

The attitudes of parents and teachers regarding the process of integration for children with special educational needs in the mainstream educational system

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Abstract: This paper presents various specific attitudes concerning the inclusive education of parents and educators connected with main educational facilities in the County of Iasi. Sixty-six parents and 54 educators participated in the study and filled in two specific scales: *Parental Attitudes toward the Kindergarten Inclusion Scale* (PATKIS) and *My Own Child in an Inclusion Classroom Scale* concerning the attitudes regarding the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the main educational stream. Significant differences between educators with higher education degrees and those with undergraduate degrees are noticed: professionals with fewer years of formal education have a more positive attitude regarding the inclusion of pupils with special needs in the main stream educational system. The results are important for teachers and parents who have children with special educational needs.

Keywords: pupils with special needs, main educational stream, inclusion in education

1. Introduction

Current challenges for the mainstream educational system in Romania: Inclusive School

Inclusion in education is an approach that implies meeting a variety of educational necessities for different children and the main purpose is the social integration of all children, especially the ones with special educational needs (SEN). Even though integrated education is more often focused on the children and the support for them, inclusive education has as its primary objective the adaptability of the schools to the special learning requirements and, by

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extension, the flexibility with which they embrace the great diversity of children in a community. One of the most important benefits of an inclusive school is the overall quality optimization of the educational system obtained through the increase of efficiency. In order to produce a significant change towards a real inclusive system, special education facilities should take action towards the integration of children with special needs into the mainstream educational system, while the latter should be prepared to receive and integrate the children that require special education. The second article of the *Salamanca Declaration* (1994) sustains that *regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education.*

The inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream educational system alongside children with normal development has proved to be the best pathway in early education (Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007). If started early in preschool, such an inclusion seems to increase the acceptance of special needs colleagues in the group and to diminish the risk of their rejection later on, during school and as well during adulthood, mainly because preschool age children have not yet developed social stereotypes. Moreover, putting children with special needs in regular classes may spread the idea of normalcy of educational and social inclusion among both parents and educators and may better prepare the child to function in the main environment of the world (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015).

Studies regarding the parents' attitudes concerning educational inclusion of children with special needs

Research has shown that the opinions and beliefs of individuals involved in the process of inclusion are of great importance (D'Alonzo & Ledon, 1992). Therefore, if the process of inclusion requires meaningful educational changes, it is essential to consider the parent's concerns, since they have important influence on both the process of changing and the standards of practice.

The available data suggests that parents have, in general, positive attitudes regarding integration, especially those with preschool children and those with children with special needs (de Boer & Munde, 2015; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015). The hope of the latter, that their children will get accepted in the regular schools, be treated as the others, have playmates and learning companions as well as friends and models of the same age, is understandable. Such parents believe that the benefits of integration (in terms of acceptance and comprehension) are very large. Usually they exhibit much more positive

attitudes and hopes in comparison with parents with regularly developed children (Gasteiger-Klicpera, Klicpera, Gebhardt & Schwab, 2013). Even parents who have no experience regarding inclusive education seem to show positive attitudes concerning educational inclusion (MacMillan, Tarrant, Abraham & Morris, 2014).

Some authors believe that segregation leads to negative attitudes among people, while interaction with persons with special needs can result in positive attitudes towards them. Not only does the interaction itself determine the positive attitude towards people with special needs, but also the nature and duration of interpersonal contact and the nature of interpersonal relationships increases the level of acceptance. Parents who have encountered inclusive educational environments generally have more positive attitudes than parents without such familiarisation and parents who notice that their children experience more success in preschool inclusive education have more positive attitudes than those who assess the experience of their children as less positive (Green & Stoneman, 1989). However, the study of Green and Stoneman (1989), which is comprised data from both mothers and fathers, showed that mothers and fathers had the same positive attitudes regarding inclusion. Positive past interactions of mothers with people with special needs, as well as some personal factors, had a strong influence on their attitude towards inclusion, while fathers were mainly influenced by the mothers' attitudes. Even though mothers are more often the main focus of research than fathers - since they are the ones who choose the educational programs for their children and are the ones who communicate with teachers - it is also necessary to study the fathers' beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion. Most studies based on parents' attitudes towards inclusion managed to collect data only from the mothers (Blacher & Turnbull, 1982).

The existing evidence indicates that educated parents more positive attitudes regarding inclusion (Kaiser & Roberts, 2013; Stoiber et al., 1998), though a relationship between the parents' level of education and the attitudes towards the inclusion has not been found yet - mothers with a higher level of education believed that the behavior of children with special educational needs could not be damaging for the class environment (Green & Stoneman, 1989).

Regarding the attitude of parents that have children with normal development, research has found that their acceptance of inclusion depends on the different types of children's needs and the degree of disability of the child. While the integration of children with physical or sensorial disabilities in inclusive classes did not cause any concern for parents of children with normal development, the integration of children with mental retardation, emotional problems or behavioral problems was considered a problematic issue by most parents (Green & Stoneman, 1989). The more serious the degree of mental retardation, the more worried the parents were concerning the integration of

that child (Green & Stoneman, 1989). Moreover, research has shown that during a group activity, mothers of children with normal development preferred to interact with physically disabled children rather than with Down syndrome children (Innes & Diamond, 1999, Downs et al, 2014), an observation that confirms the greater reluctance to accept the integration of mentally retarded children.

