the time interval requested by the participants in the experiment, depending on their availability. The proposed thematic content serves as the informational support that ensures the practical-applicative component regarding aspects of educational integration in the preschool environment, and the proposed content provides the minimum specialized knowledge required for addressing this complex process.

The practical applicability of the theoretical notions assimilated regarding the integration of preschoolers with ASD was realized through accessing the educational website entitled: www.autismgalati.ro. The mentioned online platform was created out of the necessity to support children with autism spectrum disorders, especially considering the limited availability of specialized teaching resources. Therefore, the educational website serves as a readily accessible educational resource for anyone and was established with the aim of providing children with ASD with concrete examples of activities designed according to the preschool curriculum content.

The training of the professional skills of the teaching staff participating in the experiment necessary for the specialized approach to the phenomenon of the effective integration of children with ASD - we are talking about a real integration and not a formal one - is completed by the practical application of the open educational resources offered through the online site line constituting the premises for a complete and complex approach ensuring teaching success. The impact produced by the implementation of the psycho-pedagogical model of efficiency was measured with the help of the tools used in the pretest stage by reapplying them, analysing the data obtained and formulating conclusions on the participating experimental samples.

The measurement of the effects produced by the implementation of the educational model to enhance the integration of children with autism by the teaching staff was conducted using a questionnaire that recorded their opinions. Based on the results obtained from the implementation of the Feedback Questionnaire addressed to the teaching staff in the post-experimental stage, a comparative analysis was carried out, focusing on significant aspects relevant to the research in the pedagogical dimension (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2. Comparative analysis of results - teaching staff

Nr. crt.	The Followed Indicators	The Initial Stage	The Final Stage
1.	The quality of the educational activities	The classroom activity was deficient, utilizing teaching methods appropriate for the normal developmental level without adapting them to the special requirements of preschoolers with ASD.	The activity significantly improved through an integrative approach with a focus on adapting teaching methods to the needs of preschoolers with ASD.
2.	Utilization of appropriate educational resources	Utilizing general educational resources provided in the Preschool Education Programs	Applying the educational resources provided by the model for enhancing the integration of children with autism: educational integration guide, worksheets, socio-emotional development activities.
3.	Level of specialized knowledge	The professional training of the teaching staff was specific to the preschool educational environment for children with typical development.	The professional training of the teaching staff improved with specialized elements specific to the pathology of autism spectrum disorders.
4.	Perception regarding the integration of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)	The teaching staff believed that not all children with autism could be integrated into the preschool environment considering the severity of the diagnosis.	The teaching staff demonstrate flexibility regarding the integration of children with autism regardless of diagnosis.
5.	Attitude towards children with ASD	The teaching staff exhibit a hesitant attitude caused by an inability to properly manage the situation of children with autism	The teaching staff demonstrate a tolerant attitude, accepting children with autism in the preschool environment.
6.	Collaboration with specialists in the field	Lack of knowledge about the legal framework for requesting authorized support in the issue of children with autism.	Intensification of collaborative relationships with specialists in the field at the request of the teaching staff.

7.	Level of professional stress	They exhibited a high level of professional stress due to their inability to manage situations arising from the presence of children with autism in the group classroom.	Improving the level of professional stress through the enhancement of skills in working with children with autism.
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It was found that with the assimilation of theoretical specialized knowledge in the field of integrating children with ASD, the teaching staff are prepared to apply it in practice to facilitate this process. According to the participating teachers, the success rate of a preschooler with ASD increases with the implementation of the model, and it is proposed to extend its applicability to all preschool education units in Romania.

The analysis of the psychological development evolution of preschoolers with ASD who participated in the experimental approach was conducted by correlating the results obtained through the application of the Portage test in the two stages of the research: initial and final. Below, the scores obtained will be presented comparatively, and the conclusions reached and the impact produced on the subjects by participating in the experimental program will be highlighted (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3. The comparative analysis of the psychological development in the experimental group throughout the stages of research

