

## When is the Integration of Students with Special Educational Needs Successful? - A Good Practice Example - School N.O. Brasov, Romania

Mihaela VOINEA

Ioana Roxana TOPALA

Alina Oana BOTA

Department of Psychology,  
Education and Teacher Training,  
Transilvania University, Braşov, România

### Abstract

The issue of integrating children with special educational needs in mainstream school is still debatable. However, there are situations where the integration of children with special educational needs is successful and all those involved are satisfied. What are the factors that contribute to achieving true integration? Is it about a certain school environment or some teachers? Is it about parent involvement or school leadership? To answer the research question of this study, we have raised the hypothesis that school culture (values, teachers' perceptions on integration, leadership) determines the success of integration. The goal of this study is to analyse the educational actors' perceptions (students, teachers, managers and parents) and the school culture which promotes human diversity. The study in question was embedded in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which employed both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection. A questionnaire regarding students' and teachers' perceptions on integration and focus-groups were used. A case study of a primary school (School N.O. from Brasov) was conducted. A number of 100 participants were included in the study, teachers, parents and students from primary schools of Brasov. One of the main conclusions of the research is that the integration of children with special educational needs depends on several factors: from the school culture that promotes social values such as tolerance, respect for difference, etc. to teachers directly involved in integration activities and parents who accept and understand the benefits of integration for all children.

**Keywords:** integration, school culture, children with special educational needs

### Introduction

The issue of integrating children with special educational needs in mainstream school is still debatable, because there are several factors which influence the integration. Even though in the past 10 years efforts have been made for inclusion, by promoting educational policies to combat exclusion, there is still no real, complete integration of children with SEN in the mainstream school (Unesco, 2015). This is because the terminology specific to the field of special education (integration, inclusive school, special educational needs, etc.), as Alkahtani (2016) shows, is disputed among researchers and refers to several dimensions of integration / inclusion: some objectives are easier to make and measure, such as physical integration, others, more difficult to identify and achieve, such as psychological / social integration. Also, the pedagogical dimension of integration, which cannot be ignored, is another issue and it's rather difficult to evaluate. This is reflected in the following types of questions: What type of learning experience really helps students with SEN? Is formal learning the one that ensures integration? What other forms of education impact children with SEN? These questions reflect, in fact, the complexity of the reality that this term describes.

Ainscow et al (2016) show that inclusion is: *a process* (inclusion has to be seen as a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity); inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers; *inclusion is about the presence*, the participation and achievement of all students; inclusion presumes a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement.

If we add all the attitudes towards integration, the cultural specificity of the school society, then we will have a clearer picture of the complexity of the integration issue. There is research (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Newton et al., 2014) which shows that teachers' positive perception of pupils with disabilities or of inclusive education is a determining factor for their classroom behaviour. Attitudes towards the integration of pupils with special educational needs vary according to the type of school, type of disability of the child / pupil, distance from pupils (those who work directly with the pupils or indirectly - administrators, counsellors, etc.). The teacher variables were analysed - age, didactic experience, level of schooling, direct contact with students with disabilities, teacher training, teachers' beliefs / attitudes towards students with disabilities, environment / socio-political context in which the school is set - and which greatly influences the attitude towards pupils with special educational needs.

### **The Inclusive School Between Social Values and Personal Beliefs**

Today, more and more specialists in the field of education (P. Senge 2016, H. Stolovitch, E. Keeps 2017, J. Mezirow 2014, J. Hattie 2014, H. Siebert 2001, etc.) draw attention to the necessity of redefining the place and the role of school in the individuals' lives and in society in order to meet the individuals' needs and the challenges of society. The UNESCO study of 2015 clearly highlights the idea of redefining education from the perspective of a humanistic approach seen as a solution to the challenges of the knowledge, digitized, globalized society: "The ethical and moral principles of a humanistic approach to development stand against violence, intolerance, discrimination and exclusion." (Unesco, 2015, p.10).

