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ROMANIAN TEACHERS' TRAINING NEEDS ON EDUCATIONAL MENTORING FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

In this paper, we will present some important aspects regarding the analysis on Romanian Teachers' Training Needs on Educational Mentoring for Persons with Disabilities. This analysis was made in order to identify week points regarding to the teacher's competences. The research aims to assess the training needs, as perceived by teachers, using specific instruments for data collection according to a methodology. The methodology used for this research has been developed, based on the purpose and specific objectives of this study. This methodology examines the main aspects of organising and conducting data collection and processing, which have formed the basis of the research. According to the developed methodology, the survey aims to identify teachers' training needs, priorities and recommendations, which shall be included in the curriculum of the training programme delivered, in order to cause conceptual and practical changes in education. Training needs analysis is performed in order to define the training programme. The findings of the analysis shall be used to develop the curriculum and distance learning module for the target group of teachers. It also aims to improve the e-learning interactive methods and the activity with the disabled in order to use them also within the didactic activity, to improve the results of the educational process as well as to increase the disabled access to education.

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1. Introduction

Disability, as an analytical concept involves a number of difficulties caused by the diversity of definitions and administrative classifications in each country. Within the Committee established by the United Nations on 19 December 2001 and charged with drafting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol to the Convention have been many debates on the adoption of a definition of disability in the text of the Convention. As consensus on the definition of disability has not been reached, they opted to one of "person with disabilities" as: "those persons who have substantial and long-term physical, mental, intellectual, sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society, on an equal basis with others".

Using a definition accepted by all representatives of the countries and organisations, parties to the Convention, has established a common methodological framework to identify persons with disabilities. Discrimination or inequality of opportunity cases may thus be identified, counted, and corrected (Leonardi, 2008). The European approach considers disability as a social function whereas national social policies rather define disability in medical terms, as functional assessment or impairment (Greve, 2009). Member States use a wide range of definitions for disability and invalidity due to their direct effect on the determination of rights to various social benefits to which people with disabilities are entitled to perceive.

Historically, the definition of disability has been fundamentally related to the vision and terminology used by a given society. The emergence and development of medical model – which dominated attitudes and practices towards people with disabilities worldwide during the last 2-3 centuries – have also influenced their assessment and intervention – strong medicalised, practically equating a disability with disease or deficiency.

The inclusive education process was initiated and differently implemented in the European countries and beyond. The factors contributing to the different development of this process in different countries have been derived from the existing political, cultural and economic conditions. European and global laws, declarations, projects, and strategies have been triggered in order to outline a unitary approach. Among these institutions, an important role has been played by the World Health Organization, which has proposed since 1980 to approach three distinct terms: deficiency, incapacity, and disability (Canevaro, 1980, p.11).

2. Problem Statement

The research aims to assess the training needs in Educational Mentoring for Persons with Disabilities (EMPD), as perceived by teachers, using specific instruments for data collection according to a methodology developed in this respect. Training needs analysis is performed in order to define the training programme. The findings of the analysis shall be used to develop the curriculum and distance learning module for the target group of teachers.

3. Research Questions

Special education is the fundamental concept of pedagogy issues and it is significant for the changes in the current pedagogy (Cook, Tankersley, Cook & Landrum, 2000). The concept of special education is defined with regard to the following points.

In a restricted sense, this concept tends to overlap the definition of special education, which is totally wrong, though within special education system there is specialised education, carried out a for persons with disabilities

4. Purpose of the Study

The methodology used for this research on identifying teachers' training needs in Educational Mentoring for Persons with Disabilities, based on the purpose and specific objectives of the project. This methodology examines the main aspects of organising and conducting data collection and processing, which have formed the basis of the research. According to the developed methodology, the survey aims to identify teachers' training needs, priorities and recommendations, which shall be included in the curriculum of the training programme delivered by the project, in order to cause conceptual and practical changes in education

5. Research Methods

The research aims to assess the training needs in Educational Mentoring for Persons with Disabilities (EMPD), as perceived by teachers, using specific instruments for data collection according to a methodology developed in this respect. Training needs analysis is performed in order to define the training programme. The findings of the analysis shall be used to develop the curriculum and distance learning module for the target group of teachers.

