

TEACHERS' PERCEPTION AND KNOWLEDGE REGARDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Inclusive education represents an issue focused on different problems such as conceptual delimitations, attitudes towards children with special needs or children from different social and economical areas. Teachers' perception and knowledge regarding inclusive practice represent a very important topic of today's world. This study was designed to identify the major obstacles in implementing inclusive principles in mainstream schools and to analyze different aspects of teachers' attitude towards inclusive education. A total of 427 teachers completed a questionnaire which contained 8 categories of items regarding knowledge of specific terminology and prejudice towards children with special needs. At national level, there are major confusions regarding the difference between inclusive education and integrated education.*

Keywords: *inclusive education; teachers' attitude; special educational needs;*

1. Introduction

For a great period of time, *inclusion* was a concept related with the *special educational needs* one. Since the end of the 20th century priority has been given to building an educational context, in which all children could learn, all children have potential that should be valorised – an inclusive educational context. Social equality, cooperation, the concern for people and for their needs regarding the development, integration and innovation are few of the main characteristics of nowadays society. If you want to develop a positive attitude towards people who are different but equal in rights and obligations, no matter the social, economical or educational background, you have to make the first step in order to achieve the goal of inclusion.

European educational systems see this concept more related with educational integration but there are major differences between these two. Integration represents the challenge to adapt children with special educational needs to the standards of mainstream education and inclusion represents the challenge to adapt the educational standards and context to the children's needs and characteristics. To do so, 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 first main barrier in the practice of inclusive education is represented by the teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and its principles.

The majority of the studies in this area were based on the idea that teachers should have a positive attitude towards inclusive education but unfortunately, they didn't. There are several educational conditions which can influence this attitude: the degree of the children's difficulties, the nature of children's disabilities, teachers' experience with children with special educational needs, conviction in their own capabilities to implement inclusive activities or expectations towards the children no matter what are the differences between them, curricula and so on (Chhabra, Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). Some studies revealed that teachers who have an opened perception over the inclusion are more confident in their own abilities to implement the inclusive education (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, Scheer, 1999) but

there are many mainstream teachers who believe that children considered „different” are not their responsibility, idea which revealed the fact that there are many schools where the medical-pathological model still dominates the educational activity (Angelides, Stylianou, Gibbs, 2006). A large number of teachers believe that the successful implementation of the inclusive practices should be based on a review of the curriculum and of the teaching strategies used in classes with children with special educational needs (Ghergut, 2010).

2. Purpose of the study

The main purposes of the study were to identify if there are differences between teachers' perception and knowledge regarding inclusive practices in school and to see which are the major obstacles in implementing inclusive practices in mainstream schools.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

There were 427 participants from 5 major counties of Romania (Bacau, Brasov, Toplita, Odorheiu Secuiesc and Piatra Neamt), primarily female ($n = 425$, 99.5%). Their age ranged from 20 to 59 years (mean = 43.84). Most of them have graduated medium level educational studies (high-school with pedagogical profile – $n = 313$), but there are also participants with master degree ($n = 114$). The number of years in the work field varied from 2 to 41 years (mean = 23.88).

3.2. Instrument

The study involved a self-administrated questionnaire which contains items for demographic data and items regarding inclusive education. The items related to inclusive education were divided in 8 categories and they provided information regarding the knowledge of specific terminology (inclusive education, integrated education, children with special educational needs) and prejudice towards children with special needs (for example „*Children with Down syndrome cannot be integrated in the community*” or „*Children with special educational needs should learn in special schools*”). The internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured by Cronbach' alpha coefficient which showed a good internal consistency of the entire scale ($\alpha = .710$).

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 items was asking the participants to define some concepts such as: *special educational needs*, *integrated education*, *inclusive education*, *disability*, *handicap* and *special education*. The answers revealed the fact that there 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* (87,3% - correct answers of the participants), *integrated education* (78,4% - correct answers), *inclusive education* (19,2% - correct answers), *disability* (34,7% - correct answers), *handicap* (98,3% - correct answers) and *special education* (54,3% - 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.

Table1. Teachers' beliefs regarding the knowledge of concepts

The concept	Knowing very well	Knowing well	Undecided	Knowing a little	Knowing very little
Special educational needs	18,4%	33,9%	27,1%	15,6%	5%
Integrated education	16,8%	44,6%	19,8%	12,4%	6,4%
Inclusive education	19,2%	30,1%	28,4%	12,6%	9,7%
Disability	24,8%	26,4%	20,7%	19%	9,1%
Handicap	34,1%	12,7%	16,7%	20,4%	16,1%
Special education	22,8%	19,5%	29%	16,4%	12,3%

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.

In order to identify the teachers' prejudice towards children with special needs, the teachers 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). They filled out a scale of 6 items which evaluated their beliefs regarding students with special educational needs, students with physical disabilities, children with parents who are not living with them (they are working in another country), children with autistic disorders and Down syndrome. The results are presented in table 2.

The main difficulties encountered by teachers in implementing inclusive principles such as: insufficient initial or continuous training of teachers (97,6%), the „parents' wall" (44,8%), the lack of time (27,8%), the rejection of children with special educational needs by their colleagues (19,3%), stereotypes and prejudice towards children with SEN (67,4%). 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 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.

Table2. Teachers' prejudice towards children with special educational needs

	Mean
Every child has the right to be educated corresponding to his own development characteristics.	2.21
Children with physical disabilities should not learn in special schools.	2.97
Children with parents who are not living with them do not have a higher risk to abandon school than the others.	3.42
Children with autistic disorders can be recovered.	4.31

Children with Down syndrome can be integrated in the community.	3.46
Children with special educational needs could be integrated in mainstream schools.	3.67

5. Conclusions

The results of this research underlie the fact that there are differences between what teachers know and what they think they know about inclusive education and this 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.

We have to observe that the knowledge of basic concepts such as inclusion or integration is a very weak one. The inclusive education represents a very large domain which cannot be taught in one semester of the bachelor degree programme. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink and reform the bachelor programme curricula in order to assure a better understanding and a better training of the teachers for inclusive education.

Despite the fact that the majority of teachers declare that it is important for every child or student to be educated corresponding to his level of development and his needs, the results founded that there still are prejudices regarding children with special educational needs. One possible explanation could be that mainstream teachers don't know very well the main characteristics of children with different disabilities (physical, autistic disorders, Down syndrome, emotional problems or behavioural disorders). They need support from school counselling or school psychologist in order to help every child and to develop an efficient educational activity.

This research also revealed the necessity of showing good practice examples in order to motivate teachers to apply and promote inclusive principles. 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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