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Teachers' perception, knowledge and behaviour in inclusive education

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Abstract

Teachers' perception, knowledge and behaviour in inclusive practice represent a very important topic of today's world. All the communities try to develop inclusive educational systems in order to create an inclusive society. But, in spite of this, there are major differences between what teachers believe to know about inclusive education, what they really know and how they behave in the classroom. At international level (Avramidis, Campbell and Gilmore) we can discuss about teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, but also about good practice examples. At national level, there are also good practice examples such as those of Vrasmas and Ghergut.

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1. Introduction

The European community is a special one because it is trying to achieve a very important goal: social inclusion. This is a very challenging one because this means a change of social practices, social rules and, most important, a change of attitudes. Even if we have policy documents that regulate the elaboration, the organisation and the implementation of social inclusion rules, it is very difficult to try to understand this mechanism and to be a part of it.

The first step in order to achieve the goal of inclusion is to develop a positive attitude towards people who are different but equal in rights and obligations, no matter the social, economical or educational background. This can be made especially in an educational context, with the help of teachers and in a close relationship with families and local communities.

Inclusive education represents a very big challenge for the educational systems from all over Europe, no matter how long their tradition in education is. This is a process that implies not only the integration of children with disabilities in mainstream schools but also the curricula adjustment in order to satisfy the needs of every child, no matter the level of his psychological development, physical development, social background, ethnic background or family. More than that, it is necessary a change on organisational and managerial level of educational institutions, an extent of the role and the importance of school in order to accomplish all children's educational demands.

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In this new context, education has to transform diversity into a comprehension factor for national, European and international understanding: „*education has to take on the difficult task of turning diversity into a constructive contributory factor of mutual understanding between individuals and groups*” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 5). The European community has to understand the fact that even if we are different, we have to cooperate, to accept that, to respect others' values, principles, rights, traditions, to live with one another, to build strong relationships with members of other local communities. This can be done only by education and, especially, by inclusive education.

In 1990, Jomtien hosted a very important meeting: World Conference on Education for All and its conclusions were summarized in a policy document named *World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs*. This educational policy document underlines the importance of the main objective of Education for All: „*every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs*” (UNESCO, 1990, p. 3).

This principle was also developed in others educational policy documents such as: *The Salamanca statement and Framework for action on special needs education, Resolution of the Council and the Ministers for Education meeting within the Council of 31 May 1990 concerning integration of children and young people with disabilities into ordinary systems of education, Report Of The World Summit For Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995)*.

At the beginning of every inclusive way it is necessary to highlight two main aspects: the participation at the educational process of every child and the curriculum adjustment in order to accomplish the needs and demands of all children. Therefore, Booth said: „*inclusion involves two processes: increasing pupils' participation within the cultures and curricula of mainstream schools and decreasing exclusionary pressures. The latter process requires that schools alter their ethos and practices to ensure that all children are included as a right.*” (Booth, apud Allan, 2005, p. 14).

In a research of Center and Ward it is underlined that in spite of the fact that teachers agree with the principles of inclusive education, when they are asked if they want to work with children with special educational needs (SEN) their answer is focused on children with mild deficiencies (Center, Ward, 1987). A more positive attitude towards inclusive education could be the result of teachers' involvement in inclusive programmes as Avramidis and his colleagues proved in 2000: „*The results of our survey demonstrated clear differences in responses between teachers who had experience of varying degrees and years of including children with significant disabilities in their classroom and those with limited or no experience.*” (Avramidis, Bayliss, Burden, 2000, p. 206-207).

In order to achieve the inclusion objectives it is necessary to realize an educational reform and a sharing network which can provide good practice examples for all the teachers who work with children with special educational needs and want to develop an inclusive environment. As Florian and Rouse said, the most important step is „*to work simultaneously in two directions – from the bottom up in terms of the reform of the teacher education courses offered in the University, and from the top down through links with other colleagues who are also involved in the reform of teacher education.*” (Florian, Rouse, 2009, p. 600).

