

## SPECIAL EDUCATORS ALS BRICOLEUR

**Mihaela GRASU, Ph.D.,**  
“Constantin Paunescu” Special School, Iași,  
[grasumihaela73@gmail.com](mailto:grasumihaela73@gmail.com)

**Silvia POPOVICI, Ph.D.,**  
Central Academic Library ”Mihai Eminescu” Iași,  
[silviapopovici2011@gmail.com](mailto:silviapopovici2011@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *The purpose of this article is to investigate how special educators adapt to the diverse issue of children with disabilities. The concept of bricolage has been used to explain the ways in which teachers provide individualized support to these children with special needs. Using the key elements of bricolage: action, using available resources, combining resources, we have described the professional practices of special educators. Data for analysis come from semi-structured interviews with 16 teachers from the special school.*

**Key words:** *special educators; children with special education needs; bricolage.*

### Introduction

According to official European and national documents (EASNIE, 2021), children with disabilities have the right to education, in a special school or included in mainstream education. In practice, their education even in special schools is not without problems. Although the special educators have training in special psychopedagogy, work according to a special curriculum and with a smaller number of students in the class, they face an increased level of stress, and the consulted specialist literature proves those.

If in a previous article we analyzed how bricolage manifests itself in the education of children with autism spectrum disorders (Grasu, 2023), in this study we aimed to extinguish the researched problem for the entire range of special educational requirements. Thus, we will explore the experiences of special educators to better understand how they manage to adapt to the diversity of students with special educational needs (SEN). The concept of bricolage described by Claude Levi-Straus provides an explanatory model of the activities of special educators who are aware that they must respond to the needs of children.

First of all, the article presents the specialized literature related to the situation of special educators and the main sources of stress they face, then the concept of bricolage is described, followed by the presentation of the research and the results, and finally discussions and conclusions.

### **Special educators**

Special educators work with students with a wide variety of problems, from intellectual, sensory or physical disabilities to related impairments such as autism spectrum disorders. They carry out teaching-learning-assessment activities, but also therapy and recovery activities. The class size is reduced to 8-12 students, and in the case of severe and/or multiple deficiencies, to 4-8 students, so that teaching activities can be individualized and adapted to meet the needs of each student.

Several researches carried out internationally have highlighted the stress felt by teachers in special schools. The reason for this stress is explained by the multiple roles that a teacher must adopt, but also by the behavior of students (Cancio et al., 2018). In turn, researchers Park and Shin (2020), conducting a meta-analysis of studies on teacher burnout in special schools, found correlations between student problem behaviors and teacher burnout. White and Mason (2006) identified obtaining instructional materials (70%) and managing behavior (60%) as sources of stress for beginning special education teachers.

Haydon et al. (2018) grouped the sources of stress of special educators into four categories:

- 1) lack of administrative support (lack of effective support programs for teachers, presence of a negative school climate, legislation, educational policies);
- 2) individual student challenges (need for personal hygiene and physical care, transportation, behavioral and communication issues, caseload management);
- 3) peer interaction (co-teaching situations, finding time for meetings, communication blockages and experiencing the feeling of being unappreciated);
- 4) additional sources of stress, negative or challenging interactions with parents and families, meetings with other colleagues, completing the necessary documents outside the regular school day).

In Romania too, some researches have been carried out that highlight the problems of the special education system. In 2012, Folostină and Tudorache identified the following sources of disappointment, even frustration, that teachers in special schools have: insufficient staff related to the large volume of children with severe disabilities (67.10%), insufficient income (82.10%), the limited resources of schools (73.10%). Comăneanu (2021) compared the professional stress and burnout level of teachers in regular schools with those in special schools. As a result

of the research, it emerged that special education teachers perceive a higher level of stress, which is determined by a number of factors, such as: time pressure, inappropriate student behavior, low level of training, crowded classrooms, discipline problems, lack of resources, lack of learning materials in teaching activities, lack of well-designed curriculum, bureaucracy, social and political pressures on educational organizations, insufficient reward and lack of participation in decision-making.

A solution to adapting to these difficult situations could be the bricolage, which we will present next.

