Teachers' perspective towards the implementation of inclusive education

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of an empirical study that aims to investigate teachers' perspective towards the implementation of inclusive education. The study was part a research inquiry which investigated teachers' attitudes, believes and needs regarding the process of implementation of an inclusive education system. This data was based on questionnaire, conducted with mainstream teachers in state schools in Bucharest, Romania. The results show that teachers who teach students with SEN agree to go through training courses related to inclusive education.Moreover, it is showed that teachers who hold a bachelor's or a master degree declare themselves to more prepared and have a better knowledge regarding the concept of inclusive education, while teachers who do not hold a university degree (unqualified teachers) declared themselves to be relatively unprepared to respond to the new educational requirements that come along with the development of the inclusive schools. All in all, teachers perspective towards the implementation of an inclusive educational system is mainly positively minded, teachers seeing the process as being beneficial to all students, regardless the fact they have special education needs or not.

Keywords: inclusive education, teachers' attitude; students with special needs.

1. Introduction

The need for a shared idea of inclusion targets the human factor rather than the technical side of education. It is based on the idea that inclusive education is better for all learners in terms of life preparation. The schools long-standing traditions must be overcome with a move from a medical mind-set to schools where everyone belongs. Inclusion is about all learners. (EASNIE, 2014). Other studies show the fact that inclusion is strictly correlated to the belief that students with special educational needs should be fully integrated into general education classrooms (Ivey & Reincke, 2002; Hanwi, 2003; Al Zyoudi, 2006) and that the teachers are responsible for providing all students with authentic learning experiences (Prochnow et al., 2000; Iucu & Marin, 2014).

Tring to portrait a comprehensive approach towards inclusion in education UNESCO agrees that:

'applying a rights-based approach to education in order to move towards inclusion will require comprehensive school system reform including modification of constitutional guarantees and policies, curricula, teacher training systems, materials, learning environments, methodologies, resource allocation, etc. Above all, it will require a change

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in attitudes of all people, throughout the system, to welcome diversity and difference and see these as opportunities rather than problems.' (UNESCO, 2008, p. 29).

Preparing all teachers to face inclusion in the classroom is one of the major characteristics of pedagogical shift in recent years. Nowadays, teachers` responsibilities have diversified and they have to be able to meet the challenge of teaching to the 21st century students by adjusting their teaching styles and strategies in accordance with the diversity of learning styles (Clayton, 1996; Forlin, 1997; Paterson & Graham, 2000, Marin, 2014). Therefore, universities through the teacher training departments are now required to ensure that all teachers are able to face inclusion in the classroom, by providing a highly qualitative learning experiences that will prepare them to answer to the needs of an increasing range of diverse learners (Al Tarwana, 2008). In this sense, there are some international guidelines proposed by UNESCO that states the fact that within the initial and continuous teacher training system should be offered courses with regard to inclusion in education (UNESCO, 1994). Moreover, in a report of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, there are presented four core values relating to teaching and learning in inclusive environments. These four core values are: (EADSNE, 2012, p.2)

1. Valuing learner diversity – learner difference is considered as a resource and an asset to education;

2. Supporting all learners – teachers have high expectations for all learners' achievements;

3. Working with others – collaboration and teamwork are essential approaches for all teachers;

4. Continuing personal professional development – teaching is a learning activity and teachers take responsibility for their own lifelong learning.

Understand teachers' perspective towards inclusive education is seen as a decisive factor in making schools more inclusive. Studies show that teachers have conflicting opinions regarding educating students with special education needs (SEN), mainly that some teachers see this responsibility as an extra duty (Van Reusen, Shosho, & Bonker, 2000; Gordon, 2002; Arif & Gaad, 2008). Besides, this extra responsibility is not accepted by some teachers, that do not accept the education of students with SEN and consequently they will try to ensure that other colleagues, such as the special educator will take responsibility (Mutasa, Goronga, & Tafangombe, 2013).

In addition, studies emphasizes the importance of the teacher training programme in building a positive attitudes towards inclusion (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Shippen et al., 2005; Jung, 2007). Furthermore, Subban and Sharma (2007) draws attention on the fact that if teachers acquire a negative attitudes during their teacher training programme, then those attitudes are difficult to change.

2.   **The Development of the Inclusive Romanian educational system**

The process of shifting from the integration perspective to the inclusion one started in 1990 with the first legislative document, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* that talks about the nondiscrimination principle (art.2), connected with the right to education (art.28 and 29), both articles clearly stating the need to include all students in the

educational process. A similar legislative document is the *Romanian Constitution* and the *Law of Education* that agrees that all Romanian citizens have an equal right to education, at all levels and in all forms, regardless of gender, race, nationality, religious, or political affiliation and social or economic status; and in consequence the state's role is to make sure that the principles of democratically education are applied, guarantying the right to differentiated education, on the basis of educational pluralism (Romanian Law of Education1/2011).

