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**COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE IDENTIFICATION OF
TEACHERS' NEED FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION TRAINING**

Venera-Mihaela Cojocariu (a)*, Nela Tatiana Balint (b), Mihaela Anghel (c), Cristuță Alina –
Mihaela (d)

* Corresponding author

- (a) “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, Mărășești Street no. 157, Bacău, Romania, venera_1962@yahoo.com
(b) “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, Mărășești Street no. 157, Bacău, Romania, balint.tatiana@gmail.com
(c) “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, Mărășești Street no. 157, Bacău, Romania, anghelina74@yahoo.com
(d) “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, Mărășești Street no. 157, Bacău, Romania, a.cristuta@yahoo.com

Abstract

Inclusive education is one of the components of today’s education defined by its inter- and trans-disciplinary features. Observing the implicit demand to train teachers for inclusive education in Romania, this study aims to raise awareness of this need and verify its intensity in teachers. The general hypothesis of the observational study states that as teachers climb the steps of the educational system, their need to prepare for inclusive education diminishes. The method used was the questionnaire-based inquiry. The questionnaire comprised 18 items with open and closed questions. The sample consisted of a total of 400 teachers, 100 for each of the 3 stages of the pre-university educational system (preschool, primary, middle education, respectively 50 from the urban and 50 from the rural environment in each category) and 50 teachers each from high-school and the university educational system. The recorded data and conclusions of the study could constitute an analysis of the needs for future research-development projects. They will allow the creation of inclusive education modules/programs in the university environment.

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Keywords: Inclusive education; special educational needs of students; differentiation pedagogy.

1. Introduction - Inclusive Education – From Concept to Formative Challenge

The approach to children with special educational needs knows various specific policies and strategies across countries. It has both a general determination, common to all countries, and a national one (Florian&Rouse, 2009). It is related to the formative tradition, legal regulations, but also to the awareness of the problem at the macrosocial level, the attitude of decision-makers towards it, the



availability of investments in this sector. Ultimately, it is about respecting children's rights! The problem is aggravated by serious problems of the contemporary world (poverty, food crisis, disease, migration, racism, diversity, school drop-out). The philosophy under which teacher initial/continuous training is conceived and achieved becomes, along with the financial allocation, crucial for ensuring inclusive education (IE).

1.1. Inclusive Education – Conceptual Highlights and Open Issues

The research subordinated to the student-centred paradigm marked the formative practices of the 80s. The concern to find the best education for each child separately, in relation to his capabilities/needs did not always produce the desired practical solutions. For example, the segregation of students based on performance or health related criteria did not generate desirable results (Yadav &all, 2015). Not only did it not yield the expected school performances, but also recorded relative failure in terms of the students' integration in the micro/macro community. The key challenge of IE has remained that of harmonizing, in the same class, a great diversity of school population, namely students who are extremely different in many respects (including those with and without special educational needs), while the school usually operates, almost permanently, with classifications and labelling (McIntyre, 2009). In this sense, IE, as an expression of social inclusion (Florian&Rouse, 2009), involves identifying and eliminating possible sources of exclusion (Bukvić, 2014). It designates the effort “of overcoming barriers that prevent the participation and learning of all children, regardless of their race, gender, social background, sexuality, disability or attainment in schools” (Bustos&all, 2012). The domain of IE has been increasingly outlined and students with special educational needs found their place in this process. After Rafferty, Boettcher, & Griffin (2001) IE is “the process of educating children with disabilities in the regular education classrooms of their neighbourhood schools - the schools they would attend if they did not have a disability - and providing them with the necessary services and support” (apud McCrimmon, 2015).

Following the major social transformation of 1989, in Romania IE has undergone a slow, sinuous, but continuous development, as an expression of two fundamental causes: 1. an awareness and recognition of the number of children with special educational needs; 2. the need to ensure equal rights to education for all children, no matter their difficulties. The real physical, mental, emotional, and social vulnerability of children with special educational needs makes them a distinct category of beneficiaries of education, which is what engages the identification and usage of specific strategies for knowing and approaching them in accordance with the identified needs. The restructuring of the Romanian traditional school into a warm, friendly institution, an optimal environment to implement clear and coherent inclusive policies that would produce the expected long term positive effects for an ulterior integration in society, depends essentially on the teacher, as vital partner in IE (Vaillant, 2011).

