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SCHOOL, FAMILY AND ADAPTATION DIFFICULTIES

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate the parents' experience of taking part in a system that rather rejects than helping them. A second aim was to compare the teachers and parents' perceptions toward inclusion. There were investigated 30 parents and caregivers, 10 special education teachers, 10 primary and middle-school teachers and 10 school counselors. In this qualitative study, data were collected via interviews and observer field notes. It was conducted a content analysis to extract similar themes from the different data sources. This initiative received a generally positive response from all groups of participants. The results show a high level of benevolence but no clear and specific steps in accountability. Perceived barriers included the lack of educational practice for inclusive education, the lack of managerial and teaching skills, lack of accountability and poor communication. The parents of these children tend to communicate poorly with teachers. Repeated rejections from the school determine parents' ostentatious behavior. Both groups of parents and teachers experience a high level of stress. Suggestions for improvement included acquisition by teachers of specific skills to cope with such challenges, specific supplementary learning materials and the introduction of peer teaching. Parents' experiences represent valuable proves which can be utilized in education to develop the necessary teaching skills and prepare teachers for real-educational context. Further research needs to investigate how to enhance the parents' willingness to collaborate with school and to fully exploit the potential that the relationship between school and family has it over the children's future.

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1. Introduction

One of the principles of contemporary education is to ensure a real partnership between school and family. Also, the role of the school is to support and help the family in finding the best solutions for inclusion. In Romania, there are theoretically and methodologically effective levers needed to address

learning difficulties in school. But social practices show the opposite situation. Parents of children with difficulties are forced to move their children from one school to another, every time problems arise, in a real pedagogical tourism.

1.1. Inclusive Education

Special education domain has known as main theoretical models: the medical model, dominated by segregated education, equal opportunity model, in which education was a vision of integrated education and social or diversity model, with its emphasis on inclusive education. The accepted theoretical model at a declarative level by most countries, including Romania, is the social one. The concept of inclusion, conceived in 1948, replaces the limiting term of integration (Avramidis, Bayliss, Burden, 2000). To highlight the limitations of previously existing term, some consider that integration is the „ *crowding «different» children in the schools that we can offer, with a minimum of trouble and without disturbing the institutional balance*”, and inclusion involves „*a process of cultural reconstruction*”, by which structural and functional changes occur both for the child to be integrated but also for school, teachers who receive / include within non-typical children (Slee, 1999, p. 167).

Social inclusion is the system of stipulations and means of action in multiple aspects of the individual's life, which is aimed at reducing social exclusion, ensuring equal rights and promoting diversity. Inclusive education aims to ensure the right to education for every student, respect for diversity, minimizing barriers that limit learning and participation of all children in the school life, reducing school exclusion (Gherguț, 2016).

Inclusive education is a constant concern worldwide, as demonstrated by social policies promoted by international social and educational organizations. Among the main legislative regulations, we mention: World Programme of Action in relation to Persons with Disabilities (UN General Assembly Resolution 1982), Salamanca Statement and framework for action in special needs education - organized by UNESCO World Conference on Special Education (Salamanca 1994), World Forum of Education for All - April 2000, Dakar (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2007). Romania has endorsed these lines of action by adhering to international law, signing documents such as: UN Convention concerning the Rights of the Child, Salamanca Statement, and the World Declaration on Education for all.

Main features of inclusive education are: meeting the diverse needs of all members of communities; promoting tolerance towards diversity; does not discriminate in educational process; provides solutions against marginalization of people; focusing on the child as the center of preoccupation and his multidimensional development; enables improvement of the educational act.

Most frequently mentioned barriers in the way of effectiveness of inclusive educational activities are related to the organization of the educational process, deeply rooted discriminatory attitudes, prejudices; difficulty of adapting the curriculum; inadequate teaching means; teacher training in general; insufficient scientific evidence supporting inclusion; weak community involvement in inclusive education (Unianu, 2014) false knowledge and conceptualization of special educational needs, insufficient time granted (Paliokosta, Blandford, 2010).