What kind of school and what kind of education or learning is it about? What values does this school promote? We believe it is a 21<sup>st</sup> century, inclusive, postmodern school, tailored to double requirements: on one hand, the social requirements / demands and, on the other hand, the ability to meet students', parents', and teachers' different expectations.

Analysing the definitions of inclusive school, we note the following common characteristics: an inclusive school is a school where all students are welcomed regardless of their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background or educational need; it's a safe school (children's wellbeing is present); it has a differentiated / personalized curriculum. An inclusive school is a school that promotes the principles of constructivist pedagogy, transformative learning succeeding in creating a meeting space between social values and personal beliefs, according to the following arguments.

Diversity. "Education should celebrate cultural diversity". (Unesco, 2015, p.67)

An inclusive school promotes diversity in all aspects: human diversity (students, parents and teachers from different ethnic backgrounds, lifestyles, social classes, etc.), cultural diversity, curriculum/pedagogy of diversity. Diversity as a value of postmodern society has a dual implication. On one hand, diversity provides the space for free expression of the differences between individuals; on the other, diversity can give rise to tensions or even violence. School, as a micro-society, is the one that helps us experience diversity in a somewhat securing way. Confronted early with various human typologies, with various problems (from medical to behavioural, social and emotional issues), with different learning styles, with different expectations and mentalities, all educational actors learn (each according to its own style) to understand, accept and promote diversity. Engaging children with SEN in all school activities is a good social exercise that ensures the socio-professional integration of students with SEN. This is a first argument for defining an inclusive school as a postmodern school that understands, supports and promotes diversity.

### **Positive emotions**

Recent studies of neurobiology underline that positive emotions determine effective learning. Children with SEN need even more that secure attachment that conditions learning. Traditional schools were centred on cognitive achievements, leaving behind the socio-emotional development. Nowadays school is trying to change this perspective because there is evidence that affectivity (Cozolino, 2017) is a powerful learning engine. The Finnish school model centred on the appreciation of pupils' happiness and not performance is still proof that positive emotions can ensure a harmonious global development (Walker, 2018). Living positive emotions and experiencing well-being depends on positive relationships with others. Cooperation, collaboration, tolerance, empathy, critical thinking, assertive communication and all social skills and values cannot be formed without being practiced in the various social contexts offered by school. A lot of research points out that an advantage of integration is precisely this social exercise that all those involved in education, from parents to school managers, have to do. This is the second argument to support the idea of inclusive school.

### **Promote an authentic learning**

The third argument relates to the learning process, namely to the learning experiences that make of the postmodern school a 21<sup>st</sup> century school, an inclusive school. We are talking about a transformative learning supported by the socio-cultural context in which the school is set, promoting an authentic learning that assumes the student's active involvement in learning, from the cognitive, affective, and motivational points of view, and which is based on solving authentic, day-to-day issues.

Transformative learning - "the process by which we transform problematic reference frameworks (mentalities, mental habits, perspectives on meanings) - sets of assumptions and expectations - to make them more comprehensive, lighter, more reflexive and more capable of affective change" (Mezirow, 2014:168). The integration of children with SEN into mainstream schools, beyond affirming values such as diversity, empathy, cooperation, creates the context of learning through transformation.

A study (Voinea, 2018) demonstrated that non-formal activities through their transformative learning potential may contribute to the promotion of values such as diversity, tolerance and cooperation and illustrate how people with special needs share many common problems and solutions. In fact, non-formal activities (trips, contests, cultural events, etc.) shift the emphasis from the cognitive performance to the social competencies that help children get out of the rigid patterns of formal education and see others from another perspective. Interactions with others and collaborative practices in non-formal activities develop interests and identities and create the sense of community. (Stetsekenko, 2008; Usher, 2014; Adams & Gupta, 2013).