Preschoolers Initials	Chronological Age	Development Areas						Mental Age	Development Coefficient
		Socialization	Language	Self-Service	Cognitive Skills	Motor Skills			
EXPERIMENTAL LOT- The Ladybugs Group									
Pre-experimental Stage									
C.D.A.	4 years/48 months	23 months	18 months	35 months	39 months	40 months	31	64,58	
D.I.C.	4years/48 months	26 months	27 months	35 months	34 months	42 months	32,8	68,33	
I.G.M.	4.5 years/53months	25 months	20 months	29 months	31 months	39 months	28,8	54,33	
P.M.A.	4.8years/56 months	29 months	36 months	31 months	34 months	28 months	31,6	56,42	
Preschoolers Initials	Chronological Age	Development Areas						Mental Age	Development Coefficient
		Socialization	Language	Self-Service	Cognitive Skills	Motor Skills			
Post-experimental Stage									
C.D.A.	4.3years/51months	25 months	20 months	36 months	40 months	45 months	33.2	65,09	
D.I.C.	4.3years/51months	27 months	30 months	38 months	35 months	48 months	35,6	69,80	
I.G.M.	4.8years/56months	25 months	20 months	29 months	31 months	39 months	28,8	54,33	
P.M.A.	5.1years/59months	32 months	39 months	32 months	36 months	30 months	33,8	57,28	
Preschoolers Initials	Chronological Age	Development Areas						Mental Age	Development Coefficient
		Socialization	Language	Self-Service	Cognitive Skills	Motor Skills			
EXPERIMENTAL LOT – The Smurfs Group									
Pre-experimental Stage									
D. F.	4.6years/54 months	32 months	18 months	34 months	37 months	39 months	42	77,7	
D. B.	4.3years/51 months	38 months	19 months	38 months	37 months	29 months	40,2	78,82	
Preschoolers Initials	Chronological Age	Development Areas						Mental Age	Development Coefficient
		Socialization	Language	Self-service	Cognitive Skills	Motor Skills			
Post-experimental Stage									
D. F.	4.9years/57 months	36 months	31 months	34 months	39 months	42 months	44.4	77,89	
D. B.	4.6years/59 months	33 months	31 months	43 months	39 months	37 months	44,6	75,59	

In general terms, the conclusion that emerges is that the participation of children with ASD in the program aimed at enhancing integration into the preschool environment had positive results in terms of psychological development and contributed to the increase in the developmental coefficient by directly relating it to chronological and mental age. The general conclusion drawn from the analysis of the values obtained by the experimental and control groups in the two stages of the research is that significant differences are observed in terms of the developmental coefficient related to chronological age, which reflects the mental age of the subjects. The involvement of the experimental group in the rigorously organized and implemented psycho-pedagogical approach resulted in the intensification of cohesion relationships within the group and, consequently, facilitated the integration of children with ASD.

The sociometric test was reapplied in the final stage, with different questions, to determine the changes produced from the perspective of interactions with children with ASD, measured in terms of choices/rejections. The summary of the results is presented in Table 3.4, which synthesizes the number of choices and rejections from the two experimental stages.

Table 3.4. Summarizing the results of the sociometric test from the initial and final stages

EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE	PRESCHOOLERS WITH ASD INITIALS	GROUP	EXPERIMENTAL STAGE	CHOICES	REJECTIONS
Experimental Lot	C.D.A.	The Ladybugs Group	Pre-experimental	1	4
	C.D.A.	The Ladybugs Group	Post-experimental	2	0
Experimental Lot	D.I.C	The Ladybugs Group	Pre-experimental	0	6
	D.I.C	The Ladybugs Group	Post-experimental	0	2
Experimental Lot	I.G.M.	The Ladybugs Group	Pre-experimental	0	5
	I.G.M.	The Ladybugs Group	Post-experimental	0	3
Experimental Lot	P.M.A.	The Ladybugs Group	Pre-experimental	0	8
	P.M.A.	The Ladybugs Group	Post-experimental	0	2
Experimental Lot	D.F.	The Smurfs Group	Pre-experimental	0	9
	D.F.	The Smurfs Group	Post-experimental	0	3
Experimental Lot	D.B.	The Smurfs Group	Pre-experimental	0	6
	D.B.	The Smurfs Group	Post-experimental	0	2
Control Lot	A.S.	The Bees Group	Pre-experimental	0	6
	A.S.	The Bees Group	Post-experimental	0	8
Control Lot	V.N.N.	The Bees Group	Pre-experimental	0	13
	V.N.N.	The Bees Group	Post-experimental	0	15
Control Lot	M.N.	The Bees Group	Pre-experimental	0	4
	M.N.	The Bees Group	Post-experimental	0	6
Control Lot	T.P.D.	The Little Warriors Group	Pre-experimental	0	6
	T.P.D.	The Little Warriors Group	Post-experimental	0	9
Control Lot	T.I.	The Little Warriors Group	Pre-experimental	0	9
	T.I.	The Little Warriors Group	Post-experimental	0	10
Control Lot	M.P.	The Little Warriors Group	Pre-experimental	0	3
	M.P.	The Little Warriors Group	Post-experimental	0	3

Analyzing the frequency of choices and rejections, it is observed that in the case of the experimental group, the number of rejections by integrating preschoolers towards children with ASD decreased in the post-experimental stage, indicating a tendency of acceptance through an increased level of tolerance. In the case of the control group, the results are similar to those from the pre-experimental stage, with an increase in the number of rejections within the group.

