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CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY WITH GROUP INVESTIGATION

Keywords

*Inclusive education, Group investigation, Case study,
Special educational needs, Empowerment education, Romania.*

Abstract

Inclusive education gains the interest and the attention of all Romanian educational factors. However, the challenge of developing inclusive schools is not only for policy makers but also for teachers, professionals, parents and students alike. This qualitative case study explores through Group Investigation the lived experiences of primary school teachers in attempting to create an inclusive learning environment. The purpose of the study is to help students from Pedagogy, future educators, to become familiar with the inclusive education challenges and best interventions. Data have been collected through interviews,

observations, and document analysis. Results showed that teachers face challenges due to their initial professional training not enough adequate to the inclusive education reality, diversity of special needs in classrooms, insufficient support from the families of the students with SENs, and a reduced number of itinerant teachers. The study offers participants' solutions to cope with the inclusion challenges, showing that inclusive education can become a reality when educational factors work together.

INTRODUCTION

Romania faced changes in the last years in many areas, and education is no exception. Aligning our practices with the European Union (EU) requirements and the global view upon inclusion, led our educational system into the process of applying specific EU recommendation. Various important aspects of inclusion have been promoted for implementation, such as accepting all children in educational institutions no matter their group membership, preparing them for social inclusion regardless the problems they manifest (Gherguț, 2010), developing a school-family partnership, and adjusting the schools to the needs of the students (Gherguț, 2011a).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Inclusive education gained interest in the Romanian educational system. As an EU member, Romania adjusted its laws in order to fulfil EU's requirements. Inclusive education is one of these requirements (Gherguț, 2011b). Even if the legislation exists, the implementation of inclusive education, in its real sense, is still incipient. One possible reason is the "discriminatory resistance of the society" (Alexiu et al., 2016, p. 26).

It is also important to change teachers' understanding and attitudes upon inclusion and its methods of intervention in the classrooms (Gherguț & Grasu, 2012). In order to produce this change, there is a need to properly train teachers (Gherguț, 2014) and to create real inclusive schools. However, inclusive education received a mainly positive attitude from the teachers' group even if there are some educators who do not yet totally support its implementation (Gherguț, 2010).

Research reveals that inclusive education is a sensitive (Blândul, 2010) and a challenging matter (Mag et al., 2017) due to several aspects. Some are organizational challenges such as school's financial resources and equipment (Bolborici & Bódi, 2018), school's space, proper infrastructure, and special facilities (Rasmitadila & SuryantiTambunan, 2018). An inclusive school is prepared to receive its students no matter if they have or not Special Educational Needs (SENs).

Other are methodological classroom challenges. Teachers have difficulties in working with heterogenic groups. The effort is bigger as the activities must be differentiated and individualized (Gherguț, 2010). Creating a positive learning environment can be difficult for educators when there is a diversity of special needs in classrooms. However, in such positive environment children with SENs feel accepted and valued (Alexiu et al., 2016).

A school can face different other challenges regarding inclusion. Some are related to the lack of teachers training in inclusive instruction and lack of diverse educational materials (Gherguț & Grasu, 2012). Other are associated with a big number of students in each class (Alexiu et al., 2016) or a non-flexible curriculum, usually used in traditional education (Gherguț, 2016). Another challenge comes from the low level of involvement of the students with SENs' families in supporting schools' interventions. A small number of itinerant teachers can create an imbalanced distribution of teaching responsibilities in the classroom,

children with SENs not benefiting from a professional support (Gherguț & Grasu, 2012).

At school level, it is expected that the leadership promotes politics of acceptance for all children, hiring specialists (psychologists, speech therapists, counselors), training its teachers, allocating or finding funds for learning materials, deciding to adjust the curriculum, and developing continuously collaboration with itinerant teachers (Gherguț & Grasu, 2012; Manea, 2006).

At the class level, well-trained educators can make adjustments regarding the level of requirements for students with SENs, by delivering the content based on a personalized curriculum (Blândul, 2010). The teaching strategies and methods are flexible in the classrooms (Gherguț, 2011a) based on the students' needs. Evaluation is systematic and the individual progress is continuously monitored (Gherguț, 2016). Teacher-parents relationship is important and may be based upon positive interactions for supporting students. For effective interventions plans there is a need for good collaboration between the teachers of the class and the itinerant teachers (Bolborici & Bódi, 2018).