2. Purpose of the study

The main purpose of my study was to identify if there are differences between teachers' perception, knowledge and behaviour in inclusive practices in school. I tried to identify teachers' perception on the knowledge of several inclusive concepts, the effective knowledge of those concepts and what they are doing in the classroom to promote inclusive principles. I also want to find out what are the main difficulties that teachers encounter in implementing inclusive practices.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

There were 200 participants from 4 major counties of Romania (Bacau, Tolpita, Odorheiu Secuiesc and Piatra Neamt), primarily female ($n = 184$, 92%). Their age ranged from 20 to 59 years (mean = 42.79, SD = 8.71). Most of

them have graduated medium level educational studies (high-school with pedagogical profile – $n = 123$), but there are also participants with master degree ($n = 14$). The number of years in the work field varied from 2 to 40 years (mean = 23.66, SD = 9.09).

3.2. Methods and instruments

I used a self-administrated questionnaire which contained 7 items for personal data and 4 categories of items regarding knowledge of specific terminology (inclusive education, integrated education, children with special needs), the practice of inclusive education (projection, implementation and evaluation of educational activities). This questionnaire was administrated to all the participants. I also used several focus groups in order to identify the main difficulties in implementing inclusive education and teachers' possible solutions for preventing them. At these meetings participated a number of 40 subjects selected randomly from the lot of 200. The themes approached in these focus groups were: the main difficulties that are encountered in the process of implementation of inclusive practice principles, solutions in order to overcome these obstacles and the responsibility for action in this domain. The focus group was repeated five times in order to obtain true information about the inclusive practice at different levels of instruction.

4. Results

This study revealed the fact that there is a major confusion between inclusive education and integrated education. Teachers often believe that inclusive education is the same thing with integrated education, so the major beneficiaries of this type of education are children with special educational needs.

One of the questionnaire items was defining some concepts which are related with integrated education or with inclusive education such as: *special educational needs, integrated education, inclusive education, disability, handicap, mainstream school, special education and personalised intervention plan*. The analyse of the answers revealed the fact that are many teachers who don't know the correct meaning of the concepts related with this domain. Therefore, the results are the following: *special educational needs (82,4% - correct answers of the participants), integrated education (74,3% - correct answers), inclusive education (26,3% - correct answers), disability (67,6% - correct answers), handicap (97,3% - correct answers), mainstream school (92,3% - correct answers), special education (56,2% - correct answers) and personalised intervention plan (43,4% - correct answers)*.

In spite of their answers, the teachers think that they know well these concepts. They were asked to range on a five-point Likert-type scale the response that corresponded best to their beliefs (1 – strongly agree, 5 – strongly disagree) concerning their knowledge of the concepts. The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Teachers' beliefs regarding the knowledge of concepts

The concept	Knowing very well	Knowing well	Undecided	Knowing a little	Knowing very little
Special educational needs	17,4%	33,9%	28,1%	15,6%	5%
Integrated education	16,8%	45,6%	20,8%	10,4%	6,4%
Inclusive education	20,2%	31,1%	29,4%	12,6%	6,7%
Disability	24,8%	26,4%	20,7%	19%	9,1%
Handicap	33,1%	13,7%	17,7%	19,4%	16,1%
Special education	23,8%	20,5%	27%	16,4%	12,3%
Mainstream school	31,4%	21,5%	25,6%	11,6%	9,9%
Personalized intervention plan	18,5%	27,5%	27,4%	17,7%	8,9%

As it can be seen, there are some differences between what teachers think to know and what they actually know about integrated and inclusive education. For example, a percentage of 31,1% of the participants think they know

very well the concept of *inclusive education*, but in reality only 26,3% of the teachers gave the correct definition for this concept. The differences appear between teachers who have a bachelor degree and have studied in their initial training domains which involved principles of inclusive teaching.