Current research have shown that inclusive education can mediate cognitive development, improving educational outcomes for children with SEN and verbal skills (Ruijs, Peetsma, 2009; Kurth Mastergeorge, 2012; Sainato, Morrison, Jung, Axe, Nixon, 2015), positive social development and peer acceptance (Nakken, Pijl, 2002; Bellini, Peters, Benner, Hopf, 2007). Progress in acquisition of adaptive behavior competences are effects of inclusive education (Dessemontet, Bless, Morin, 2012), and more elements of self-determination competences are acquired in this setting (Hughes, Agran, Cosgriff, Washington, 2013). There were also investigated the effects on children without disabilities. It was found that inclusive education produced differentially stronger learning in not-at-risk classmates (Fuchs, et al., 2015).

1.2. School - family Partnership

According to the new inclusive policies, parents have the right to be informed, to receive support from the school, the right to participate and be consulted about the proposed plans for recovery. Researchers noticed the asymmetric relationship between teacher and parent, due to different views and scientific language used by specialists, which often intimidates and alienates the parent from the collaborative process to which is entitled (Reid, Valle, 2004). The experts highlight the importance of knowing the child's behavior in different contexts for determining placement options (Marks, Kurth, Bartz, 2014). This information can be obtained from parents, if the prerequisites for real collaboration are created. Another essential criterion in order to develop an authentic relationship between parent and school is that teachers grant sufficient time for consultations and meetings with them.

Parents experience a high degree of stress (Jones, Passey, 2004), “as well as feelings of depression, anger, shocks denial, self-blame, guilt, or confusion” (Heiman, 2002, p. 165), seek support from relatives, those with similar problems but also from the school in order to cope with these difficulties. School has an important role in educating parents in order to raise awareness, improve knowledge, and develop their level of competence to deal with specific problems (Kok, Akyuz, 2015).

Recent studies show that in Romania parents of included children in the mainstream education are not involved in the educational process, in decision-making regarding their children's educational path. Also, although education is free and compulsory, parents bear some the direct and indirect costs, which are quite consistent during the educational period (Turza, Duminičă, 2015). Besides the parent meetings, teachers make available to parents hours of consultation regarding the educational path of the child. Teachers initiate communication with parents mainly when behavioral problems which they cannot manage arise and much less for consultations or educational discussions.

The hastily implementation of legislative and methodological measures allowed terminology confusion between integration and inclusion, which gave rise to poor or improper practices. Implementation of measures without real and effective training of teachers has generated frustration for teachers and parents. Specialized personnel (support teachers, itinerants) are in too low number in relation to the amount of requests. Country reports show that the average support teacher spends a maximum of 1-2 hours / week with a child with SEN, insufficient time in order to make progress. Another interesting situation is the one in which the support teachers find themselves, not being full employed to the schools where they operate and not having continuity from year to another in the same school, generate

demotivation, isolation and frustration for the itinerant and disappointment among parents and children with SEN.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Objective, Hypotheses, Methods, Instruments

This exploratory study sought to investigate the parents' experience of taking part in a system that rather rejects than helping them. A second aim was to compare the teachers and parents' perceptions toward inclusion. Considering these objectives, the research has the following research questions:

- a) The partnership between school and family is a real one or just a goal?
- b) How does this partnership influence the way in which children with special needs adapt in mainstream education?
- c) Which are teachers attitudes regarding inclusion?
- d) Which are the main obstacles in establishing an effective communication between the parent of a child with SEN and teachers?

This qualitative study involved use of the social inquiry; data were collected via interviews and observer field notes. The subjects were informed about the purpose of research, their rights to participate in this research and were assured of confidentiality before the beginning of the interviews. For this purpose we constructed a structured guide interview which contains 7 demographic items, 6 open questions and 8 closed questions. Regarding the closed questions the participants had agree or disagree with the item. On some of the closed questions participants could not firmly agree or disagree and in consequence we had to introduce a third choice: sometimes or possible. On average, interviews took about 12 minutes per person. The interviews were conducted face to face and, where participants were not available, the interviews were conducted through the telephone. The observer field notes aimed at recording the acceptance of children with SEN by their peers.