### **Teacher's leadership**

Last but not least, an inclusive school requires a management that promotes a culture of diversity. It is well-known that teachers' mentalities determine their teaching behaviour and the quality of their relationships with students. One of the vulnerable points of integration regards precisely those mentalities, attitudes. An important role in creating a climate favourable to inclusion is the managerial team that both through conception and through its own behaviour promotes cooperation, critical thinking, and help offering. The Finnish school model is again relied on to support this idea: "all schools in Finland must set up a student support team consisting of specialists, teachers and school managers who should discuss worrying issues and decide on the best way of approaching them". (Walker, 2018, p. 16)

The principle of inclusion helps to change the mind set of teachers, principals and parents because they also go through transformative learning.

All of the arguments presented above support the idea that an inclusive school that has an impact on all those involved in education is a school that is dynamic, open to challenges and responds to the needs of individuals regardless of their status.

### **School N.O. – an Example of Good Practice for Integration**

This research is part of an interdisciplinary project under the aegis of Transylvania University of Brasov, Romania, which aims to develop a training program for support teachers, seen as the key factors in creating an inclusive culture. One of the goals of the project is to identify parents', teachers' and students' perceptions on integration, starting from the premise that one of the main barriers to genuine integration is attitude / mentality.

In our research we analysed a school in Brasov, Romania, which attracted our attention by the way it managed to integrate students with SEN, meaning in a manner very close to the principles of an inclusive school presented above.

**Methodology:** The goal of this study is to analyse the educational actors' perceptions (students, teachers, managers and parents) and the school culture which promotes human diversity. The study in question was conducted in a mixed methods structure, which employed both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection, embedded in a constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm. We are interested in deeply understanding specific cases within a particular context. (Patton, 2002).

A questionnaire regarding parents' and teachers' perceptions on integration and focus-groups with students were used. A case study of a primary school (School N.O. from Brasov) was conducted

This study included a number of 100 participants: a sample of 20 primary school teachers, a sample of 20 secondary school teachers, 20 parents, 20 pupils from primary schools and 20 pupils from secondary school from Brasov.

The questionnaire addressing the parents' and teachers' attitudes towards the integration of students with SEN in school included 23 items, on a 5-point Likert-scale (ranging from 1= to a very small extent, to 5 = to a very large extent), pertaining to attitudes towards the integration of children with SEN in a typical classroom, related to cognitive aspects (Ex: "I believe integration of children with SEN is important"), emotional aspects (Ex: "I am afraid of a child with SEN being in a normal classroom") and behavioural aspects (Ex: "I am willing to participate in training programmes/specific activities regarding the integration of children with SEN")

For the teachers, there was also developed a questionnaire aiming at the cooperation with the support teacher. This questionnaire consist in 5 closed -structured items, using a 5-point Likert scale, pertaining to both behaviour and attitude towards the teacher's collaboration with the support teacher.

**Discussion:** The institutional analysis of N.O. school addressed the physical / material aspects of the school and the social dimension (of human resources).

From the point of view of the material dimension, N.O. school has three buildings, recently renovated, with educational areas appropriate to students' age and fitted with the necessary equipment for a modern 21<sup>st</sup> century education. In two of the buildings, they teach primary school pupils and in the third one (located 1 km from the other two), they teach the secondary school students. The school is located in an area on the outskirts of the city, in a developing neighbourhood, within a very attractive environment (the area is known for its forests, the nearby lake, the zoological garden and the recreational park).

The buildings where primary school students are taught are arranged in a welcoming, joyful manner specific to pupils in this learning cycle. We note the large spaces in the school yard and especially a garden where the students participating in a project planted trees. The courtyard of the school is full of children's asphalt drawings; the cardinal points are marked; there are the sports grounds.

The results of projects in which the school participated (national and international projects), since the inauguration of the school, are presented and the guiding values are written on the steps of the school (see photo).



Fig.1 School values (friendship, honesty, tolerance, respect, collaboration, communication, education)

From the analysis of the physical aspects of N.O. school, we can say that this school creates a good environment for integration, creates a sense of belonging to students (by displaying their results, their products), gives them the chance to manifest their interests (by involving teachers and pupils in many different national and international projects) and promotes values specific to nowadays society.

