Support Teacher as Key Factor of Integration Children with Special Education Needs in Mainstream School

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Abstract

The issue of integrating children with special educational needs in mainstream school depends on several factors. The most important is the support teacher, who is the link between school, family and community, between children and teachers and other specialists. (Avramidis & all 2000, Ainscow 2016, etc.). Teachers need to change their own mind set and system of values according to the new social responsibilities in order to become promoters of human diversity, acceptance and tolerance. Therefore, teacher training must respond diligently to the new teacher's roles and responsibilities. The main purpose of this research was to identify the training needs for support teachers based on the analysis of their own socio-educational experience (their own role and their particular training needs as support teachers), as well as (mainstream school) teachers', pupils' and parents' perceptions regarding integration. This study was conducted in a mixt methods structure, which employed both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection. A questionnaire-based survey was conducted, with mainstream teachers, on one hand, and parents, on the other hand. We addressed the issues of attitudes towards the integration of children with SEN (special education needs) and the collaboration with the support teacher. Also, focus-group interviews were conducted with support teachers. A number of 112 participants were included in the study (57 teachers from mainstream schools, 20 support teachers, and 35 parents) Conclusion: Teachers' and parents' cognitive schemas regarding what a support teacher can and should do in order to facilitate the integration of children with SEN are different from his/her actual educational role and responsibilities. This gap between the social representations and the actual job description can be bridged by building a more complex and accurate understanding of how every actor involved in the integration process must become aware of one's personal beliefs and expectations, assume and thoroughly play his/her part in a collaborative manner. Teacher training through transformative learning based on sharing experiences and group projects is a learning experience suitable for developing competences for teachers for special education.

Keywords: teacher training, children with special educational needs, transformative learning, support teacher.

Introduction

This article is a continuation of a research (Voinea, 2018; Voinea, Topală, Bota, 2018) on teacher training for special education (support teachers). It is important to mention that in Romania the support teachers are the teachers who work with children with special educational needs who are integrated in mainstream school. One of the most important

responsibilities of the support teacher is to help children with SEN (special educational needs) to achieve the educational goals, to help classroom teachers to adapt curriculum, to be a liaison between school and community.

But, most support teachers often face major difficulties in their work because of parents, students and teacher`s mentalities and affective barriers. Despite all the efforts made for this integration, as European studies show (Unesco, 2015), the issue of integration / inclusion still raises many resistances.

There is research (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Newton et all, 2014) which shows that teachers' positive perception of pupils with disabilities or of inclusive education is a determining factor for their classroom behaviour. In this case, the support teachers have a major role in changing the mind sets of educational actors.

Support teachers, through their position in school, can make a significant contribution to changing mentalities, behaviours towards integration, and can help to develop an inclusive culture. More and more studies (Hattie, 2014; Senge, 2017; Fullan,1993) demonstrate the link between school culture, teachers' mental structures and school changes: "(....) The strong impact of our schools is the way we think" (Hattie, 2014, p.326). The way the teachers perceive and understand their roles and responsibilities contributes to their engaging in change in educational practice. That is why teachers today need to reconsider their own theories about their work and see themselves as something more than facilitators of learning, namely as agents of change (Fullan, 1993) with impact on the whole school culture.

How can this be achieved? First of all, through the appropriate training of support teachers, who then, through their interactions with all the actors involved in integration, will form new patterns of behaviour.

Training teachers through transformation is one of the possible solutions, which leads to the overcoming of cognitive and emotional barriers.

Why is the support teacher a key factor of integration?

Most specialists (Avramidis,Norwich 2002; Ainscow et all, 2016) in the field of special education emphasize that integration is a very complex process that depends on many factors. A literature review underlines a set of roles that a support teacher has, such as:

Assesses students' educational needs,

Collaborates with classroom teachers (for example, attending team meetings),

Assists all teachers in organizing curriculum and in using effective teaching strategies,

Serves as a liaison between the local school and the community,

Interacts with parents during conferences, home visits, and telephone conferences,

Is informed on research on intervention strategies.

This synthesis of the support teachers' roles and responsibilities emphasizes that the success of integration depends on them because they are the ones who analyse, select the educational experiences necessary for the child, share the results with the specialists, parents and teachers, permanently communicate with those involved in the integration .

Moreover, studies related to teachers' perception on integration show that positive attitudes lead to a good integration.

Even in the digital society, teachers remain agents of change because teachers can offer learning experiences that students, especially students with special educational needs, may not obtain at home.