2.2. Participants

The study population consists of 60 respondents. Parents represent 50% (30 participants) of the study population, 16,7% (10 participants) are represented by Special Education Teachers, School teachers 16,7% (10 participants) and Counselors 16,7% (10 participants). The lot is consisted of a majority of 95% (57 respondents) female and 5% (3 respondents) are males. Most of participants reside and work in the urban area, 86,7% (52 respondents), and 3 (13,3%) participants work in rural areas. Age varies between 22 and 60 years old, with the mean age being 40,4 years old.

As regarding education, 14 respondents (23,3%) followed courses for Special education, while 46 (76,7%) have degrees in various areas, 33 (55%) have a Bachelor degree, 25 (41,7%) have a Master's degree and 2 respondents (3,3%) have a PhD. From the total of the parents interviewed, 7 (23,3%) of them have their children in kindergarten, 9 (30%) have their children in primary school, 14 (46,7) have their children in middle school. Special Education Teachers are involved in the educational act as follows: 4 (40%) are teaching at kindergarten, 3 (30%) are teaching at primary school and 3 (30%) are teaching at middle school. Teachers that works with inclusive classrooms are: 4 (40%) are teaching at kindergarten, 3

(30%) at primary school and 3 (30%) are teaching at middle school. As regarding counselors we interviewed: 1 (10%) works at kindergarten, 1 (10%) works at primary school, 4 (40%) work at middle school and 4 (40%) work with high school pupils. From the total number of parents interviewed who have kids with difficulties 8 (26,7%) of children are between 1 and 5 years old, 7 (23,3%) are between 6 and 10 years old, 14 (46,7%) are between 11 and 15 years old and 1 (3,3%) is aged between 16 and 20 years old.

The experience of Special education teachers in their field is as follows: 3 (30%) have between 1 and 5 years of experience, 2 (20%) have between 6 and 10 years of experience, 1 (10%) has between 11 and 15 years of experience, 1 (10%) have between 16 and 20 years of experience and 3 (30%) have more than 20 years of experience in teaching special needs pupils. As regarding those who teach at the primary and middle school, 5 (50%) have between 1 and 5 years of experience, 2 (20%) have between 6 and 10 years of experience, 1 (10%) has between 11 and 15 years of experience and 2 (20%) have more than 20 years of experience in teaching pupils. As regarding Counselors: 2 (20%) have between 1 and 5 years of experience, 3 (30%) have between 6 and 10 years of experience, 4 (40%) have between 11 and 15 years of experience and 1 (10%) has more than 20 years of experience in counseling pupils.

2.3. Results

We analysed the respondents' answers to the closed items questions and for the first two questions: if they work or have a child with difficulties or disabilities and if this child has or had difficulties adapting to the inclusive classroom environment, all participants, 60 (100%) answered „yes”. As regarding the 4th question which analyses if the child had to be moved from another classroom or school, 35 (58,3) of respondents answered that they did not have to move the child from another classroom or school as against 25 (41,7%) of the respondents that answered „yes” answered the following question referring to the frequency of relocation and 20 (33,3%) stated that the child was relocated one time as against 4 (6,7%) respondents which stated that the child had to move two times. Question number six refers to teachers' training, whether they are prepared for children with special needs. The answers received are mostly negative therefore 42 (70%) of the respondents believe that teachers are not prepared for children with special needs, only 16 (26,7%) consider that teachers are prepared.

The 9th question refers to teacher – parent relationship, emphasizing if the parents of children with special needs are a bigger challenge for the teacher than parents of children with typical development level. 34 (56,7%) do not believe that, as against 18 (30%) respondents who answered „yes”, 8 (13,3%) respondents chose the alternate answer „sometimes”. Question number 10 that referred to the behavior of pupils with SEN as being more tiring and requires more attention from teachers, 47 (78,3%) answered „yes”, 13 (21,7%) answered „no”. The last closed question refers to the susceptibility of students with typical development level to develop challenging behaviours learned from children with special needs in inclusive classes. The majority 46 (76,7%) answered „no”, 10 (16,7) answered „yes” and 4 (6,7%) believe that is a possibility but not a rule.