From the point of view of the human resources, N.O. is a school with 750 pupils in primary and secondary school, 20 primary school teachers, 37 secondary school teachers, a school counsellor, a support teacher, a speech therapist, 12 Integrated children). Children come from various social backgrounds, the middle class being dominant. N.O school is a "typical average" school for Brasov, being neither a prestigious school (centred exclusively on student performance), nor a problem school. We could say that it is a dynamic school where successes come together with various problems. Proof of the success and the openness of teachers for collaboration are the award winning projects ("Friends fur-ever", 2013;" Open the gates to the universe", 2017) that led to receiving the e-twinning school title.

The interview with N.O. school manager (who has 10 years of experience as a manager and 31 years as a teacher) has highlighted the fact that the values promoted through formal school documents and formulated in the school's mission and vision (*school is a non-discriminatory community where students feel protected, respected and motivated for permanent learning*) are also present in the teaching behaviour and the relationships with subordinates. The manager herself is involved in projects, supporting her colleagues by her own example. The projects at the county level "How do I feel, how do I behave?"; "Ethno Treasure", "Glorious Past - European Future", "On Mountain Trails" as well as Erasmus or e-twinning international projects such as "Values and student entrepreneurs", "My virtu@l friend", "The odd one...IN" target directly or indirectly values such as: integration, cooperation, collaboration, openness to communication, responsible use of media. The common key of all projects is that they work in student-teacher teams and they promotes and exercises social values with direct impact on students, teachers and parents.

It is also worth noting that the school teachers are supported by the school manager to capitalize on the physical environment in which the school is located through formal and non-formal activities in the area where the school is located. (e.g., tourist orientation contests, visits to the zoo, trips, etc.).

Both the physical environment and the social ambiance of the school influence both teachers and students. In this sense, the focus group analysis is significant.

The focus group with primary school pupils highlighted the fact that those in the higher grades (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>) understand the issues of students with SEN in a more nuanced way. We present in the table below, the topics identified in the focus group.

No.	Identified topics	Grades 1 <sup>st</sup> – 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Grades 3 <sup>rd</sup> – 4 <sup>th</sup>	Grades 5 <sup>th</sup> – 6 <sup>th</sup>	Grades 7 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup>
1	Representations regarding children with SEN	Medical conditions Learning difficulties	Medical conditions Learning difficulties Behavioural issues Social issues (ethnicity, low social status) Emotional issues (when you lose someone dear or when your parents get a divorce)	Medical conditions Learning difficulties Behavioural issues	Medical conditions Learning difficulties Behavioural issues
2	Emotions related to children with SEN	Pity Sadness	Pity Sadness Desire to help	Pity Desire to help	Pity Desire to help
3.	People responsible for helping children with SEN	The primary school teacher	The primary school teacher Parents The psychologist Colleagues, Friends	Parents Teachers The psychologist Colleagues, friends	Parents Teachers The psychologist Colleagues, friends
4	Proposals / solutions	-	-	Colleagues, friends A special classroom in school Discussions ("they about themselves")	An class to talk Inclusion in games Activities together

Table 1 Topics identified in focus group

By analysing comparatively the topics approached in the focus groups, we notice that the differences of perception, understanding and interpretation of the issues related to the integration of students with SEN in mainstream school are related to several factors:

1. The direct experience with children/people with SEN (children who have experienced life along those in difficulty have a different understanding and acceptance of people with SEN)
2. Participation in formal and non-formal activities on inclusion (pupils in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades declared that they had discussed in the civic education subject matter about "people with disabilities, people who have lost someone dear"; pupils in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades gladly remembered the projects made together with children with SEN). Here, the role of school in promoting values and behaviours specific to inclusion is clearly outlined. Of course, non-formal activities such as projects, competitions, cultural events had the greatest emotional impact.
3. Also, the presence of the support teacher and of the school psychologist who work with the pupils is another factor contributing to the formation of certain attitudes regarding children with SEN.