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5.1. The design of the surveyed population

The surveyed population had the following structure: most of the surveyed teachers were women (82.2%). This percentage of female teachers having answered the questionnaire also reflects the large number of women employed in the education system in Romania (Figure 1).
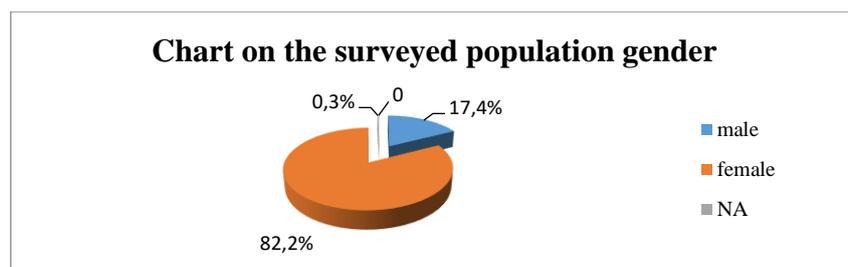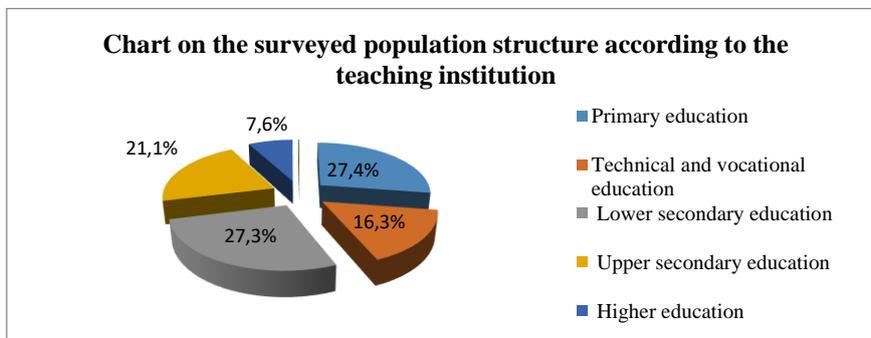

Figure 01. Population gender

The percentages of teachers inquired according to the education establishment where they work, have been relatively close. However, most teachers who willingly responded our research were the primary and lower secondary teachers (Figure 2).

Figure 02. Population structure according to the teaching institution

The age structure of the inquired population (Romanian teachers) was set according to the following categories: teachers having less than 10 years of professional experience in the education system, then those having between 10 and 15 years of teaching experience, the third category including teachers having between 15 and 20 years of professional experience, and teachers with the largest teaching experience (over 20 years) (Figure 3):
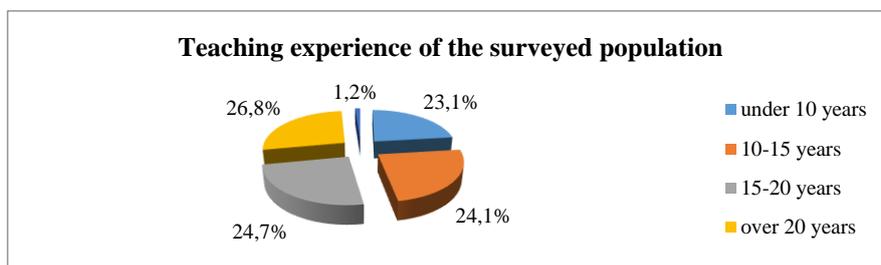
**Figure 03.** Experience of the surveyed population

One of the aspects taken into account when setting up the courses structure given within a project is the participation of potential attendees in the associated training programmes. The relevance of the training programmes offered by the project, but also the availability and the need for training teachers in these fields is highlighted by the high percentage of polled teachers who have never attended an EMPD course (almost 71%) (Figure 4).
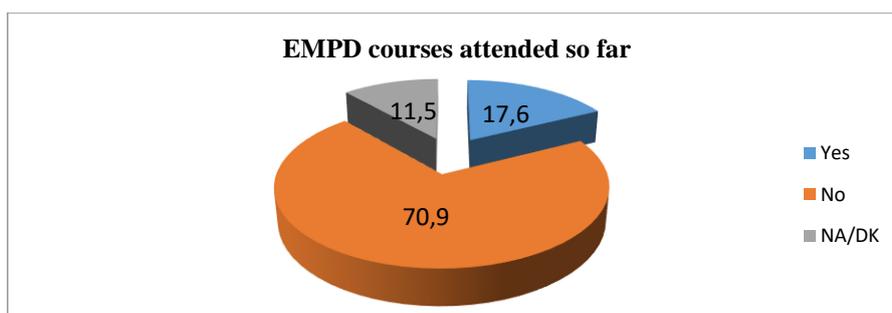
Figure 04. EMPD courses attended so far