In Romania, inclusive education has legislative support and it was received with relative openness. However, there are still many challenges that the educational partners (schools, teachers, students, professionals, parents) must face. Some attitudes, behaviors, interventions may be changed, other may be understood. Thus, inclusive education may become a reality and not only remaining a desideratum for our society.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of the Primary school teachers regarding the challenges faced in the process of inclusion. Further, the study explores methods of intervention teachers use in inclusive classes. Additionally, the study aims to help students from Pedagogy of Preschool and Primary School (PPPS) academic program, future educators, to become familiar with the inclusive education challenges and interventions.

The study is based upon empowerment education philosophical framework developed by Freire in 1970 (Freire, 2005). According to this theory, education is important as it gives power to the people. In this empowering process, the dialog is key for overcoming possible issues.

Four research questions guided this study.

- 1.How are the teachers trained for inclusive instruction?
- 2.What are the challenges teachers face in inclusive instruction?
- 3.What methods do teachers use to overcome the difficulties they meet in inclusive instruction?
- 4.What are the recommendations of the teachers regarding a successful inclusive instruction?

METHODOLOGY

The present study is a qualitative research. Its main purpose is to explore the experiences of Primary school teachers regarding inclusive education, the challenges of inclusion teachers face and what coping strategies they found. Thus, qualitative research is the most suitable methodology.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The design used in this research is case study. According to Yin (2014), a case study is an appropriate design when we look for the deep experiences of the participants who lived the phenomenon under exploration. Thus, as researchers, we can gain new perspectives upon a phenomenon. When a phenomenon is bounded, meaning has limited data, time for observation, and number of participants, then it is a case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study the case is inclusive education and it was conducted in one school. Thus, it is a holistic single case study (Gaikwad, 2017; Yin, 2014).

In addition to case study, we used group investigation (GI). According to Sharan and Sharan (1992), GI is a cooperative learning strategy used for “classroom instruction in which students work collaboratively in small groups to examine experience and understand their topic of study” (1992, p. 1). By using GI, the last-mentioned purpose of this study can be fulfilled.

The GI has six stages, applied to one specific group of students from PPPS. Each of these steps is described below (Sharan & Sharan, 1990):

(1) *Identifying the topic to be investigated and organizing students into research groups*—the students had a list with possible topics to investigate, all related to our Inclusive Instruction class. They had the freedom to group themselves by different criteria (proximity, topic interest, affinities).

(2) *Planning the investigation in groups*—together with the students we divided the work in small sections and decided within the allocated time to explore the literature in the field.

(3) *Carrying out the investigation*—we divided the responsibilities regarding data collection and data analysis. The students of this group and the teacher (researcher), conducted the class observations and interviews, and transcribed the interviews. For document analysis, individual interventions plans have been collected.

(4) *Preparing a final report*—data was analyzed, coded, organized into categories, and the themes were developed.

(5) *Presenting the final report*—all GI’s parts were assembled and a written report, in a form of PPT, was prepared. The study was presented at the university’s scientific conference in 2019. For each member of the investigation group parts of the presentation were allocated. One day before the scientific conference we had a meeting to polish the last details of our presentation.

(6) *Evaluation*—the GI presentation was appreciated by the conference participants. Therefore, we discussed and decided to publish this study. We evaluated the process and the product of this GI and we listed

the aspects which needed improvement in the limitations section of the study.

RESEARCH SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The institution where the study was conducted is a Primary school institution in Ilfov county. It is an institution where students from ethnic and non-ethnic groups attend the school together. The participants were three primary school teachers. We used a purposive sampling as the goal of the study was to collect information from those having experience in inclusive education. The criteria for selecting the participants were (a) to have students with special needs in their classroom, with or without diagnosis, and (b) to be willing to participate. All three participant are women, teaching in the primary school for several years. All of them have students with special needs in the classroom but without a diagnosis.

DATA COLLECTION

Several sources of data collection were used in this study: interviews, class observations, and documents analysis. We conducted interviews with three primary school teachers, all meeting the selection criteria. Class observations have been carried out by the GI students, following the sections from the observation guide specifically developed for this study: (1) general information about class (grade, school year, subject-matter, teacher's name, date); (2) organization of classroom space; (3) teaching methods used; (4) teacher-students interaction; (5) student-student interaction; (6) category of students with SENs; (7) teachers' interventions in the case of students with SENs. Individual intervention plans from the teacher-participants have been collected for analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed in order to respond research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process of data analysis consisted in transcribing the recorded interviews, coding and organizing data into categories and themes. The interviews were analyzed together with the classroom observations and the documents.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is the term used for the quality of a study, showing if a study can or cannot be trusted (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The credibility of this study was assured by the triangulation of the data sources: interviews, observations, and document analysis.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was conducted in an ethical manner. We followed several important steps in our research. First, we obtained the verbal approval of the institution where we conducted the study, both from the general director and deputy director. Second, we obtained the verbal and written consent of the participants. From the written consent form, they received detailed information about the study. Third, we assured the participants we take care of their anonymity and confidentiality in our study. We used pseudonyms for each participant in order to assure the anonymity in reporting our findings. Regarding confidentiality, we mentioned that the shared information remains between the participant and researchers (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The participants have received also a copy of the consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through the collected data, the research questions have been answered: (1) How are the teachers trained for inclusive instruction? (2) What are the challenges teachers face in inclusive instruction? (3) What methods do teachers use to overcome the difficulties they meet in inclusive instruction? and (4) What are the recommendations of the teachers regarding a successful inclusive instruction? The findings of this study are presented by answering one by one research questions.