1.2. Training Teachers for Inclusive Education – Context and Domestic Challenges

Beyond the prejudice that the integration of children with special educational needs in classes with normally developed children “is a policy doomed to fail” (Jordan, Schwartz&McGhie-Richmond, 2009), it remains a complex issue, with various, sometimes contradictory approaches/solutions (idem). López-Torrijo&Mengual-Andrés (2015) show that the need to train teachers for IE has been supported since

1978. Despite growing concerns related to increasing the quality of education, teacher initial training for IE for middle/high-school/university education is practically absent in Romania. The only qualified people in the field are graduates of the Special Psycho-pedagogy program. In the official curriculum of teacher initial training, for level I and level II, there is no separate discipline related to the issue of students with special educational needs. And although the training of teachers for primary and preschool education comprises such a component, it is deficient and limited to just 1 compulsory course (Basics of Special Psycho-Pedagogy, also possibly The Psycho-pedagogy of children with learning difficulties), with the possibility to supplement it with an optional course (Logopedia). Thus, the reality of our educational system is similar to that of other countries in the region (e.g. Turkey, Serbia) (Sazak Pinar, 2014; Jovanovic&Rajović, 2013). Hence, it is no wonder that the attitude of teachers towards such educational contexts is one of reticence, to say the least, and their work is burdened by serious concerns that exist in most educational systems: a misunderstanding of the role of the teacher in an inclusive classroom; the fear that teachers could not pay due attention to students without special needs; the fear that they are not methodologically prepared to work with such students (Jordan, Schwartz&McGhie-Richmond, 2009).

2. Research Methodology

The ascertaining study aims to complete a research on identifying a real need of teachers for IE training, clearly outlined and of the same intensity across the entire course of the Romanian educational system (preschool, primary, middle, high-school, university education), a basis for future formative steps in the field.

Purpose: To identify the existence of a real need for IE teacher training.

General hypothesis: Is there a real need for IE teacher training in Romania (for pre-university – all levels – and university education)?

Specific hypothesis 1: the need for IE training of teachers from the Romanian pre-university education is stronger than that of teachers in higher education;

Specific hypothesis 2: teachers in higher education do not show the need for IE training;

Specific hypothesis 3: the need for IE training of teachers from the Romanian pre-university education is manifested mostly in primary education;

Specific hypothesis 4: the need for IE training of teachers from the Romanian pre-university education is manifested mostly in the urban rather than rural areas.

The research was conducted during the 2015-2016 academic year, on a sample of 400 teachers, 100 for each of the 3 stages of the pre-university educational system (preschool, primary, middle, respectively 50 from the urban and 50 from the rural environment in each category) and 50 teachers each from high-school and the university educational system. The data collection tool was a questionnaire consisting of 12 items (9 closed items and 3 open-ended items).

Research objectives and their correlation with the items:

O1: Knowledge of the opinion of teachers about the level of correlation between the current organization of the educational system in Romania and IE practices (I1, I2, I3);

O2: Knowledge of the opinion of teachers about their own need for IE training (I4, I5, I6, I7, I8);

O3: Identifying the teachers' experience in activities with students with special needs (I9, I10, I11); O4: Prioritizing teacher training in relation to the main areas of IE (I12).

3. Presentation and Analysis of Results

The systematization, presentation, analysis and interpretation of the data collected through the questionnaire will be made in accordance with the set objectives. In the data analysis, we marked U = urban, R = rural. For O1, the data were collected through the items I1, I2, I3. Table 1 shows the data obtained.

Table 1. Centralized presentation of the results for Objective 1 (Items 1,2,3)

Item 1	Preschool		Primary		Middle		High-school		University							
	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R						
YES	19	38%	15	30%	31	62%	21	42%	14	28%	6	12%	21	42%	7	14%
NO	31	62%	35	70%	19	38%	29	58%	36	72%	44	88%	29	58%	43	86%
Item 2	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R
Very high	2	10,52%	0	0%	11	35%	4	19%	1	7,14%	0	0%	1	5%	1	14,28%
High	7	36,84%	3	20%	3	10%	8	38%	5	35,71%	2	33,33%	11	52%	2	28,57%
Average	4	21,05%	8	54%	8	26%	6	29%	4	28,57%	2	33,33%	5	24%	3	42,85%
Low	6	31,57%	1	7%	8	26%	2	10%	4	28,57%	1	16,66%	3	14%	1	14,28%
Very low	0	0%	3	20%	1	3%	1	5%	0	0%	1	16,66%	1	5%	0	0%
Item 3	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R
YES	48	96%	46	92%	47	94%	50	100%	49	98%	47	94%	49	98%	48	96%
NO	2	4%	4	8%	3	6%	0	0%	1	2%	3	6%	1	2%	2	4%