Another objective of this study was the identification of inclusive practices approached by the teachers in their classrooms. Most of them declared that they are collaborating with the school counsellor (86,3% of the participants), some of them said that they use some individualised educational strategies (46,4%) and a part of the answers were focused on informal activities that implement the principles of inclusive education and they were quite impressive. For example, a teacher wrote: *„I help three children every day to go to school because their mother would leave her home for a couple of days, without someone to know where to find her”*.

The focus groups revealed the main difficulties encountered by teachers in implementing inclusive principles such as: insufficient initial or continuous training of teachers, the „parents’ wall”, the lack of time, the rejection of children with special educational needs by their colleagues, stereotypes and prejudice towards children with SEN. The most important solution found by the participants at this research is an efficient initial or continuous training of teachers in order to know, apply and implement inclusive educational practices in their classrooms. There were groups of teachers who considered that it is also important to establish and maintain a strong relationship with the children’s parents or with the local community for a better just inclusive community.

5. Discussions

The results of this research underlie the fact that it is a very long way towards achieve educational inclusive principles. If we want to have an inclusive community, we must change our attitude towards children with special educational needs and implement an instructional strategy which can determine the achievement of this goal.

The best way to do that is represented by the educational activity and especially by the role model that the teacher has in his relationship with his pupils. The teachers need a specialised training on disabilities and specific areas of disabilities such as visual impairment. This is also a conclusion presented by Lynch and his colleagues in an investigation of the work of 38 specialist itinerant teachers. They saw a major problem as follows: *„huge demand for SEN support is whether training specialist teachers focused on specific areas of disability such as visual impairment constitutes efficient use of resources”*. (Lynch et al., 2011, p. 485).

The professional qualification or the quality of continuous training programmes is very important in inclusive education as Ghergut showed in his research regarding teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive practices. The universities’ study programmes should have special disciplines concerning the adjustments of curriculum in order to optimize all children’s learning. But this requires some changes at institutional level, at systemic level and on policy development level: *„the optimum application of inclusive education in the Romanian educational system requires a series of changes in the operation and upgrading the system components according to the new standards emerging in many countries promoting and supporting an educational policy that focuses on inclusion and full valuation of the individual in the community/society.”* (Ghergut, 2010, p. 715).

The differences between what teachers think they know about inclusive education, what they really know and what they actually do in this area should pullout an alarm signal for the decision factors that can make a reform in order to increase teachers’ level of competence for inclusive practices. It is impossible to make inclusive education without knowing which is the meaning of this concept, which are the principles of this type of education, what is specific for it, what other practitioners did in this educational field.

The inclusive practice examples offered by the teachers who participated on this research revealed the necessity to build and maintain a strong relationship with the local community, especially with other teachers in order to share experiences, to develop new strategies for inclusive activities and build an inclusive society which can provide social inclusive activities for all his members. This is a conclusion also presented by Malinen, Savolainen and Xu in one research made in 2011 on teachers’ self-efficacy and attitudes towards inclusive education: *„an interesting finding is also that the most critical concern is neither the pedagogical approaches nor the ability to manage student behaviour but rather a sense of efficacy in collaborating with other teachers, professionals and parents.”* (Malinen, Savolainen and Xu, 2012, p. 531).

6. Conclusions

This research revealed the necessity of a better understanding and knowing of the inclusive concepts by the teachers, the necessity of showing good practice examples in order to motivate teachers to apply and promote inclusive principles. The education quality depends first of all on quality of the teachers who organise, implement and evaluate instructional activities. The declarative level is not enough for inclusive education. It is absolutely necessary to apply the principles of inclusive teaching, to develop new strategies which can help all children progress and to obtain performance in their learning activities. The optimisation of pupils' learning is a result of a differentiated teaching which can provide for each pupil the opportunity to valorise his full potential. The teacher's most important role is to identify the right strategy for each child and to try to adjust his curricular steps according to his level of development, needs, demands and interests for educational domain.

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