E. Tafa and G. Manolitsis (Greece, 2003) conducted a study regarding the attitudes of parents with normally developed children towards an inclusive preschool. The results showed that parents had positive attitudes towards inclusive education and the greater the frequency of parents' interaction with people with special needs, the less amount of concern they had with respect to the inclusion of their child. There were no significant differences between the attitudes of mothers and fathers as well as between different levels of education. Most parents seemed to find more advantages than disadvantages regarding their children's participation in inclusive programs.

It is important to emphasize that the above-mentioned studies collected data from countries where inclusive education had been introduced for several years. In Romania, inclusive education was recently introduced, which means that a thorough investigation of all factors involved in this new process is essential.

Purpose of Research

The present study is focusing on evaluating the specific and differentiated aspects of parents' and teachers' attitudes towards the integration of children with special educational needs and as well assessing the differences in performance (average grades for two main school subjects) between children who were part of an inclusive or non-inclusive group. The concern of parents and teachers regarding the integration of their own child in an inclusive or non-inclusive class was also explored.

Furthermore, we looked into the influence of teachers' educational level and amount of experience on attitudes regarding integration as well as the use of a higher variety of work methods both home and in class.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A number of 140 subjects were included in the research (25% male and 75% female). A total of 66 were parents and 54 were professionals - psychologists, special education teachers, teachers on various subjects and primary school teachers. The majority of professionals (94%) have a university education.

2.2. Instruments

A questionnaire was used to assess parents' attitudes towards inclusive education. The questionnaire included: (a) a section that required background information about education and their relationships with people with special needs, (b) two open questions and 2 scales.

The first section consisted of 7 items. The first item asked whether the mother or father completed the questionnaire. The two following items required information about the educational background of the parents and the next four items asked about the parents' interactions with people with special needs (if their own children had special educational needs or if they had ever met someone who had). Parents that responded "yes" to the second question were asked to indicate whether the person with special needs was a friend, relative, colleague or acquaintance and how frequently they interacted with that person (every day, 2-3 times per week, 2-3 per month, or 2-3 times per year).

Parental Attitudes towards the Kindergarten Inclusion Scale (PATKIS) consisted of 36 points derived from relevant translated and adapted measures (Green and Stoneman, 1989; Stoiber *et al.*, 1998). The participants were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement using a 4-point Likert scale (1 - *I strongly disagree*, 2 - *I disagree*, 3 - *I agree*, 4 - *I strongly agree*).

My Own Child in an Inclusion Classroom Scale consists of 7 items. The participants were asked to indicate their level of concern when in their children's class were integrated pupils with different types of special educational needs: severe, moderate or mild mental retardation, physical disability, behavioral problems, impaired vision or hearing. The parents' degree of concern was assessed using a 4-point Likert scale (1 - *not concerned at all*, 2 - *somewhat concerned*, 3 - *concerned*, 4 - *very concerned*).

The first section of the questionnaire was adapted so that it could be used to assess both teachers' and parents' attitudes concerning the integration of children in classes with or without students with special educational needs.

All of the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire that consists of a section regarding educational background and relationships with people with special needs as well as two scales adapted for parents and teachers. Next, they were asked to state two possible advantages and two possible disadvantages for the case when their own child was integrated into an inclusive class.

3. Results

The statistical analysis (*Anova Univariate*) highlighted that the scores for global attitudes on integration are influenced by the level of education ($F(1,119) = 3.343, p = 0.022 < 0.050$); teachers with a higher level of education

scored lower at the global attitudes scale than teachers with a lower level of education. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1, considering the level of education.

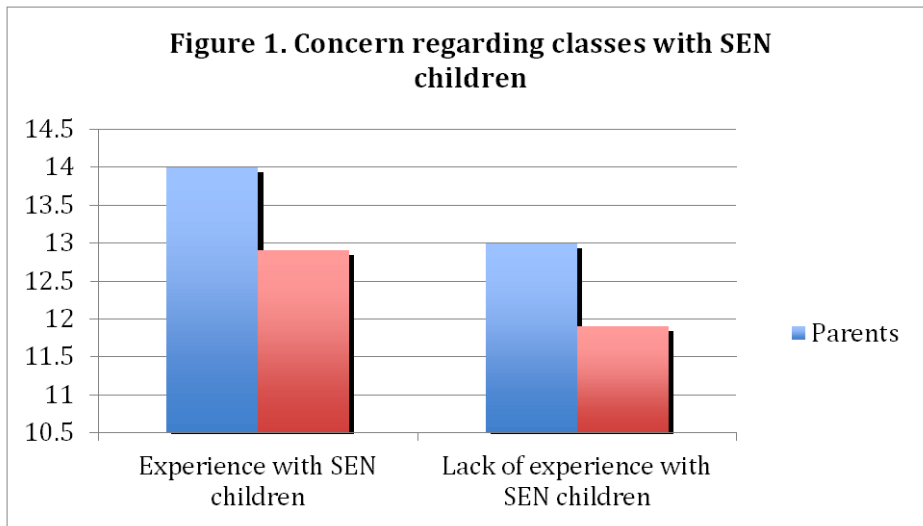
Table 1. Global attitudes on integration