5.2. EMPD Current State of the Surveyed Teachers' Training Needs

We further present some relevant information on the surveyed teachers' training needs in EMPD: over 75% of the surveyed teachers affirm they need skills in raising awareness on disabled persons' needs, to a large or very large extent; over 79% agree they need to acquire skills in carrying out personalised contingency plans for various disabilities, to a high or very high extent (Figure 5, Figure 6).
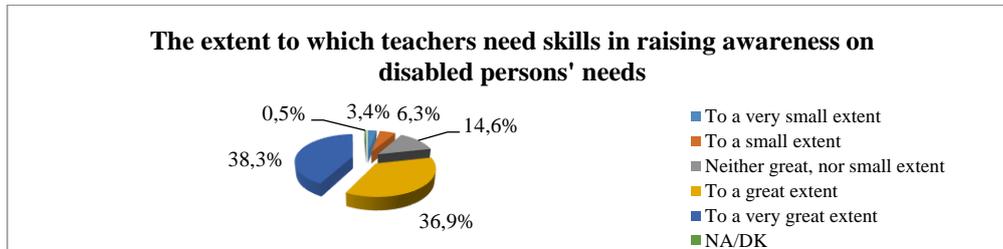
Figure 05. Skills in raising awareness on disabled persons' needs
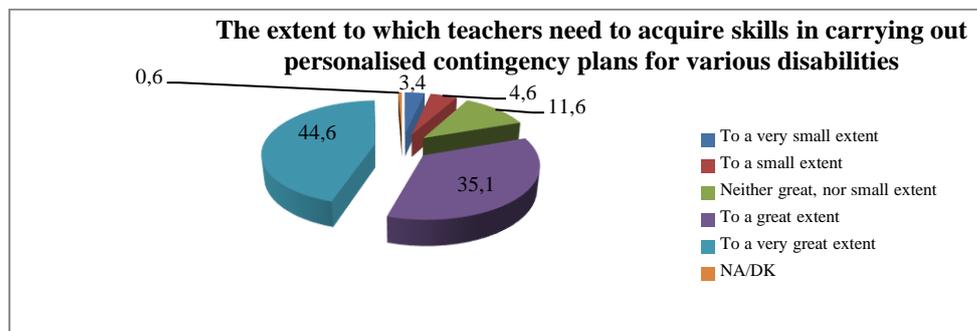
Figure 06. Acquire skills in carrying out personalised contingency plans

Also, 80% of the surveyed teachers believe they need to develop such skills as: assessing disabled students' academic performance; mentor – disabled student communication in order to carry out individual and group activities; maintaining emotional balance in the working group (Figure 7, Figure 8).
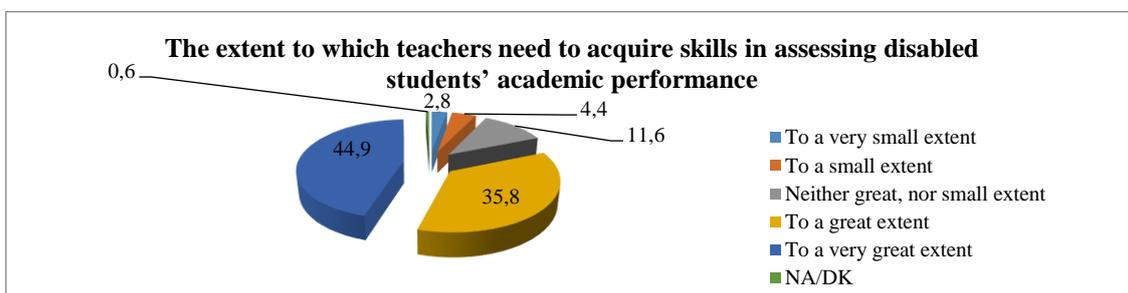
Figure 07. Acquire skills in assessing disabled students' academic performance

The extent to which teachers need to acquire skills in mentor – disabled student communication in order to carry out individual and group activities