The general conclusions at the end of the application of the experimental approach highlight major changes in the functioning of the integration process of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment and direct us towards the implementation of the psycho-pedagogical model to make it more efficient.

The general **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS** highlighted and synthesized the main scientific results of the research, which were presented in correlation with the predetermined goals and objectives. It was found that in the educational practice, within an integrative context at the preschool level, there are two educational paradigms: the pedagogical paradigm and the psychological paradigm, around which the entire approach to individualized learning for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is structured. Elaborating on the essential elements, we emphasize that, from a pedagogical perspective, reference is made to the preschool curriculum, the efficient organization of the integrated educational process, and the professional training of the teaching staff. From a psychological perspective, the focus is on the cognitive, emotional, and social development of preschoolers with special needs. Thus, we conclude that:

1. The Social Dimension is based on the relationships and interactions that children establish within the family environment, the preschool environment, and with community members. It significantly influences success in life. The emotional dimension focuses on managing one's own emotions in concrete situations by developing appropriate responses in various contexts.
2. Development of Socio-Emotional Skills can be achieved through educational initiatives centered on intensifying group interactions, accepting and respecting diversity, and forming prosocial behaviors through which children recognize and express emotions.
3. Interdependence of the Two Dimensions: The social and emotional dimensions are interdependent, complementing and influencing each other in the following ways: social interactions favor the development of a child's self-confidence and, implicitly, the development of self-control.
4. Actions Necessary for the Optimal Integration of Preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorders are carried out on four levels: the legislative level, the inter-institutional level, the level of educational institutions, and the preschool group level.

Reporting the research results to the established **goals and objectives** led us to conclude the following aspects:

- Establishing the Conceptual and Methodological Framework: the integration of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) into the preschool educational environment involved analyzing the psychological mechanisms necessary for understanding the particularities of children with ASD and the pedagogical mechanisms underlying the planning and organization of the learning process in accordance with their needs.
- Identifying Psychopedagogical Particularities: the particularities of children with ASD were identified through direct observation of their natural behavior within the preschool group from social, emotional, and behavioural perspectives, and by analyzing their cognitive development levels using established measurement tools from the literature.
- Developing and Implementing a Psychopedagogical Model: based on initial observations and results, the development and application of a psycho-pedagogical model aimed at enhancing the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment

were initiated. This model's structure included theoretical, practical, and methodological aspects for the coherent application of the knowledge acquired by the teaching staff involved in the research. It aimed at achieving the goals of integrative education for preschoolers with ASD and the integrating children, contributing to changing educational policy perspectives.

- Efficiency of the Psycho-pedagogical Model: the psycho-pedagogical model elaborated and implemented proved to be efficient, as evidenced by the progress made compared to the initial results diagnosed in the pre-experimental stage. This led us to conclude that early intervention has positive effects and facilitates the integration process.

The **values** conveyed through the content of the paper are derived from innovative elements synthesized into a series of general conclusions presented as follows:

- 1) Conducting a Theoretical-Empirical Research: this research focused on exploring the preschool age, which is crucial in the subsequent development of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).
- 2) Determining Key Concepts: these concepts are essential in the context of integrating children with ASD into the preschool educational environment. They include integration, ASD particularities, and early intervention.
- 3) Analyzing Psychopedagogical Paradigms: this analysis covered theories, models, and educational practices related to the integration of children with ASD.
- 4) Redefining the Concept of Educational Integration: this redefinition focuses on the educational integration of children with ASD, ensuring a more inclusive and effective approach.
- 5) Configuring and Validating the Psycho-pedagogical Model: this model aims to enhance the integration of children with ASD into the preschool educational environment. Additionally, it includes the implementation of a formative intervention program.