The problem that arises is the training of support teachers who are aware of their important role in school and community. We also believe necessary a clearer redefinition of the support teachers' professional identity in a 21st Century school that develops a culture of inclusion, promoting diversity and interest in the student's well-being.

It is necessary to rethinking the teacher training system according to the individual and post-modern society. Teachers need to change their own mind set and system of values according to the new social responsibilities in order to become promoters of human diversity, acceptance and tolerance. Therefore, teacher training must respond diligently to the new teacher's roles and responsibilities.

The transformative learning as a training strategy for support teachers for special education has the potential of becoming an effective approach.

Transformative learning as training strategy for support teachers

One of the most important quests in the teacher training system is re-orienting teacher training for sustainability and rethinking education from the perspective of a humanistic approach (Unesco, 2005; 2015). Teacher training in accordance with the requirements of a sustainable society, which also takes into account the personal fulfillment of individuals, capable of producing visible changes in people's behaviour is transformative learning. The analysis of the emergence of the concept of transformative learning highlights its strong foundation: pedagogical, philosophical, practical (experiential) and last, but not least, social. The author of the transformative learning theory, J. Mezirrow, launched the concept of transformative learning in 1978 in the article *Transforming Perspectives*, inspired by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (the concept of critical consciousness), by Jurgen Habermans' philosophy (which makes the distinction between instrumental learning and communicative learning) and even by the observations of his wife's transforming experience, who returned to complete her studies as an adult.

Over the years, in which conferences and research on transformative learning took place, Mezirrow developed the concept also taking into account the criticisms it had attracted. Mezzirow defines transformative learning as "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, 2014p.168).

Transformative learning is a comprehensive theory of adult learning, based on social constructivism. It is the type of learning that suits the adults' characteristics (Stolovitch, Keeps 2017, pp.94-95), meaning that it is the one that takes into account the learners' experience, the fact that they can monitor their learning process, they are responsible and autonomous, but also have vulnerable spots, such as fear of failure and loss of reputation.

 Although it has its limits, the transformative learning theory has been used in adult and teacher training successfully (Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2010; Kroth and Craton,2014)

Transformative learning is based, according to Mezirow, on the reflection and confrontation of various perspectives. The social context in which experience is shared is also very important. For teachers, who usually work alone with students, the experience of sharing and reflection on their own behaviour are crucial.

All these theoretical prerequisites were the basis of a training programme for support teachers aimed at changing the mentality of integrating children with SEN and their role in the community and school. The programme was designed in the form of workshops where teachers were working in groups, debating issues related to their role and their profession, sharing experiences in a context based on respect, collaboration and good mood.

Methodology: The main purpose of this research was to identify the training needs for support teachers based on the research of their own socio-educational experience (their own role and their particular training needs as support teachers), as well as the (mainstream schools) teachers', pupils' and parents' perceptions regarding integration.

This study was conducted in a mixt 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 descriptive research design was used, employing 3 non-random samples – 35 parents, 57 mainstream teachers and 20 support teachers - and a mixt methods approach to data collection:

questionnaire-based surveys for parents and mainstream teachers,

focus-group interviews for support teachers,

over a span of two weeks.

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A questionnaire-based survey was conducted, with mainstream teachers, on one hand, and parents, on the other hand. We addressed the issues of attitudes towards integration of children with SEN, and the collaboration with the support teachers.

Also, focus-group interviews were conducted with support teachers.

This study included a number of 112 participants: a sample of 57 primary and secondary school teachers, 35 parents, and 20 support teacher from schools from Brasov.

Mainstream teachers were asked to respond to a questionnaire aiming to determine aspects regarding their collaboration with the support teachers. This questionnaire consisted of 34 closed -structured items, using a 5-point Likert scale, pertaining to both behaviour and attitude towards integration and the teacher`s collaboration with the support teacher.

For typical parents (whose children are normal, but have class colleagues with SEN), the same 27 closed-structured items questionnaire was used in order to collect information regarding their attitude towards the integration of children with SEN.

Results and Discussion:

After analysing the data collected via questionnaire, which targeted 57 teachers (from primary and secondary school) regarding their collaboration with support teachers, and 35 typical parents regarding their attitude towards the integration of children with SEN, we were able to have a more accurate image of how these two actors (teachers and parents) relate to the integration issues. A selection of results was made in order to present the most relevant information. As concerning mainstream teachers, we found that approximately 40% of the respondents declared to be willing to actively participate in the integration of children with SEN (31,58% - likely + 8,77% - very likely), as depicted in Fig 1.
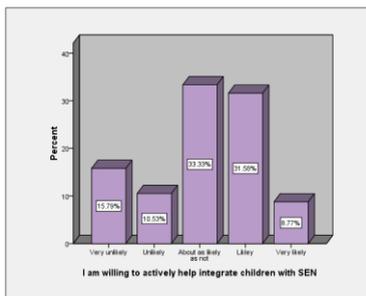