### **Bricolage**

Bricolage is a term that comes from the French language and means assembly of various structures and materials. In the scientific environment, it was used for the first time by the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1970). The author contrasts the bricoleur, the "wild mind," who builds things using whatever materials are at hand, adopting practical solutions, with the engineer, the "scientific mind," who follows a plan and has a precise vision and relies on tools and specific resources. Although bricolage is based on intuition, it does not only produce banal and imperfect solutions, but can even achieve "unexpected brilliant results".

Later, the concept of bricolage extended to other disciplines or contexts. In education, bricolage is opposed to conservative teaching, limited creativity, the use of outdated or inadequate theories, and involves using existing skills and abilities to face all challenges (Hatton, 1997). For his part, Campbell (2019) describes the bricoleur teacher as active and individualistic in professional practice, having an eclectic range of methods. On the one hand, he is aware of the curriculum requirements and educational policies, but on the other hand, she/he follows his instincts and is guided by what she/he believes is best for his students. The core characteristics are creativity, flexibility and empowerment, rather than conformity and focus on repetitive strategies. According to Jenlick (2006), the principal as bricoleur has the task of balancing the daily challenges encountered in the school with the needs of students and teachers. For this, it does not turn to a single way, but to multiple perspectives and means of solving problems and making decisions. Bricolage is also a strategy used by families to overcome certain social boundaries encountered in the process of raising children (Gheorghiu and de Saint Martin, 2011). In the field of research, bricoleurs recognize that the boundaries of traditional research are pushed through the use of multiple methods (Rogers, 2012). In the organizational field, bricolage means "creating something from nothing", that is, the engine that leads to the implementation of some resources that are existing in the company

(Baker and Nelson, 2005) or "using the available resources to carry out tasks and fulfill objectives" (Duymedjian and Ruling, 2010).

Bricolage is defined as the ability to cope by applying combinations and available resources to new problems and opportunities (Baker and Nelson, 2005). According to these authors, bricolage presents three defining elements:

(1) to do, to be active, involved, focused on solving problems. It means seeking, trying solutions, refusing to be limited, which is different from passivity, indifference or avoidance. It also implies the idea of getting by, which means refusing to limit yourself, going beyond the boundaries of standards, insisting on trying different solutions and observing the results.

(2) using readily available resources, making do with "what is at hand." This involves creativity, improvisation, tolerance of ambiguity, overcoming the fear of failure.

(3) combining resources or giving them another meaning in order to apply them to new purposes, different from those for which they were originally intended or used.

Individuals act as bricoleurs by improvising from the resources they have available, borrowing and experimenting with new elements or modifying existing ones.

### **Research description**

To investigate the topic addressed, we used a qualitative research approach, using 16 semi-structured interviews with special educators. This article aims is to describe the professional practices of special educators that help them deal with the diversity of students with SEN.

### ***Objectives:***

- to explore the actions taken by special educators to succeed in responding to the diversity of students;
- to identify the resources used by the special educators;
- to describe how special educators combine the resources at their disposal to adapt to various problematic situations.

### ***Hypothesis and sample***

Are special teachers bricoleurs? How can the do-it-yourself actions of special teachers be described?

To answer these questions, we interviewed 16 female teachers from the "Constantin Păunescu" Special School in Iai, with a working experience between 20 and 5 years. We approached these teachers from the special school relatively easily as work colleagues.

### ***Methods***

We used the semi-structured interview and related observation. Interviews lasted between 45–90 minutes and we obtained consent from the subjects for their recording. The interview guide included 5 main themes:

- description of the circumstances in which they ended up working with children with SEN;
- strategies used for continuous professional training;
- organization of class work, choice of methods and procedures, teaching aids, etc.;
- the main professional challenges;
- the most relevant professional satisfactions.

The interviews were transcribed, then analyzed using the thematic analysis method.

### **Results**

Making a synthesis of the answers obtained, we identified how special educators act to meet the needs of students, which are the main categories of resources used and how they combine the resources at their disposal to adapt in challenging situations.