TEACHERS' TRAINING

The participants balanced between to be and not to be well trained:

(1) *Theoretical training*—looking on the participants theoretical training one teacher have mentioned that “Theoretically we have been very well prepared, but the reality is totally different” (Miruna/Interview). The participants mentioned that in working with children with SENs they need specific instruction. These findings are supported by other studies which have showed that teachers need a special training in order to effectively address the needs of the students with SENs (Alexiu et al., 2016; Gherguț, 2012; Mag et al., 2017).

(2) *Lack of theoretical training*—one participant recognized that “I had no training [regarding inclusion]. We had to adjust, based on what we have read, so only based on an individual study of some case studies. We did not have training” (Rachel/Interview). Other studies support these results too. The inadequate training of educators regarding inclusion is a real issue. Teachers' training should be adjusted to the realities they meet in an inclusive classroom (Gherguț, 2011b, 2012; Mag et al., 2017).

DIVERSITY OF CHALLENGES

The participants of the study faced different challenges in their teaching profession with regard to inclusive education, as follows:

(1)*Students manifest different problems*—some of them have attention deficit: “They cannot concentrate more than five minutes” (Rachel; Observation I). Another teacher mentioned that “I cannot keep him focused for a long time because he starts being nervous” (Miruna). Other students betray a social inadaptability: “Some are isolated, another speaks alone. [They manifest] strange behaviors” (Rachel). “I had violent students. They have uncontrolled reactions, throwing out, fighting, being impulsive” (Laura). The motricity issues are also present: “The student cannot write the letter or the number in the allocated space” (Miruna). In inclusive education the diversity of the students with SENs can be a challenge not only for the teachers of the class but also for the schools not yet prepared to fulfil their needs (Gherguț, 2012).

(2)*Lack of diagnosis*—was another challenge the teacher-participants expressed as an issue in their classes. The participants have students with SENs but without a diagnosis. Therefore, they cannot look for a professional support (psychologists, speech therapists) in order to develop a plan for individualized interventions. The parents refuse to evaluate their children and refuse to admit a possible problem. “They are all perfect. There is no one diagnosed as having special needs or for other problems” (Rachel). Such parental attitude can reduce the professional interventions which aim to create a positive educational inclusion for the children (Gherguț, 2012).

(3)*Lack of parents’ involvement*—family has an important role especially in the education of the children with SENs. One participant said that “If I don’t have the parents’ support and they don’t work supplementary at home, I cannot help student more than that” (Miruna). Laura said “The parents are not aware in a first phase that their little child has a problem” which make the intervention of the teachers less prompt.

There is also a decreasing level of parent interest as Rachel said “Parents’ interest decreased very much. There is an imbalance between what they do for their children and the expectations they have from school to do for their children” (Rachel). A low involvement of parents has negative effects upon inclusion. Several studies identified the support of parents as an important factor in inclusion (Bolborici & Bódi, 2018; Gherguț, 2011a, 2014).

(4)*Lack of itinerant teachers*—without a systematic support from specialists, the teachers of the class cannot accomplish much for these students with SENs. “These itinerant teachers are, I don’t know, one or two in the county. Very few” (Laura). As a result, these specialists cannot spend much time supporting the students with special needs. Rachel says, “We have an itinerant teacher who works with this child 30 minutes, once a week”. There is a need to have well prepared itinerant teachers who can support students with special needs in their education journey (Gherguț, 2010; Gliga & Popa, 2010) but also to develop partnerships with the parents (Bolborici & Bódi, 2018; Gherguț, 2016)

(5)*Large number of students in a class*—usually the classes have a large number of students. One teacher mentioned that “I cannot let the 28 students and take care in a special way of these two students with SENs. From my point of view, it is not benefic for them” (Laura). Studies have showed that, when several students with SENs are part of a class with a large number of students, the situation is more challenging for both teacher and students (Alexiu et al., 2016).