Figure 1. Distribution of declared willingness of mainstream teachers regarding their active participation in the integration of children with SEN

Moreover, as seen in Fig 2, 73% of the questioned teachers declared that they were willing and very willing to collaborate with support teachers in order to facilitate the integration of children with SEN.
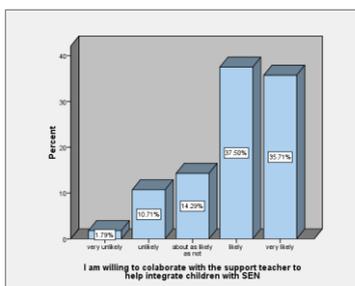

Figure 2. Distribution of mainstream teachers' declared willingness to collaborate with support teachers for the integration of children with SEN

As for their input regarding integration responsibility, nearly 59% of the teachers who responded agreed and strongly agreed to the contention that the main responsibility when thinking about integrating children with SEN in a typical class was theirs (Fig 3), whereas aprox. 69% of the respondents believed that support teachers were first bearers of the responsibility of integration (Fig 4).
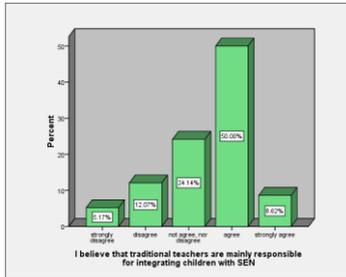

Figure 3. Levels of agreement declared by mainstream teachers regarding their perceived responsibility for the integration of children with SEN
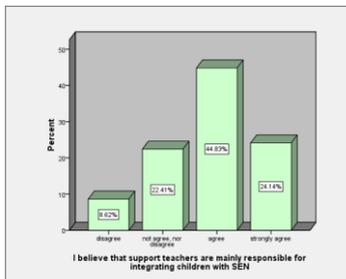

Figure 4. Levels of agreement declared by mainstream teachers regarding the support teachers' responsibility for the integration of children with SEN

Findings also showed that the mainstream teachers who responded perceived themselves as being not properly prepared to facilitate the integration of children with SEN – only 22,42% agreed and strongly agreed that a mainstream teacher was ready to facilitate integration (Fig 5) – coherently responding that they were willing (62,62%) to participate in specific training programmes concerning the facilitation of integration of children with SEN (Fig 6).
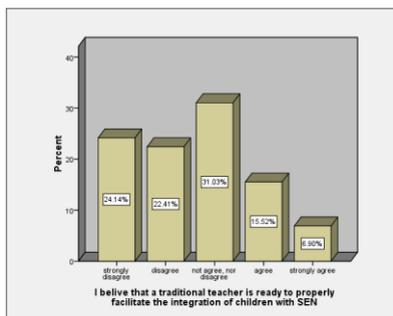

Figure 5. Levels of agreement declared by mainstream teachers regarding their readiness to facilitate the integration of children with SEN

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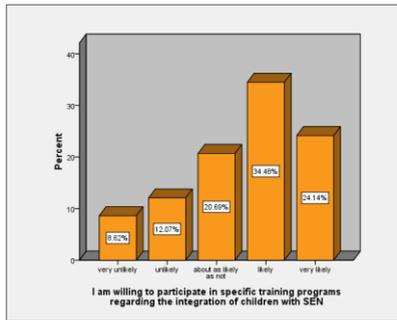Education and Research

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Figure 6. Mainstream teachers' declared willingness to participate in specific training programmes for the integration of children with SEN

Data was also collected from 35 typical parents who responded to the questionnaire, and the findings showed that 47% of parents with non-disabled children did not consider themselves as having a great responsibility when it came to facilitating the integration of SEN children (Fig 7).
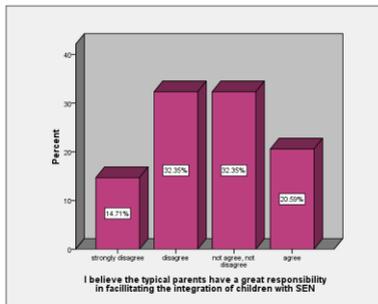

Figure 7. Levels of agreement declared by typical parents regarding their responsibility to infacilitate the integration of children with SEN