The results obtained for *Item 1- Do you consider that the current organization of the educational system in Romania enables real practical implementation of inclusive education?* - indicate the fact that in urban areas, the affirmative opinions of teachers fall between a minimum of 28% at middle level and a maximum of 86% at university level, with close values of the options of pre-school teachers - 38% and 31% for primary teachers. In rural areas, where we compare only 3 levels (preschool, primary, middle), the affirmative opinions of teachers fall between a minimum of 12% (middle-school teachers) and a maximum of 42% for respondents from the primary level. It follows that those who mostly appreciate the correlation between the current organization of the educational system in Romania and the practices of inclusive education are university teachers (urban areas), whereas those who strongly contest it are teachers from the entire rural education: secondary, 88%; preschool, 70%; primary, 58%.

The results obtained for *Item 2 - To what extent can the practical implementation of inclusive education be achieved?* (for those who regarded this as possible) reveal the fact that in urban areas, the most positive view on this issue is provided by primary school respondents, 35%. In contrast, with very little confidence in this possibility there are the pre-school, middle-school and university teachers, each with 0%. In rural areas, a higher confidence in this possibility was manifested by primary teachers, 12.5%, with pre-school teachers, 20%, at the other end. Overall, the highest confidence in the actual possibilities to put IE into practice was revealed by the affirmative answers of primary school teachers, 35% from the urban and 19% from the rural areas.

The results obtained for *Item 3 - Do you find it necessary to address the educational curriculum in terms of the integration of children with special needs?* - indicates that both in the urban (between 94% at primary and 98% at middle and high-school level) and rural areas (between 92% at pre-school and 100% at primary level), teachers support inclusive education to a great extent. The data allow us to state that the awareness of the need to integrate children with special needs is highly developed at all the subjects from the investigated group.

For O2, the data were collected through items I4, I5, I6, I7, I8. Table 2 (Annexes) shows the data obtained.

The results obtained for *Item 4 - Do you consider it important to train teachers for inclusive education?* - indicate a high level of importance given by the respondents to IE teacher training. In urban areas, the results are placed on the upper threshold, with levels ranging from 96% (high-school teachers) to 100% (pre-school, university). In rural areas, all the 150 - 100% - respondents, from all levels, responded affirmatively. The data show a very high awareness of the need for IE training at 87.25% of the investigated group (Table 2, Annexes).

The results obtained for *Item 5 - Is your professional development for inclusive education a priority?* - indicate two aspects: a high percentage of teachers interested in this component of their training; a decrease of this training need, as the students' age increases. If for the urban environment, these aspects are mostly prioritized by primary teachers (92%), this percentage decreases successively (72%, middle school; 60% high-school) reaching a minimum of 42% for higher education. For rural areas, the interest is high but not at the same level (between the minimum of 80% at middle-school teachers and the maximum of 94% at pre-school teachers) and the interest decreases as the educational level rises. For the whole sample, 75% of the respondents say that IE is a priority for them (Table 2, Annexes).

The results obtained for *Item 6 - Do you have teaching knowledge/skills in working with students with special needs?* - aimed at a self-assessment of teachers' acquisitions in IE. The data show, for the entire sample, a very high proportion of teachers (66%) who admit that they do not have adequate competences in IE. The least trained in IE are university teachers (92%), closely followed by those in the urban preschool (84%). With equal scores there are the teachers in urban primary and middle education (66%). The only ones who feel well instrumented for IE are high-school teachers (62%). In rural areas, more than half of primary teachers believe that they are trained appropriately to work in IE (64%), while in kindergarten and middle school the lack of the specific training is felt to a very large extent (66%, respectively 80%) (Table 2, Annexes).