Another document that focused on social inclusion, but also covering educational inclusion is *The Common Memorandum on Inclusion* signed, in 2004,by the Romanian Government with theEuropean Commission and presents the fact that students living in poor families are having 2,3 times more chances to abandon the school, in comparison with students from non-poor families.

The Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research has initiated several programmes that target the development of both mainstream schools, as well as special needs schools and the transformation of special schools into school centres for inclusive education. The idea that supports this shift towards the inclusive school system is related to the fact that students with special education needs from the mainstream education can benefit from both qualified services from the supporting teacher/itinerant, as well as special therapy sessions provided by the psych-pedagogy teachers from the resource centers.Moreover, each school has its freedom to choose if the national curriculum plan must be adapted depending on the needs of students.

The improvement and development of educational services in the Romanian education system is correlated to the following aspects: (Ghergut, 2012)
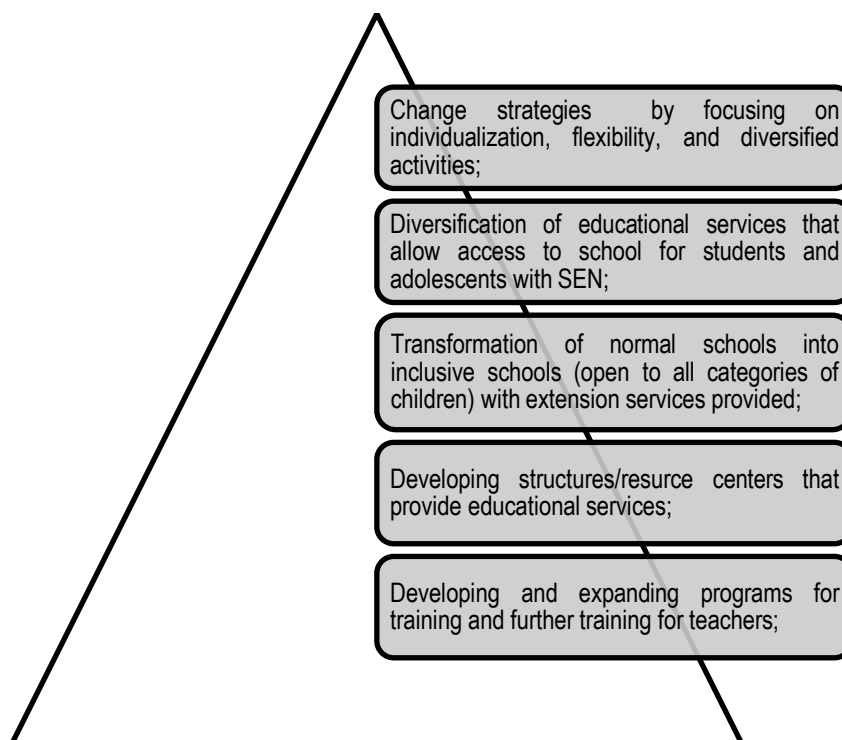

Figure 1 Aspects that influence the improvement and development of educational services in the Romanian education system

The obstacles in promoting an inclusive education are complex and notable, but in Romania the most relevant one is the lack of clear legislative initiatives and the lack of training that teachers received in facing inclusion in the classroom (Marin, 2014). Based on the assumptions presented above, the aim of this study is to contribute to the knowledge in the field of inclusive education, more specifically on the human factor that influences the development of the inclusive education system, and that is the teachers` perspective towards inclusive education.

3. Methodology

A quantitative approach was used by administrating a questionnaire to mainstream teachers in state schools in Bucharest, Romania. The design of the questionnaire is based on a set of 3 clusters such as: knowledge in the field of inclusive education; teachers` level of preparedness in order to face inclusion in the classroom; and the importance of initial teacher training course in order to prepare future teachers to deal with inclusion. The independent variable that were taken into consideration were respondents` highest level of education and respondents` level of studies they teach.

The questionnaire was administrated between January and July 2014. It is estimated that nearly 400 teachers from 17 public schools that have received the questionnaire through their principle which facilitated the access to the sample. From these, 213 teachers completed the survey which shows the fact that the response rate was of 47%.

The profile of the respondents in term of the highest level of education that they have obtained and in terms of the level of studied they teach is presented in the tables below.

Table 1 Participants profile in terms of the highest level of education obtained

	High school studies	Bachelor degree	Master degree	Doctoral degree
No of participants	25	112	69	7

Regarding participants profile in terms of the highest level of education obtained it can be observed that the majority of teachers that have participated in this study hold a bachelor degree (112 respondents), while 69 of them hold a master degree and 7 of them have passed through doctoral studies. At the same time, a category of approximately 8,5% of respondents have only graduated from the *upper-secondary*school.

Table 2 Participants profile in terms of the level of studies they teach

	Pre-school education system	Primary school system	Lower- Secondary School System	Upper - Secondary School System
No of participants	95	55	29	34

When it comes to participants` profile in terms of the level of studies they teach, it can be observed that 95 respondents work in the preschool education system, 55 of them work in the primary education system, where 29 of them work in lower secondary school, respectively 34 of them work in the upper-secondary education system.