When asked whether the integration of children with SEN was beneficial (for everyone involved), 51,4% of the typical parents agreed or strongly agreed that it was indeed beneficial, even if approximately 59% of them declared that they were worried about the integration of a child with SEN in their child' class.
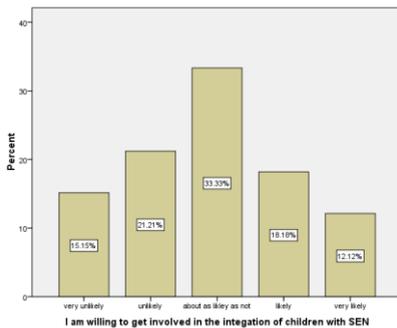

Figure 8. Declared willingness of typical parents to get involved in the integration of children with SEN

Moreover, when asked about their willingness to get involved in the integration process, their answers were somewhat equally distributed between willingness (in various degrees) and unwillingness, 33,33% being undecided (Fig 8). However, 54,28% of the typical parents declared willingness to encourage their non-disabled child to participate in specific educational activities (both inside and outside the classroom, curricular and extracurricular) in order to facilitate the integration of children with SEN.

The analysis of the data gathered through the focus group led to the outline of the following topics presented in Table 1.

No.	Identified topics	Teachers with less than 10 years of experience	Teachers with more than 10 years of experience
1	The roles and responsibilities of the support teacher	The main role of support, mediation	Support, mediation, "child's advocate"
2	The highest satisfaction	Integration of the child	Integration of the child Good relationships with parents and teachers
3	The greatest difficulty	Legislation Many documents to fill in	Many documents Lack of collaboration with teachers
4	Collaboration with Teachers	Difficult (Especially with teachers of exact sciences) Good (with primary school teachers)	Difficult (Especially with teachers of exact sciences) Good (with primary school teachers)
5	Training needs	Specific courses (autism, behavioural disorders, therapies	Specific courses (autism, behavioural disorders, therapies) Personal development

Table 1 Topics identified in focus group

The focus group with support teachers highlighted that in terms of roles and responsibilities, teachers defined themselves as support, mediator, or even the child's "advocate". The fact that there are no differences in perception between the two categories of teachers (in terms of experience) shows that one of the responsibilities assumed by support teachers is precisely to help the child with special educational needs.

Focusing on the child with special educational needs is also obvious in the second theme identified in the focus group, which is that all teachers say that the greatest satisfaction they have is when the child is integrated. However, this integration is perceived differently by teachers (some say they feel satisfaction when the student acquires certain behaviours such as writing or reading, or when the student succeeds in passing from one school level to another). We can notice a difference in senior teachers' perception, who also add good relations with pupils' parents and teachers as far as satisfaction is concerned. This demonstrates that, with experience, satisfaction with working with children with SEN is not only about the integration of the child, but also about good relationships with other important agents of integration.

The support teachers' difficulties are related to the (many) documents they must do (intervention plans, curricular adaptations), legal aspects or the lack of collaboration with class teachers (as reported by support teachers with over 10 years of experience).

Regarding working with class teachers, all support teachers said there was a good collaboration with the primary school teachers and a difficult collaboration with teachers from secondary school, especially with those teaching science.

With regard to training needs, we noticed that all support teachers desired training courses addressing the specific issues they encountered in everyday practice. In older teachers, however, the need for personal development also arose.

By summarizing the data from the focus groups and from the questionnaires, we can state that support teachers, especially those with less seniority in education, have a limited perceptions about their roles and responsibilities. In general, they only see themselves as support teachers for pupils, less for teachers and parents, or as agents promoting the values of inclusion in the school or the community. We could say that they are especially centred on the child and his problem. Experienced teachers have a wider perception on both the roles and responsibilities, and the training needs. Collaboration of support teachers with class teachers and parents remains a vulnerable issue of integration. An important barrier is the traditional representation of the role of school, support teachers and parents' involvement in school life.

Even if the research has its limits, specific to a predominantly qualitative research, we consider that the collected data help to design a training programme, primarily aimed at reconsidering professional identity.

4. Conclusions

The present findings could have practical implications in a sens that they underlie the need for support teachers's specific training.An important conclusion refers to the fact that the perceptions on the role of school, of teachers, collaboration with parents are obstacles in adopting new roles (not only for teachers, but also for parents), of roles more flexible and tailored to the students and the community. An important part in covering this distance between beliefs, perceptions and behaviours is even given to support teachers, who, by adopting new roles, can make changes in their network of relationships. Hence the practical conclusion: the need for adequate training of support teachers.

Support teachers need a transformative training (in Mezirow's view), capable of producing those mental changes that lead to new, more flexible and more adaptive behaviours

Acknowledgements

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