0,8
2,7 4,3
11,8
47,6
32,8

- To a very small extent
- To a very small extent
- Neither great, nor small extent
- To a great extent
- To a very great extent
- NA/DK
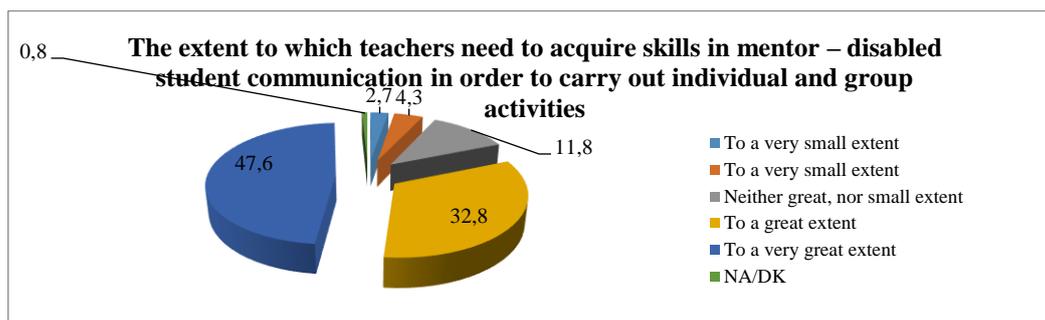
Figure 08. Acquire skills in mentor

The same situation is highlighted on the need to acquire skills in organizing learning activities for groups including disabled students and maintaining emotional balance in the working group, over 79% of respondents agreeing they need these skills to a great and very great extent (Figure 9, Figure 10).

The extent to which teachers need to acquire skills in organizing learning activities for groups including disabled students

0,6 2,4
4,2
10,7
44,4
37,7

- To a very small extent
- To s small extent
- Neither great, nor small extent
- To a great extent
- To a very great extent
- NA/DK

Figure 09. Acquire skills in organizing learning activities

The extent to which teachers need to develop skills in maintaining emotional balance within the working group

0,5 2,8 4,4
11,6
44,9
35,8

- To a very small extent
- To a small extent
- Neither great, nor small extent
- To a great extent
- To a very great extent
- NA/DK

Figure 10. Develop skills in maintaining emotional balance

We further present some views of the surveyed teachers on the opportunity of such a programme: "Children with disabilities are increasingly numerous in large classes of students, integrated into mainstream education, therefore the mentorship for teaching disabled persons is needed in today's education system"; "The course is welcome to any teacher in the mainstream schools because each of us had, at a certain point, students with special needs to be included. The course should meet the needs of teachers in special schools, but also to those in mainstream schools"; "In my opinion, this course will be very welcome for teachers in the education system".

6. Findings

During the research, teachers' knowledge concerning persons with disabilities have been structured as follows: knowledge and appropriate use of theoretical concepts related to EMPD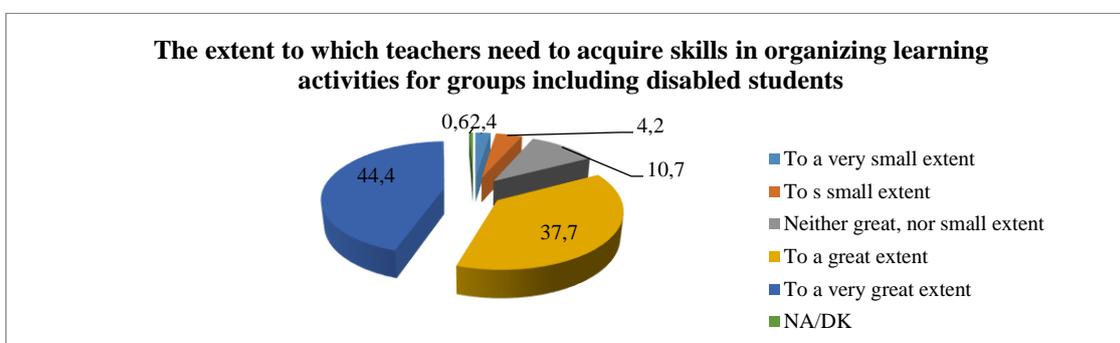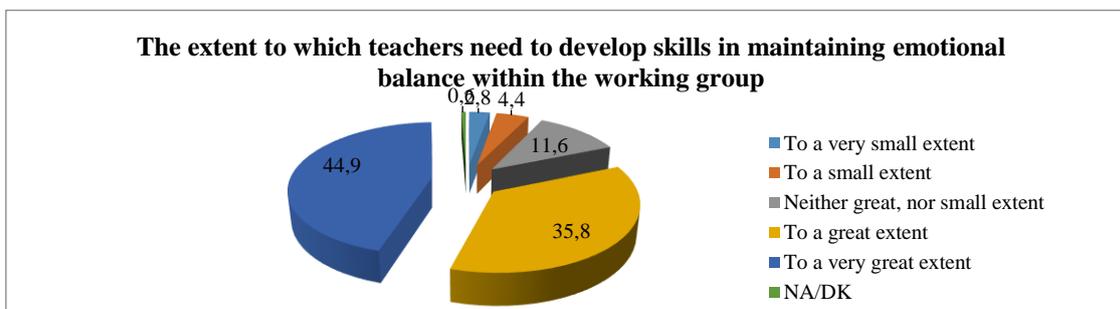; Raising awareness on disabled persons' needs; Carrying out personalised contingency plans for different disabilities; Organizing learning activities for groups including students with disabilities; Using search programmes to access the information available in the virtual environment and communicating by electronic mail; Assessing disabled students' academic performance.