The focus groups have also highlighted certain vulnerabilities, besides the positive aspects related to inclusion:

1. There is still poor perception of people with SEN, with a domination of the medical aspect and the one related to academic performance (the most common description of students/people with SEN is a negative one: "they do not learn", "do not write", "are lazy"). This limited perception is sometimes sustained by the fact that teachers work separately (personalized) with these children, especially for the basic skills of writing and reading, and these children are "taken by the psychologist". The opinion of a second-grade girl is significant: "she, the psychologist, also takes me, but not because I am bad, but to develop."
2. Another weakness identified in the focus groups is linked to insufficient communication with students about integration issues. Children need more discussions with specialized people, who to present them, in an accessible way, various aspects of inclusion. Most of the time, the conversations are with the class teacher, in the primary school or with a teacher (in the secondary cycle) and very rarely with the parents. Most pupils participating in the focus groups appreciated the positive, interesting discussion and expressed their willingness to participate again in such discussions.

The parents' perspective on integration issues completed the interpretation of the data collected by the other methods. Analysing the questionnaires, which had a return rate of 75% in parents, we noticed that parents consider that the responsibility of integrating children with SEN belongs to parents (67%), to pupils with SEN and support teachers, to a very large extent (33%). Also, 80% of parents think, to a large extent and to a very large extent, that integration of children with SEN in mainstream schools means that they will work with typical children in common projects.

Unlike parents, teachers think that integration primarily depends on the support teacher and the school management.

The qualitative analysis of the answers to the questionnaires revealed that parents have a positive attitude towards integration, considering it to be an important, necessary issue, but place the responsibility outside the school, to the parents of children with SEN. The dominant emotions are those of pity, of concern, but too few say they are willing to spend time or money to support integration. The fact that parents see integration as involving children with SEN in common projects with their colleagues is a good thing that reflects changes in perception. We suppose that this change is also due to the children's projects developed in school, where parents were involved as well. However, there are still some changes to be made, as we noticed, according to the questionnaire answers, a discrepancy between what they feel and what they would be willing to do.

Teachers also have a positive attitude and they believe that integration is largely dependent on the support teacher, the school management and the group of pupils in which the child with SEN is integrated. The positive attitude can be explained by the fact that teachers know better the reality of integration and some of them have had this experience.

The teachers' positive attitude is influenced by the fact that they have had a very good collaboration with the support teacher. The proof that this collaboration is good is also the fact that the support teacher is known by all the teachers of the school, not only by those who work directly with him. The support teacher is always present in school (he does not have many schools in his didactic norm, as is the case in most schools in Brasov) and is involved in school projects. This is actually the key of the success of integration in this school.

By synthesizing the answers to the questionnaire, the analysis of the focus groups with children, interviewing the manager, we can presume that there is a contamination of attitudes from parents and teachers to children - something that is

noticeable especially at the level of emotions. There is generally a positive attitude towards the integration of children with SEN, which can be explained by several factors:

- The existence of children with SEN in school fact which fosters the social exercise of understanding and accepting the other,
- Availability of teaching staff to work in a personalized manner, to collaborate with the management team and with the support teacher,
- Effective involvement of the support teacher, the counsellor and the speech therapist in various school activities,
- The manager's and teachers' involvement in projects on integration (at different school levels),
- Exploiting the potential of the area and the community in organizing non-formal activities with a transformative impact on all students and teachers.

#### 4. Conclusions

Although the research carried out has the constraints specific to the constructivist-interpretative approach, where the truth is built through the dialogue between the participants and the researchers, from the adjustment of the perspectives and the impossibility of generalizing the conclusions, we can state, based on the presented case study, that a school promoting a culture of inclusion creates the premises of changing attitudes. We can presume that the integration of children with special educational needs depends on several factors: from the school culture that promotes social values such as tolerance, respect for difference, etc. to teachers directly involved in integration activities and parents who accept and understand the benefits of integration for all children.

This research is a starting point for a broader research that aims to compare different types of school culture and to investigate the relationship between school culture and the attitudes towards integration of all involved.

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