BETWEEN DESIRE AND FULFILMENT

Speaking about the methods used to overcome the challenges in inclusive instruction, the participants mentioned several aspects:

(1)*Accepting the reality*—even when the situation is not so positive “we do what we can do. Many times, I am not satisfied with what I do. But,

taking into consideration that I have 28 students in the class, all six-year-olds, it's too difficult" (Miruna).

(2)*Discussions with parents*—communication can build bridges between two parts. In this case, "We encourage parents to discuss at home with their children through dialog" (Rachel). Miruna said "I am really glad that this mother communicates and supports me. She comes and sees what we work in the classroom and she practices at home with her daughter." In such cases, when the parents are open to communicate with the teacher, the child with SENs can improve and make good progress.

(3)*Differentiated evaluation*—the participants of the study decided to apply an evaluation based on the individual potential of each student and especially for those with SENs. "The evaluation sheets were, in a way at a minimal level, so I encouraged them in this way" (Laura).

(4)*An environment wherein the children feel accepted*—this is a very important aspect as the children with SENs have already a low self-esteem. "The students support each other, they help each other. I mean, they did not reject them. I did not allow them from the beginning" (Laura; Observation). Alexiu and colleagues (2016) found out that the learning environment plays an important role for students with SENs development, being challenging for teachers to create a positive space wherein students feel comfortable and accepted.

LOOKING FOR IMPROVEMENTS

Participants made recommendation regarding how they see a successful implementation of inclusive education. They addressed suggestions for three groups of participants in education.

(1)*For training organizations*—they should provide (a) special trainings addressing different problems regarding inclusion. "I would really like to find a course to help me in my work, especially with those students with attention deficit" (Rachel). There is a need not only for learning proper

methods to address students with special needs but also organizing (b) trainings in how to plan activities for these students. “Nobody, at any course, showed us... no one showed me, look, lady, for mindfulness, for logical-mathematical intelligence you must do this or that” (Laura).

(2)*For future teachers*—experience does not appear suddenly. It comes in a direct contact with the reality from schools. Therefore, the participants gave those who are preparing to be teachers two important recommendations: (a) keep contact with the reality from schools. “They should go in schools, assist in classes, to clearly see what the problems are and then strive to find the best method to work with these children” (Laura). In addition to assistance, future teachers should be aware of the need of possessing a (b) very good theoretical knowledge. “It is important to know very well children psychology for the age of the students you will work with. The teaching methods are also important, to be creative, to always bring new materials to your students and to think on how to improve your work for them” (Rachel). Several other studies found out that one of the interventions to consider in inclusive education is an adequate training for the class teachers (Alexiu et al., 2016; Mag et al., 2017) and itinerant teachers (Bolborici & Bódi, 2018).

(3)*For schools’ administration*—not only teachers training or their exposure to the school reality is important but also the support they receive from the school administration. The participants consider important to have (a) a smaller number of students in the classroom, and (b) special classes for students with SENs. “There are already 32 children in the classroom and if you have also students with special needs it is too much. It is over the power of a teacher” (Miruna). This result is supported also by Alexiu and colleagues (2016) who state that a large number of students in the classroom can reduce the opportunities for a personalized approach of the students. Miruna continued by saying that “I would recommend organizing a special class for these children, who can have professors prepared for such a work.” It is a mixture between human rights and special

right concepts, trying to identify the best practices for the children with SENs (Alexiu et al., 2016).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this study we can highlight several recommendations. Schools' administration should assure a good in-service training for teachers, creating real inclusive schools, and providing enough itinerant teachers. For teachers we recommend considering participation at special trainings in inclusive instruction and identifying and applying effective methods in working with students with SENs. We recommend the involvement of university students in group investigations. They may gain both knowledge and skills in their field. Additionally, they develop research and collaborative skills, being able to investigate individually or in groups other topics of interest. For further research, we recommend the study to be applied on a bigger number of teacher participants in both rural and urban schools and also, involving parents and administrators too.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations of this study consist in a short time allocated for data collection and the small number of the participants. We may also add the limited time for the PPPS students' training in qualitative research, and especially in GI method. As this study is a qualitative research, the generalizability of the findings resides in the choice of the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

Even if in Romania inclusive education is nascent, a change is necessary in the way educators understand inclusion and the methods of

interventions they use in their classrooms. There is a need for an adequate training of educators but also assuring enough and well-prepared itinerant teachers. The educational system should develop real inclusive schools, willing to meet the needs of different kind of students, aiming to educate them in the best manner for society, no matter the difficulties or the disabilities these students manifest.

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