The study presented in this paper opens new perspectives in the approach to the integration process of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) at the early education level, focusing on pedagogical and psychological paradigms. The results obtained from this research can be directed towards creating educational guides that support teachers in their classroom activities and provide examples of implementing the mandatory contents of the preschool curriculum. In this regard, we believe that the proposed socio-emotional activities and worksheets constitute both informational and practical support. These resources are scheduled throughout the entire school year and have the potential to be applied across all age stages within early education.

The results of the psycho-pedagogical experiment emphasize the functionality of the Psycho-pedagogical Model in order to enhance the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment. This functionality is achieved through the development of social, emotional, and behavioural aspects that complement and interconnect in a harmonious process, leading to the confirmation of the hypothesis and demonstrating the resolution of the scientific problem. The training and development of professional competencies among the involved teaching staff have led to changes in pedagogical practice, the elimination of stress caused by the challenges of integrating children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), and a new

innovative vision characterized by tolerance and acceptance of atypical preschoolers. The experimental impact was also obvious in the high level of group cohesion: there was an increase in the number of acceptances within the collective, eliminating manifestations of rejection by integrating children.

Based on the conclusions formulated and the results obtained, we formulate the following **recommendations:**

For managers of integrating institutions:

- Providing an assistant/ educator's aid for classes that included children with autism;
- Creating physical and material conditions adapted to the needs of children with ASD;
- Specifying the directions and measures provided in the operational plan for organizing the integrative process in optimal conditions;
- Taking steps to collaborate with specialists in the field to facilitate integration;
- Initiating and implementing educational programs for teachers and parents of children with ASD;
- Promoting a participative management by co-opting the teaching staff of the institution in adopting the solutions considered optimal adapted to the specifics and problems of the school.

For teachers:

- Demonstrating a tolerant attitude towards the child with special requirements and reorganizing the educational process in order to meet educational needs;
- The teaching staff represents the connecting element between the disabled child and the integrative children, and his/her position is reflected in the encouragement/ inhibition of collaboration intentions at the group level;
- Ensuring the quality of the environmental environment by adapting teaching materials to the specifics and needs of the child with ASD;
- Stimulating collaborative relationships, communication with families of preschoolers and stimulating parents' involvement in organized formal and informal activities;
- Intensifying the exchange of experience with other teaching staff from different work environments, by promoting collaborative relationships and mutual support;
- Continuous professional improvement by participating in seminars, conferences, workshops on the topic of integrating children with ASD.

For parents:

- Collaborating with a specialist and providing updates on any changes, regardless of their nature, to clarify them and plan any necessary interventions for remediation.
- Active involvement in the educational environment and the intensification of relations with teaching staff for constant information on the evolution and progress recorded;
- Promoting attitudes of empathy towards the parents of children with ASD, of understanding and support towards them;
- Intensification of communication with one's own child by offering opportunities to recount the events of the kindergarten, the daily routine;
- Participation in courses aimed at parenting education and counselling for parents.

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ADNOTARE

Lupușor Roxana-Monica, ”Paradigme psihopedagogice de integrare a copiilor cu autism în mediul educațional”, teză de doctor în științe ale educației, Chișinău, 2024

Volumul și structura tezei: Lucrarea cuprinde introducere, trei capitole, concluzii generale și recomandări, 270 surse bibliografice, 144 pagini text de bază, 9 anexe, 24 tabele și 16 figuri.

Publicații la tema tezei: rezultatele obținute sunt publicate în 13 lucrări științifice.

Cuvinte-cheie: mediu educațional preșcolar, cerințe educaționale speciale, tulburare din spectrul autist, cadre didactice, paradigmă psihopedagogică, integrare socio-educațională, instruire individualizată.

Domeniul de studiu: Teoria generală a educației.

Scopul cercetării a constat în identificarea și validarea paradigmei eficiente de integrare a copiilor cu TSA în mediul educațional preșcolar.

Obiectivele cercetării au fost: determinarea fundamentelor psihopedagogice privind integrarea copiilor cu TSA în mediul educațional preșcolar; stabilirea cadrului conceptual și metodologic al integrării copiilor cu TSA în mediul educațional preșcolar; evaluarea competențelor specifice cadrelor didactice din învățământul preșcolar în lucrul cu copiii cu TSA; identificarea particularităților psihopedagogice ale copiilor cu TSA integrați în mediul educațional preșcolar și investigarea intensității relațiilor interpersonale a preșcolarilor integratori față de copiii atipici integrați; elaborarea și validarea *Modelului psihopedagogic de eficientizare a integrării copiilor cu TSA în mediul educațional preșcolar*.