After analysing the collected data, one may conclude that this knowledge is very low. Teachers need to acquire clear skills in this field (Figure 11).
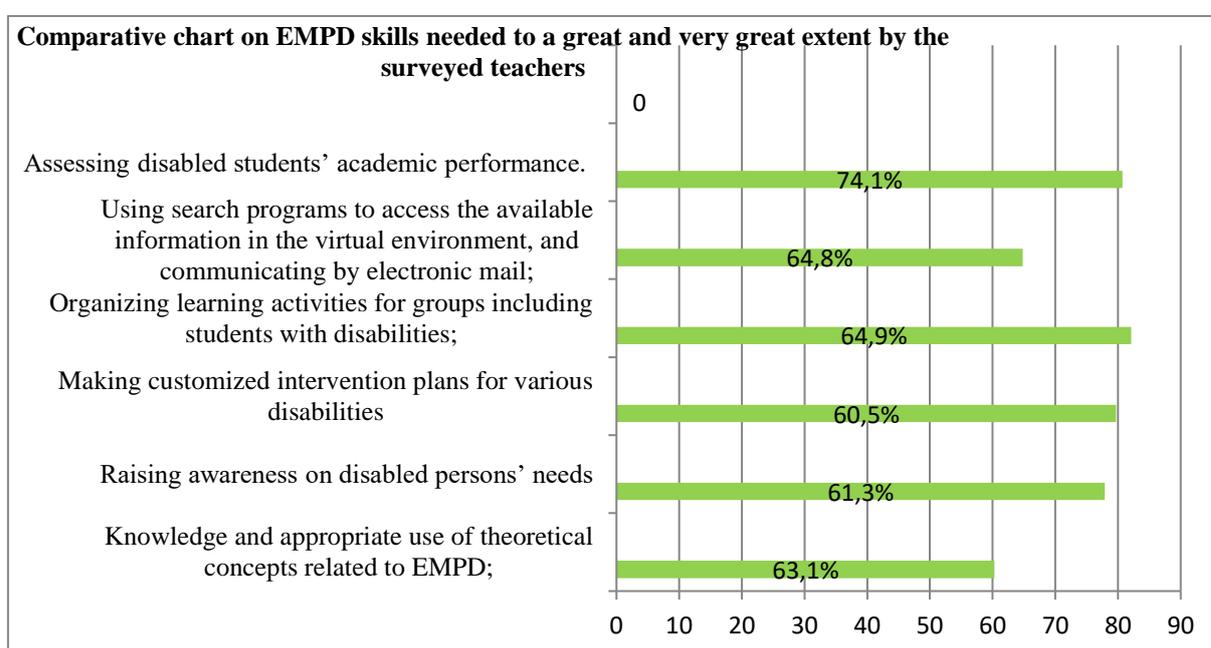
Figure 11. Comparative chart in EMPD skills

The surveyed teachers have admitted they do not have enough knowledge about the deficiencies of disabled students which could be useful in teaching those classes where they are, "I cannot say I know much about disabilities. Just what I've read on the net or what I've heard on TV. I don't have a training in this field and it would be really necessary"; "I have no knowledge on the needs of disabled people, types of disabilities, nor on working with disabled students"; "I do not know teaching strategies applicable for these students which might have already been tested and analysed, I do not know any methods of best practice in this field"; "I have only isolated knowledge about disabilities and I have not worked with assistive technologies".

From the perspective of the inquired teachers, a course meeting specific training needs in this area should provide cognitive - social - emotional skills; it should promote empathy, sense of observation, objectivity; it should develop empathic ability, the ability to relate with people, to maintain emotional balance, whereas teachers should have the availability to work with such children.