4. Results

The results are organized as follows. Firstly, teachers` level of knowledge in the field of inclusive education is being examined according to their level of study in order to portrait how much information teachers hold regarding a specific field of study, such as inclusive education that is present in the Romanian system for over 25 years. Also, presenting a statistic of the number of teachers that have previously worked with students with SEN will show how diverse the Romanian education system is and will also show teachers` level of identifying situations where they had to adapt both the curricula and the teaching strategies to the learning needs of all students. Nevertheless, teacher` level of preparedness to teach students with SEN is presented in comparison to teachers` need of going through training courses that can prepare them to face an inclusive school environment. If there is a real need to receive specialized training that can lead to changing the teacher training curricula, this could be considered as a main factor to start putting a stress on the need to have a compulsory course that deals with the concept of inclusive education.

Table 3 Correlation between the highest level of education and the level of knowledge in the field of inclusive education

		The highest level of education completed	Level of knowledge in the field of inclusive education
The highest level of education completed	Pearson Correlations	1	,187**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,006
	N	213	213
Level of knowledge in the field of inclusive education	Pearson Correlations	,187**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,006	
	N	213	213

**. Correlations is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In table 3, there is present a statistic that shows the correlation between the highest level of education and the level of knowledge in the field of inclusive education. There is a positive correlation (p =, 187) between the highest level of education completed and the level of knowledge regarding the concept of inclusion. Thus, teachers who hold a bachelor's or a master degree declares to more prepared and have a better knowledge regarding the concept of inclusive education, while teachers who do not hold a university degree (unqualified teachers) declared themselves

to be relatively unprepared to respond to the new educational requirements that come along with the development of the inclusive schools.

Table 4 Correlation between the number of teachers who have experience in working with students with SEN and the level of usage of teaching strategies and methodologies adapted to the needs of students with SEN

		Have you worked with students with SEN?	To what extent are you familiar with using teaching strategies and methodologies adapted to the needs of students with SEN?
Have you worked with students with SEN?	Pearson Correlations	1	-,138*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,045
	N	213	213
To what extent are you familiar with using teaching strategies and methodologies adapted to the needs of students with SEN?	Pearson Correlations	-,138*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,045	
	N	213	213

*. Correlations is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Although teachers declared they have experience in working with students with special needs, they say that they are not familiar with the process of adapting teaching strategies and methodologies to the needs of students with SEN. There is a negative correlation (p = -, 138) between the items presented above, showing that, either teachers haven`t received a proper training regarding ways of adapting the curriculum and the teaching strategies in order to fulfil the needs of every student and offer each students a unique learning experience, or they do not feel sufficiently confident on applying what the literature has highline as being essential, mainly to make use of instructional strategies known to be effective for divers learning contexts and divers learners.

Table 5 Correlation between teacher` level of prepares to teach students with SEN and the presence of training courses regarding the specification of an inclusive school environment

		To what extent are you ready to receive students with SEN in the classroom?	Do you think attending training courses regarding inclusive education could help you to better adapt to different learning situations that involve students with SEN?
To what extent are you ready to receive students with SEN in the classroom?	Pearson Correlation	1	,154*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,024
	N	213	213
Do you think attending training courses regarding inclusive education could help you to	Pearson Correlation	,154*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,024	

better adapt to different learning situations that involve students with SEN?	N	213	213

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

A significant number of teachers that are willing to teach students with SEN agree to go through training courses related to inclusive education. In this sense, a positive correlation can be seen (p =,154) between the item concerning the extent to which teachers think they are ready to receive pupils with SEN in their classrooms and the need to go through a teaching training programme that will enable them to receive the proper training and to be ready to face inclusion the classroom.

5. Discussion and conclusions

At a legislative level, there is a need to further improve the legislative document and create a unitary vision of what inclusive education really means, aligning and at the same time updating the terminology used in this field. Specifically, at a legislative level the concept of inclusion and special education needs should be adopted and should be avoided concepts such as handicapped. That is why it is necessary to adopt a National strategy on inclusion of students with special education needs that is aligned to the international forum of discussion. Moreover, the national strategy should focus on the importance of investing in the teacher training programmes so that it can provide future teachers a qualitative and relevant learning experience that can prepare them to face inclusion in the classroom.

As showed, teachers say they have little or no clear information on the concept of inclusion, which could have a negative consequences on the process of developing an inclusive school education. Therefore, it must be implemented a system of initial and continuing training that meets the current requirements of future teachers, providing compulsory courses in the field of inclusive education to all the future teachers regardless of their specialization. Respondents are in favor of going through training courses to acquire a special set of skills to thereby be able to work in an inclusive learning environment which correlates to the findings of the OECD report that shows that teachers opinion towards their own professional development is commonly related to the need to acquire new knowledge related to didactics and on how to adapt to diversity in the classroom. (OECD, 2005)

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