The results obtained in *Item 7 - Have you attended, in the last 6 months, training (courses) for students with special needs?* - indicate a differentiated concern of teachers for IE teacher training. Very little involved in these courses were teachers from urban areas (preschool, 6%; primary, 8%; high-school) while urban middle-school teachers (72%) were really concerned about this issue. A surprising result is that academic teachers were not involved at all (0%) in this process. In rural areas, at preschool (26%) and primary (16%) teachers the concern to participate in IE training is 4, respectively 2 times higher than at their urban peers, while at middle-school teachers it is much lower (only 10%). There prevails, for the whole sample, a significant and worrying lack of involvement of teachers in IE training (67.29%), which supports the urgent need to design and conduct such approaches (Table 2, Annexes).

The results obtained for *Item 8 - If YES, specify the name and the organizing institution* - reconfirms what the Romanian teacher training system shows as a trend. We refer to the small number of teachers who participated in such courses and indicated the institution providing the training. The respondents from the university did not participate at all in IE training while teachers who engage mostly in this activity are teachers from the rural primary education (22.86%). Among the respondents who answered affirmatively in relation to participation in training courses for students with special needs (see item 7) there were some of them who did not answer the question in item 8. The institutions nominated as organizing training courses for IE (by those who responded affirmatively to item 7) are minimally represented by universities (2.86%) and maximally by the Teaching Staff Resource Centre/Casa Corpului Didactic (68.57%). Regarding the type of training courses, the Course on integrating children with special educational needs presents the highest percentage (48.28%), followed by the courses on Psycho-pedagogy (41.37%) and on Anti-stigmatization (3.44%).

For O3, the data were collected through the items I9, I10, I11.

The results obtained in *Item 9 - Throughout your experience, have you ever had students with special needs in your class?* – highlight the fact that 235 teachers (158 from the urban - 63.20% and 77 from the rural areas - 57.33%) out of the total of 400 respondents have worked with this category of students. Most of the teachers in this situation are those in kindergarten, rural areas (70%); middle school (78%) and high-school, urban areas (86%). Those who worked least with students with special needs are university teachers (28%) and rural primary teachers (34%) (Table 3, Annexes).

The results obtained for *Item 10 - If YES, specify the type of special need/deficiency* - allow the finding of a relatively large diversity of experiences of teachers in relation to students with special needs, for the whole sample. These are: 1. mental retardation and psychomotor impairment (each mentioned 88 times); 2. autism (64); 3. locomotor impairments (34); speech disorder (33). At the other end, teachers worked least with students with special needs such as: 1. neurological deficits and impaired hearing (each mentioned 13 times); 2. Down syndrome (16) (Figure 1).

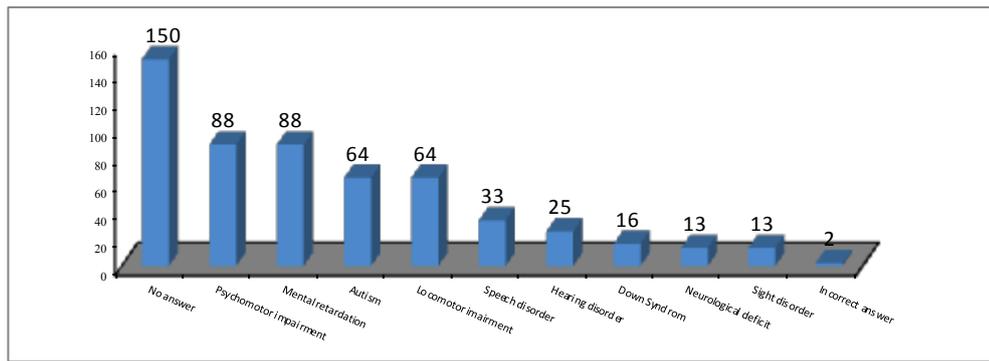


Fig. 1. The distribution of teachers' experiences in working with students with special needs

The results obtained for *Item 11 - What do you think are the 3 most important issues that you faced during classes with students with special needs?* – reconfirm the painful realities of contemporary society: the increasing number of children with attention and concentration difficulties (132 times) both in the urban (67) and rural areas (65); thinking difficulties (84); communication difficulties (49); networking (44); aggressiveness, impulsiveness (44). Most seldom of all, teachers think that they come across difficulties related to the stigmatization of children with SEN by other children (5). These types of responses do not really identify the difficulties of the IE process, but only certain categories of special needs. However, some respondents also indicate real problems of the process, such as: the student's and family's failure to adapt to the school environment (25); lack of sufficient time resources (16); difficulties in the relationship parent - school - student (11) (Figure 2).