The polled subjects affirm that they have little knowledge on disabled persons, acquired in informal spaces and, for the moment, they do not give them the certainty of mastering a clear methodology for working with disabled students.

6.1. Relevant Attitudes towards EMPD

By the answers of the survey participants, one may note their willingness to attend the course, this suggesting the emphasis laid on practical aspects (practicability), "relying on spontaneity and interaction between participants". Teachers say there are pupils with special educational needs in the classes they teach and they do not know how to behave or how to proceed with them.

All respondents emphasized the principle of equal opportunities in access to education and social life: "I need this course to be able to provide equal or better opportunities to my students in order to acquire academic success and also, for a successful integration of (present or future) disabled students, both in school and society"; "In the context of changing educational policies, I consider these training sessions absolutely necessary, especially when working with disabled persons".

Teachers also stressed the need for continuous training of the persons working in education: "Students with SEN need, primarily, people who understand and accept them. Initial training is not always enough to work with these students. The training courses are welcome, they are needed". It is very necessary to have teachers prepared for carrying out activities addressed to persons with disabilities. "(For some of us) it is very difficult to accept these children, this requiring that every teacher learn how to work with them." It is also considered that the topic of the training programme meets the needs of the current society and "it is important to organize such courses, as they are very effective for teachers working with disabled persons every day". The interviewed subjects consider that the course should be structured in online and face-to-face sessions.

It is hoped that, at the end of the course, the participants have the necessary skills to be enabled to organize teaching, learning and assessing activities for groups including students with disabilities.

The approach of the course should have such characteristics as "professionalism, reliability, and creative working methods", "the training should be predominantly practical, it should work with concrete tasks, best practices and relevant examples", "the training should be focused on acquiring a set of general and specific skills, able to be assessed and self-assessed".

The surveyed teachers consider that the participants in the training programme should acquire "the ability to manage potential problem situations occurred when working with disabled students"; "the ability to design, develop and use individualised educational interventions, very useful for disabled persons during the teaching and learning process".

The subjects listed several benefits of participating in the EMPD course: "This training programme may foster life skills development according to the child's needs to recreation and socialization"; "children's access to care and recovery"; "teachers' uptake of the most appropriate and effective methods to work with these disabled students".

The subjects recommend more attention to be paid to rural teachers training: "Since in rural schools there are no psychologists or support teachers, and we often work with disabled children, I think greater attention should be paid to our training in this direction".

Teachers' expectations from an EMPD training programme are focused on: "Communicating and optimising the mentor – disabled student relationship in designing teaching activities"; "enhancing motivation for understanding social policies and implementing best practice patterns in learning activities designed for groups including students with disabilities"; "how to choose alternative working techniques, appropriate for disabled persons; how to receive feedback correctly; how to assess the degree of meeting a disabled person's needs; how to properly assess his/her performance"; "raising awareness on the problems and needs faced by these people and finding the most effective ways to integrate these people into society"; "opportunities to disseminate information and experience on this theme, with colleagues, other institutions or larger communities; - to analyse/ assess my own attitudes, beliefs, experiences, in terms of educational policies".

7. Conclusion

As regards the EMPD programme (needs, content, structure, objectives, expectations, skills), after analysing the collected data, the following findings resulted: over 75% of the surveyed teachers claim they need skills in raising awareness on disabled people's needs, to a large or very large extent; over 79% of the teachers state they need to acquire skills in carrying out personalised contingency plans for different disabilities, to a great or very great extent; 80% of the polled teachers reckon they need to develop such skills as: assessing disabled students' academic performance; mentor – disabled student communication in order to carry out individual and group activities; maintaining emotional balance in the working group; 98% of the teachers consider a training programme in this field shall be very appropriate, stressing its importance, necessity and usefulness.

Concerning knowledge on disabled persons' deficiencies, after analysing the collected data, we may conclude that this knowledge is very low. The polled subjects affirm that they have little knowledge on disabled persons, acquired in informal spaces and, for the moment, they do not give them the certainty of mastering a clear methodology for working with disabled students. Teachers need to develop clear skills in this field, to a large and very large extent: Knowledge and appropriate use of theoretical concepts related to EMPD; raising awareness on disabled persons' needs; Carrying out personalised contingency plans for different disabilities; Organising learning activities for groups including students with disabilities; Using search programmes to access the information available in the virtual environment and communicating by electronic mail; Assessing disabled students' academic performance. The interviewed subjects consider that course should be structured in online and face-to-face sessions. The subjects recommend more attention to be paid to rural teachers training.

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