The subjects identified the following main difficulties faced by children with SEN in schools: socializing / networking with peers (12); learning difficulties (8); failure to adapt / understand to the teaching loads transmitted to all children (6); the limited language development of children with SEN (5); not accepting children with SEN in the group of students by parents of typical children (3); the absence of

the support teacher, itinerant (2); maintaining a low level of attention during the course (2); maladjustment to mass curricular requirements (1); infringement of the rules by students with difficulties (1); excessively long working time (1); interaction with unexperienced teachers (1). As shown above, the inclusion is low, children with SEN being more tolerated in many cases marginalized. The school makes little effort to adapt to their special needs, there is no differentiated teaching. Their expectations concern the child's adaptation to the new environment and school environment, not to facilitate the adaptation of the environment to the needs of the child.

Teachers acknowledge that one reason for rejecting students with SEN is poor preparation to work differentiated, because training courses in this subject, to which they have access to, are approaches in a general and vague manner. Teachers possess unclear, incomplete information about the specifics of the disorder faced by the children ("teacher does not know which the children's psycho-individual particularities are"). Reasons given to justify teachers' rejection attitudes are: lack of necessary time in order to prepare the materials needed to work differentiated in class (6); the large number of students in classes (10); absence of support from teacher / therapist / specialist / caregivers (10); the impossibility of applying an intervention program and adapted curricula without support (6); classroom management challenges (7).

As possible solutions for building an effective inclusion, subjects found to be significant: improvement of teacher training and embedding courses that address SEN as early as initial training (14); hiring more professional staff to work with SEN children / the existence of a special education specialist in every school (14); the existence of an attendant for the child (8); real, correct and differentiated assessment for every child (10); adequacy of educational areas (5); decrease the number of students in classes (5); legislative regulations starting from the concrete situation of Romanian schools (4). A large proportion of the subjects (32) consider that the team needed for building the personalized learning plan should consist of a teacher, psychologist, and a parent. Also, they wish for this team to work, not just to be a hypothesis for a possible future progress.

At the question "Who supports parents in their search for a class / schools suitable for children with SEN?", 31 subjects answer that nobody, 9 considered that teachers are those supporting the parents, 5 consider that school psychologist, 5 that the private therapist is the one alongside the parent, 3 consider to be the team for his case, 3 see a support in the Child Protection Services, 2 answer that the doctor and other 2 consider that in line with parents sit the NGOs. Projecting the question in the area of accountability, the subjects consider that in fact the ones who should assist parents are: psychologist / counselor (8); Child Protection Services (5); NGO (5); Teacher (5); County school inspectorate (4); the team in charge of the case (3); private therapist (3); doctor (1), and other 26 "do not have the slightest idea who should deal with this issue".

The observer field notes recorded the level of acceptance of children with SEN by their peers. It was used the same observation grid in different context, school and for different children with SEN. The children were observed in the schoolyard, in breaks between classes and at the end of the day. There have been made only 15 observation that concluded that children with SEN are tolerated, not accepted and, in some cases, the victims of bullying phenomenon.

3. Conclusion

We find that although great progresses have been made towards an inclusive education there are still many issues to be clarified and improved. The subjects of this study are asking for an active involvement from everyone involved in the child's individual progress monitoring. It is necessary for steps to be made in order to request tailored and adaptable teaching materials for children with SEN. Another weak point is the need to change the attitudes and the involvement of teachers, typical children in the inclusive class and their parents (not to marginalize the children with SEN). Some school counselors consider necessary a practical implementation of "what was validated in the pedagogical research field, therapist's experiences to be valued, to be unity and connection between all participants' in the inclusion and learning process."

3.1. Implications. Discussions. Limitations

The study is meant to be an invitation to the competent forums to encourage the implementation of measures to improve the current situation. Of course this study shows its limitations due to the small number of subjects. Being a sensitive subject, there were few those who wanted to reply to interviews. The results show a grim situation, in which the real inclusion accountability is unassumed by any part of the system. It is noticed the urgent need of scientific information, the acquisition of techniques and instruments, tools for teaching students with SEN. The partnership between the school and family is still in development. Further research needs to investigate how to enhance the parents' willingness to collaborate with school and to fully exploit the potential that the relationship between school and family has it over the children's future.

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