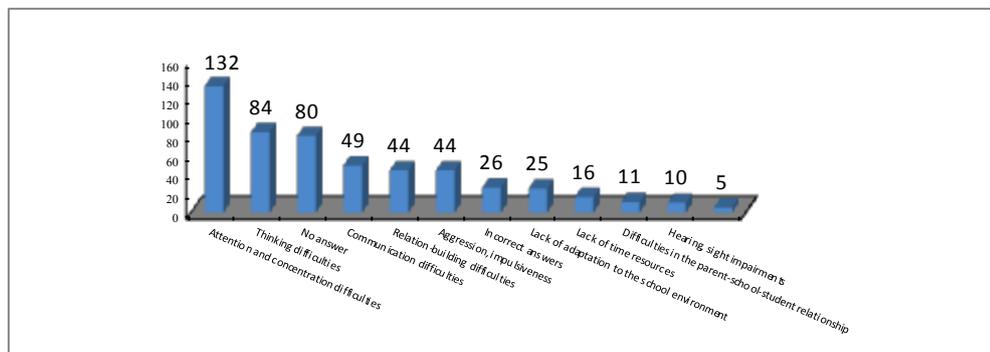


Fig. 2. The distribution of the problems that teachers came across in their direct work with students with special needs

For O4, the data were collected through item 12. The results for *Item 12 - After completing a teacher training program on inclusive education I expect to have major acquisitions in the field* - are shown in Figure 3. They show a high level of expectations for: a. special strategies for working with children with various special needs (232 teachers); b. examples of best practices in inclusive education (198); c. specialized psycho-pedagogical knowledge in inclusive education (190). There was found a weaker interest for issues such as: legal issues underlying the process of inclusive education in Romanian/international law (91).

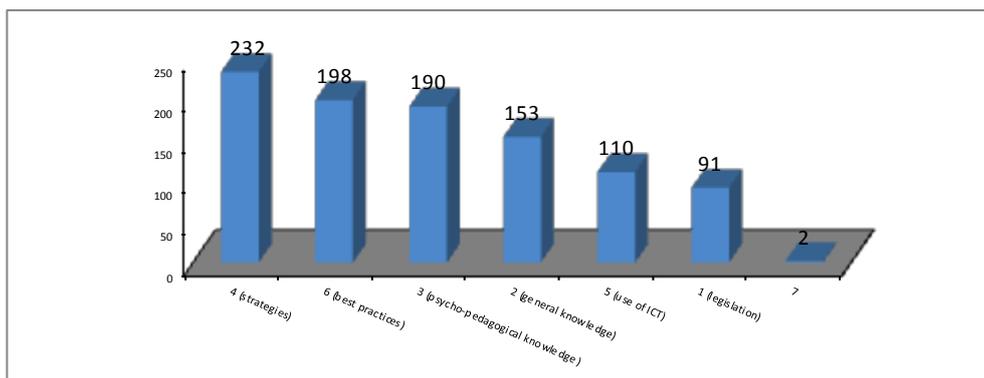


Fig. 3. The main interest domains for IE teacher training

4. Conclusions

The investigation conducted by us revealed both problems of how to achieve IE in Romanian education and suggestions for overcoming them. By relation to the assumptions made at the beginning of our research, we found that two hypotheses were confirmed and two were invalidated, as follows:

The specific hypothesis 1 – the need for IE training of teachers from pre-university Romanian education is stronger than that of teachers in higher education - *was validated*. Most teachers support the importance of their training for inclusive education, 87.25% of the investigated group (according to the data from item 4). The data from item 5 gives us arguments to validate the hypothesis and claim that teachers from pre-university education manifest a greater need for IE than those in the academic environment (primary 92%, middle 72%, high-school 60%, university 42% - far below the average of the sample, 75% of respondents having said that IE is a priority for them). Specific hypothesis 1 is also supported by the confirmed need of teachers to participate in training courses and training in IE (according to the data from item 7), particularly through relatively surprising data showing that university teachers were not involved at all (0%) in this process.