Noutatea și originalitatea științifică a tezei se axează pe: 1) realizarea unei cercetări teoretico-empirice axate pe explorarea vârstei preșcolare, importantă în evoluția ulterioară a copiilor cu TSA; 2) determinarea conceptelor de bază în contextul integrării copiilor cu TSA în mediul educațional preșcolar: integrare, particularități TSA și intervenție timpurie; 3) analiza paradigmelor psihopedagogice la nivelul teoriilor, modelelor și practicii educaționale; 4) redefinirea conceptului de integrare educațională a copiilor cu TSA; 5) configurarea și validarea *Modelului psihopedagogic de eficientizare a integrării copiilor cu TSA* și implementarea *Programului formativ de intervenție*.

Rezultatul obținut care a contribuit la soluționarea problemei științifice importante rezidă în conceptualizarea *Modelului psihopedagogic de eficientizare a integrării copiilor cu TSA*, determinând facilitarea integrării preșcolarilor cu TSA în mediul educațional preșcolar.

Semnificația teoretică a cercetării rezidă în: fundamentarea teoretică a paradigmelor psihopedagogice de abordare a educației copiilor cu CES, pe baza analizei și interpretării literaturii de specialitate; analiza comparativă a noțiunilor de integrare și incluziune educațională a copiilor cu nevoi speciale; identificarea particularităților specifice TSA și a manifestărilor în mediul educațional preșcolar; stabilirea cadrului de referință privind formarea competențelor profesionale în condițiile integrării la grupă a copiilor cu TSA; elaborarea modelului psihopedagogic de eficientizare a integrării copiilor cu TSA în mediul educațional preșcolar.

Valoarea aplicativă a cercetării: constă în aplicabilitatea *Modelului psihopedagogic de eficientizare a integrării copiilor cu TSA în mediul educațional preșcolar* realizat, la nivelul serviciilor de educație timpurie.

Implementarea rezultatelor științifice: s-a realizat în comunicările prezentate la diverse conferințe științifice naționale și internaționale, în varii publicații științifice ale autorului, precum și în activitățile didactice practice susținute în cadrul învățământului preșcolar, reprezentate de Grădinița cu Program Prelungit nr. 9 și Grădinița cu Program Normal Nr. 40 din Galați, România.

ANNOTATION

Lupușor Roxana-Monica, "Psycho-pedagogical paradigms of autistic children integration in the educational environment", PhD thesis in educational sciences, Chișinău, 2024

Structure of the thesis: introduction, three chapters, general conclusions and recommendations, 270 bibliographical sources, 144 pages of basic text, 9 annexes, 24 tables and 16 figures.

Publications on the topic of the thesis: the obtained results are published in 13 scientific papers.

Keywords: preschool educational environment, special educational needs, autism spectrum disorder, teachers, psycho-pedagogical paradigm, socio-educational integration, individualized instruction.

Field of study: General theory of education.

The research aimed to identify and validate an effective paradigm for integrating children with ASD into the preschool education environment.

Research objectives were: to determine the psycho-pedagogical foundations for the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment; to establish the conceptual and methodological framework for the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment; to assess the specific competencies of preschool teachers in working with children with ASD; identification of the psycho-pedagogical particularities of children with ASD integrated in the preschool educational environment and investigation of the intensity of interpersonal relationships of integrated preschoolers with atypical integrated children; elaboration and validation of the *Psycho-pedagogical model for streamlining the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment*.

The novelty and scientific originality of the thesis are focused on: 1) conducting theoretical-empirical research focused on exploring the preschool age, important in the further development of children with ASD; 2) determining the basic concepts in the context of integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment: integration, ASD particularities and early intervention; 3) analysis of psycho-pedagogical paradigms at the level of theories, models and educational practice; 4) redefinition of the concept of educational integration of children with ASD; 5) configuration and validation of the psycho-pedagogical integration model of children with ASD and implementation of the formative intervention program.

The obtained result that contributed to the solution of the important scientific problem lies in the conceptualization of the *Psycho-pedagogical model for streamlining the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment*, determining the facilitation of integration of preschoolers with ASD in the preschool educational environment.