### ***Action***

In general, the teachers interviewed state that students with SEN cause them to be in a permanent state of action and alertness. These students have a low frustration tolerance, and they have to prevent crisis situations that can destabilize the entire collective. Sometimes the usual approaches are not effective, so teachers look for novel solutions.

Most special school children have severe language and communication problems and it takes persistence to find strategies to communicate with them. A teacher describes how he tested several methods until he was able to communicate with students through drawings. Searching for information on the Internet, he found a training course in the Picture Exchange Communication System Method (PECS) and by following it he was able to improve her communication with her students.

### ***Use of available resources***

One of the solutions used by most of the interviewed teachers in searching for professional resources is the Internet, which, most of the time, is accessed from home. The Internet helps them to expand the boundaries of their knowledge, to find news in the field, training courses, individual worksheets, activity ideas, but also to exchange opinions or materials with other specialists. Moreover, with the help of the Internet, information can be quickly transmitted to teammates or parents.

Another solution used by teachers is to enlist the help of other

colleagues. One teacher described asking permission from colleagues to attend their classes to observe how they react to certain problematic situations. In this way she also learned how to proceed in a similar situation.

Turning parents into collaborators is another solution presented by teachers. For example, a special school teacher reports that she can conduct her visual arts class much more easily when he proposes to paint with the students, when he receives help from a parent. Although it is a favorite activity, a student is unable to do it independently. If he is supervised by the mother, the teacher can take care of the other students in the class and the lesson can be conducted in good conditions.

### ***Combining resources***

Several teachers interviewed state that some of the methods and techniques of working with children with SEN that they learned during the training courses cannot be applied to the class of students for several reasons. First of all, unlike the individual office where the specialist works with only one child, the teacher has a class of students with diverse problems and must pay attention to all of them. She would need another person to be able to apply some of the methods as they were presented and she cannot do all the classes in partnership. Secondly, children have been trained in different styles and what works for one child may not work for another. That is why teachers consider it necessary to know several methods and techniques and to combine various working procedures, in order to adapt to different situations that may arise in the class. A significant problem that teachers raise is finding and preparing materials for lessons. Because there are no textbooks adapted for special schools, nor accessible materials, teachers spend a lot of time searching different sites for worksheets, which they simplify or adapt, since not all students are at the same level. Sometimes they design different teaching materials to help children better understand the concepts being taught. A teacher tells how she and her students made clock faces from recyclable materials to help them read the exact time.

### **Discussions**

This study aimed to identify the adaptation strategies of special educators to the diverse needs of students in a special school.

One of the strategies is to look for, to try different solutions, that is, not to be indifferent, passive or avoidant. Another strategy is to use readily available resources, being creative and improvisational. The third strategy is to combine resources, giving them a different meaning than the one for which they are usually used.

The strategy of being active, of looking for solutions to succeed in working in a special school is also found in other researches. For

example, in a study by Chao et al. (2017) it was shown that attending a training course in the education of children with SEN led to an increase in teachers' sense of self-efficacy in teaching and classroom management. Teachers with high self-efficacy tend to make a substantial effort to overcome their difficulty and treat this situation as a challenge rather than an obstacle. They are more willing to put substantial effort into organizing, planning, and teaching lessons and motivating their students to perform, identify effective classroom management systems, than teachers with low levels of efficacy.

The use of the Internet as a resource at hand is also mentioned in other studies. Thus Thanavathi (2020) showed that digital media is a vital tool used by teachers. The use of technology arouses the curiosity of students with SEN, stimulates them to get involved in school activities, helps them understand more easily and learn better.

Okhrimenko et. al. (2021) raises the issue of training special education graduates to use digital means of teaching. These researchers are of the opinion that only with a sufficient level of professional training in the digital field, the special education graduates will be competitive on the labor market.

Another author (Meyer, 2013) describes the socio-material bricolage that teachers resort to in order to adapt to the unpredictable and rapid changes that occur during the instructional-educational process. According to this author, teachers make do with what they have at hand and adapt different resources to their immediate needs and activities by combining different types of activities, technologies and other classroom resources.