The specific hypothesis 2 - teachers in higher education do not show the need for IE training – *has been invalidated*. Admitting the importance of IE teacher training by 100% of the respondents (according to data from item 4), only 42% of university teachers considered their professional development a priority for IE (according to data from item 5). Caught between so many specific needs, they do not negate the need for this training but state that they engage little in IE (at the declarative level) and not at all at the actual level (according to item 7, where 100% of the academia respondents declared that they did not participate in training or courses on working with students with special needs). It is possible that university teachers may not meet students with special needs too often and hence are not motivated to get involved in IE training or be forced to leave this matter in the background.

The specific hypothesis 3 - the need for IE training of teachers from Romanian pre-university education is manifested most strongly in primary education – *has been validated*. Teachers from both urban and rural primary education showed the strongest need for IE training compared to all the other peers from pre-university education (92% in urban, 82% in rural areas, 87% the average for primary compared to 75.25 the average for the entire sample, as shown by the data from item 5). The teachers

from the primary level - rural areas (16%) are more interested in attending training courses compared to teachers from the primary level - urban areas (8%). The living environment and conditions may determine the presence of a large number of children with special needs in rural areas, and consequently a higher need for IE teacher training. The urban primary school teachers participating in training is low compared to teachers from the other educational cycles. The percentage of teachers from rural areas who attended training courses is lower than that of pre-school teachers (16%), but higher than those of middle-school teachers (10%) (according to data from item 7).

The *specific hypothesis 4* – the need for IE training of teachers from the Romanian pre-university education is manifested in urban areas to a higher degree than in rural areas – *has been invalidated*. For all pre-university teachers, IE training is important, the ratio ranging between 96% and 100% (according to the data from item 4). However, teachers in rural areas attach much greater importance to this training (100%), compared to those in urban areas (79, 60%) (according to data from item 4). Regarding the priority for IE, the ratio varies between 60% and 72% for teachers in pre-university education. We have found a high proportion of teachers in rural areas that prioritize this training (85, 33%), unlike teachers in urban areas (69, 20%) (according to data from item 5). The importance and significance that teachers attach to inclusive education are demonstrated by participation in training courses, the teachers in rural areas (preschool 26%, primary 16%) to a higher extent than teachers in urban areas (preschool 6%, primary 8%). The increased interest for participation in these courses is highest (72%) for middle-school teachers in urban areas. These data are added to those collected for items 6-12, among which we mention the most relevant: very high percentage of teachers (66%) who admit that they do not have adequate competences in IE (item 6); significant and worrying lack of involvement of teachers in IE training (67.29%) (item 7); more than half of the sample (235 teachers - 158 urban, 63.20%, and 77 rural, 57.33%, - out of a total of 400 respondents) admits to having worked with students with special educational needs (item 9), although not prepared enough in this regard; the professional development lines most expected from an IE training course are: specialized strategies for working with children with various special needs; examples of best practices in IE; specialized psycho-pedagogical knowledge in the field of IE (item 12).

All the data presented allow us to conclude that the *general hypothesis* – is there a real need for IE teacher training in Romanian education (pre-university (all levels) and university)? – *has been validated*: with different intensities and in different percentages, with different forms of expression and assumption, this need is manifested throughout the entire course of Romanian education, from preschool to the university level. Also, the *purpose* of our study – identifying the existence of a real need for IE teacher training - *has been reached*.

The obtained data are consistent with results of other studies. It is necessary to recognize that we need training for IE, this being a first good step, but not enough. All the more so as “very little is known about how skills for effective inclusion are developed, or about how to influence teachers’ epistemological beliefs in order that they might be reflected in their practices. We know that teachers enter the profession and the initial period of preparation with beliefs about teaching and learning that are intransigent and hard to change (Jordan, Schwartz, McGhie-Richmond, 2009). On the other hand, there are numerous conclusions and suggestions of specialized fora (UNESCO IBE, 2009), elaborated for

Public Policies, Learners and Teachers, International Cooperation. Two of these refer to IE teacher training and are in perfect agreement with the results of our study: 1. “Train teachers by equipping them with the appropriate skills and materials to teach diverse student populations and meet the diverse learning needs of different categories of learners through methods such as professional development at the school level, pre-service training about inclusion, and instruction attentive to the development and strengths of the individual learner”; 2. Support the strategic role of tertiary education in the pre-service and professional training of teachers on inclusive education practices through, inter alia, the provision of adequate resources” (idem).

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