The theoretical significance of the research lies in the theoretical foundation of the psycho-pedagogical paradigms of approaching the education of children with SEN, based on the analysis and interpretation of the literature; the comparative analysis of the notions of educational integration and inclusion of children with special needs; the identification of ASD's specific features and its manifestations in the preschool educational environment; the establishment of the reference framework for the formation of professional skills within the integration of children with ASD in the group; the elaboration of the *Psycho-pedagogical model for streamlining the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment*.

The applied value of the research: consists in the applicability of the *Psycho-pedagogical model for streamlining the integration of children with ASD in the preschool educational environment*.

Implementation of the scientific results: was realized in the communications presented at national and international scientific conferences, in scientific publications of the author, in the practical didactic activities delivered in the Extended-day Kindergarten No. 9 and the Normal schedule Kindergarten No. 40 in Galați, Romania.

АННОТАЦИЯ

Лупушор Роксана-Моника, «*Психо-педагогические парадигмы интеграции детей с аутизмом в образовательную среду*», диссертация на соискание ученой степени доктора педагогических наук, Кишинев, 2024 г.

Объем и структура работы: Работа включает введение, три главы, общие выводы и рекомендации, 270 библиографических источников, 144 страницы основного текста, 9 приложений, 24 таблицы и 16 рисунков.

Публикации по теме диссертации: полученные результаты опубликованы в 13 научных работах.

Ключевые слова: дошкольная образовательная среда, специальные образовательные потребности, расстройства аутистического спектра, педагогический коллектив, психолого-педагогическая парадигма, социально-образовательная интеграция, индивидуализированное обучение.

Область исследования: Общая теория образования.

Целью исследования было выявление и обоснование эффективной парадигмы интеграции детей с РАС в дошкольную образовательную среду.

Задачами исследования являлись: определение психолого-педагогических основ относительно интеграции детей с РАС в дошкольную образовательную среду; создание концептуальной и методической базы интеграции детей с РАС в дошкольную образовательную среду; оценка конкретных компетенций педагогов дошкольных учреждений в работе с детьми с РАС; выявление психолого-педагогических особенностей детей с РАС, интегрированных в дошкольную образовательную среду, и исследование интенсивности межличностных отношений интегрированных дошкольников по сравнению с интегрированными атипичными детьми; разработка и обоснование *Психолого-педагогической модели оптимизации интеграции детей с РАС* в дошкольную образовательную среду.

Научная новизна и оригинальность диссертации направлена на: 1) реализацию теоретико-эмпирического исследования, направленного на изучение дошкольного возраста, важного в дальнейшей эволюции детей с РАС; 2) определение основных понятий в контексте интеграции детей с РАС в дошкольную образовательную среду: интеграция, особенности РАС и раннее вмешательство; 3) анализ психолого-педагогических парадигм на уровне теории, модели и образовательной практики; 4) переосмысление концепции образовательной интеграции детей с РАС; 5) создание и валидирование *Психолого-педагогической модели оптимизации интеграции детей с РАС* и реализации *Программы интервенционного обучения*.

Полученный результат, способствовавший решению важных научных задач, заключается в концептуализации *Психолого-педагогической модели оптимизации интеграции детей с РАС*, определяющей облегчение интеграции дошкольников с РАС в дошкольную образовательную среду.

Теоретическая значимость исследования заключается в: теоретическом обосновании психолого-педагогических парадигм подхода к обучению детей с РАС, основанном на анализе и интерпретации специализированной литературы; сравнительном анализе понятий интеграции и образовательной инклюзии детей с особыми потребностями; установлении нормативной базы формирования профессиональных навыков в условиях групповой интеграции детей с РАС; разработке *Психолого-педагогической модели оптимизации интеграции детей с РАС* в дошкольную образовательную среду.

Прикладная ценность исследования: она заключается в применимости *Психолого-педагогической модели оптимизации интеграции детей с РАС* в дошкольную образовательную среду, на уровне услуг раннего образования.

Внедрение научных результатов: реализовано в сообщениях, представленных на различных республиканских и международных научных конференциях, в различных научных публикациях автора, а также в практической дидактической деятельности, поддерживаемой в дошкольном образовании, представленном Детским садом с группами продленного дня № 9 и Детским садом с обычной программой № 40 из Галац, Румыния.

LUPUȘOR ROXANA-MONICA

**PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL PARADIGMS FOR THE
INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN THE
EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

SPECIALTY: 531.01 – GENERAL THEORY OF EDUCATION

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