## **Conclusions**

This article explores how special educators deal with the various challenges of educating children with SEN (lack of resources, student diversity, challenging behaviors). Bricolage behaviors were identified, such as the ability to act and adapt to students' needs, to prevent crisis situations, to use existing resources, to combine the resources they have at their disposal in a creative way, adapted to the circumstances, etc. which helps teachers to most effectively meet the needs of a complex and diverse school population. Bricolage is based on the fact that teachers build a repertoire of knowledge, methods, techniques, means and didactic materials and adapt their strategies to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children.

## **References**

- Baker, T., Nelson, R. E. (2005). Creating something from nothing: Resource construction through entrepreneurial bricolage. *Administrative science quarterly*, 50(3), 329-366.

- Campbell, L. (2019). Pedagogical bricolage and teacher agency: Towards a culture of creative professionalism. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51(1), 31-40.
- Cancio, E. J., Larsen, R., Mathur, S. R., Estes, M. B., Johns, B., Chang, M. (2018). Special education teacher stress: Coping strategies. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 41(4), 457-482.
- Chao, C. N. G., Sze, W., Chow, E., Forlin, C., Ho, F. C. (2017). Improving teachers' self-efficacy in applying teaching and learning strategies and classroom management to students with special education needs in Hong Kong. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 66, 360-369.
- Comăneanu, M. M. (2021). Self-Perception of the Burnout Syndrome Symptoms on Mainstream and Special Education Teachers. *Journal of Experiential Psychotherapy*, 24(2).
- Duymedjian, R., & Ruling, C. C. (2010). Towards a foundation of bricolage in organization and management theory. *Organization studies*, 31(2), 133-151.
- European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Profile commissioned by EASNIE for the Global Education Monitoring Report 2021 - Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia - Inclusion and education: All means all, <https://gem-report-2020.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Romania.pdf>.
- Foloștină, R., & Tudorache, L. A. (2012). Stress management tools for preventing burnout phenomenon at teachers from special education. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 69, 933-941.
- Gheorghiu, Mihai Dinu, de Saint Martin, Monique (coord), (2011), *Education and social boundaries: France, Romania, Brazil, Sweden*, Polirom Publishing House, Iasi.
- Gradea, I. (2018). *Attitudes Towards Intellectual Disabilities in Romania Looking at Linkages with Educational Policy and Integrated Youth Programming*. Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness.
- Grasu Mihaela (2023) *Bricolage in the education of children with autism spectrum disorders*, Netedu Adrian (coord.), *Social sciences between engagement and distancing*. In honor of Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Publishing House from Iași, 478-485.
- Griffin, C. C., Winn, J. A., Otis-Wilborn, A., Kilgore, K. L. (2003). *New teacher induction in special education*. COPSSE Document Number RS-5E). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education, <https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/UF/00/09/08/93/00001/RS-5.pdf>.



- Hatton, E. (1997). Teacher educators and the production of bricoleurs: an ethnographic study. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10(2), 237-258.
- Haydon, T., Leko, M. M., Stevens, D. (2018). Teacher Stress: Sources, Effects, and Protective Factors. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 31(2).
- Jenlink, P. M. (2006). The school leader as bricoleur: Developing scholarly practitioners for our schools. National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA). Available at <http://cnx.org/content/m13650/1.2/>
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Wild thinking. Totetism today*, Scientific Publishing House, Bucharest, 1970.
- Meyer, B. (2013). *Tablets in the Classroom: Improvisational Rhythms and Change through Bricolage*. International Association for Development of the Information Society.
- Okhrimenko, O., Semenikhina, O., Shyshenko, I. (2021). Future teachers' readiness for the digital modernization of inclusive education. New challenges in the professional competence development of future specialists: collective monography, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, 2021.
- Park, E. Y., Shin, M. (2020). A meta-analysis of special education teachers' burnout. *Sage Open*, 10(2).
- Rogers, M. (2012). Contextualizing theories and practices of bricolage research. *Qualitative Report*, 17, 7.
- Thanavathi, C. (2020). Digital tools with inclusive education. *Inclusive Education Inclusive Education*, 320.
- White, M., Mason, C. Y. (2006). Components of a successful mentoring program for beginning special education teachers: Perspectives from new teachers and mentors. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 29(3), 191-201.