Category	Level of education	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Parent	general school	7	18,1429	1,6762	,6335
	highschool	40	18,5250	3,2184	,5089
	colleage	9	20,3333	2,7839	,9280
	university	10	16,7000	4,1647	1,3170
	Total	66	18,4545	3,2872	,4046
Teacher	preuniversity	3	21,0000	1,7321	1,0000
	university	51	17,1373	3,3348	,4670
	Total	54	17,3519	3,3767	,4595

No significant differences were found between the parents' and teachers' scores at Global attitudes on the integration scale, regardless of level of education. Moreover, it was found that neither for parents nor teachers did the amount of experience have any significant effect on the scores for global attitudes on integration.

The concern regarding classes with SEN children did not differ significantly for parents and teachers, based on their level of experience with special needs children (*One Way Anova*). Marginal significant differences were observed between the level of concern about classes with SEN children between parents and teachers - parents scored higher on *Concern regarding classes with a SEN children* subscale: $F(1, 119) = 3.524, p = 0,063 > 0,050, p < 0.070$ (*Figure 1*).

The amount of concern regarding classes with normally developed children did not differ between parents and children, regardless the amount of experience the participants had with children with SEN. There were no significant differences found between the variety of work methods used by parents and teachers, regardless of the amount of experience they had with children with SEN.



4. Discussion

The teachers that achieved the highest scores at the global attitude scale are the ones that have a lower level of education - the primary school teachers. The teachers that are part of this category have daily close interaction with the students so, while promoting the interests of students, they were able to develop more positive global attitudes concerning the integration of children with special educational needs. Given the fact that an inclusive system has not yet been implemented in the mainstream educational system, most of the teachers have only mere interactions with children with special needs, so they did not embrace the idea of integrating children with SEN in ordinary schools. Another reason why children with special needs are not integrated into the mainstream school system is that, even though integration has been successful in many schools, the concept of an inclusive educational system has yet to be developed.

It seems that the amount of experience with children with special needs is quite small, the number of professionals working with these children is relatively low, and the members of the groups change from year to year, resulting in a lack of involvement and lack of appropriate decisions regarding the integration of these children. These shortcomings have slowed the process of integration of children with special needs in the mainstream educational system.

It is already known that working with individuals with special needs requires a great deal of effort, and it seems that all the hard work invested until now in spreading the knowledge is not enough yet. Most people have responded positively when asked about the integration of children with SEN,

but when confronted with the situation of sending their own child to an inclusive school, they become reluctant and refuse to accept the presence of other children with SEN in their child's class. It is possible that these results are related to the mistrust of parents regarding teacher efficiency when it comes to managing an inclusive class (Green si Stoneman, 1989; Tafa, Manolitsis, 2003). We think that parents who were less concerned about integrating their own child in an inclusive class have a greater amount of experience with children who have SEN or maybe their family history of children with special needs may have determined them to be more compliant to this category of children, and so they have presented a more positive attitude towards them, which encourages the process of integration in inclusive schools. The theory regarding the efficiency of the educational contact proves not only the useful existence of the contacts but the quality and the duration of these contacts that create positive attitudes (Tafa & Manolitsis, 2003).

The concern regarding classrooms with normally developed children was similar for parents and teachers, regardless of the amount of experience in working with children with special needs. This shows explicitly that accepting an inclusive educational system and encouraging cooperation among normally developed children and those with special needs is beneficial and does not affect the development of normal students as well as cause stagnation or decrease their performance.

Neither teachers, nor parents had different scores on the variation of methods in the classroom. It is possible that the methods used by professionals in inclusive classes are the same as those used in regular classes, which is contradictory with the knowledge that children with special educational needs often require different curricula and different methods that would help them assimilate the information taught in class.

The number of methods used in the classroom and at home is not different for parents or teachers and is not influenced by the amount of experience with children with special needs. The Romanian cluster on which the survey was applied have relatively little or no experience with children with special educational needs or with normally developed children that go to inclusive schools.

The study confirms previous scientific research developed in countries where educational systems promote the integration of children with special needs. The results prove that parents are concerned about this process due to the fact that no information is provided regarding the positive aspects of integration. Secondly, parents are concerned about the teachers' skills regarding school work when it comes to children with special needs. The most important long-term objective remains the integration of children with special needs using appropriate work methods in class, adapted for children with special needs, but also adequate for normally developed children.

5. Conclusions

It is essential for teachers to start applying the theoretical knowledge gained so far and practice the appropriate methods used in working with children with special needs integrated into mainstream educational systems. The acceptance and effective work with children with special needs must be stimulated, in the same way in which activities with top students of the class are now encouraged.

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