## Edu World 2016
## 7th International Conference

# TEACHING FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: AN EXPLORATORY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract**

A critical discussion of the first findings in an exploratory study of learning to teach for diversity and inclusion is proposed. The analysis of language data from semi-structured interviews with teachers, in the early stages of the proposed exploratory study, employs the conceptual tools of chronotopical analysis (Bakhtin, 1981; Bloome et al., 2009) and those of positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990). Findings indicate the emergence of common practitioners' narratives on learning for diversity and inclusion. Holding on to the existing narratives appears to be the practitioners' preferred strategy in finding and affirming a position regarding the common discourse on teaching and learning for diversity and inclusion in the space of the schools' common practices. The production and deployment of new mental or material tools to learn and teach for diversity and inclusion is obstructed by what teachers name a *lack of* relevant *information* on specific educational needs of learners in their classrooms, a *sense of isolation* in the classroom practice and *an impermeable boundary* structure of the timely delivery of disciplinary contents expected of teachers in mainstream education. The implications for research and for educational practice are discussed here.

**Keywords:** Diversity; inclusion; teaching practices; teachers' narratives.

## 1. Introduction

Political recognition of the complex demands on schools and teachers to efficiently respond to issues of  diversity and inclusion in everyday school life and to promote social cohesion and responsive action  towards the disadvantaged students and students with learning or behavioural problems - as that

affirmed in the OECD Report *Teachers Matter* (Mckenzie et al., 2005) - prompts the general understanding that teachers' needs for confident, informed actions and decisions in the classroom are to be met in the course of pre and in-service teacher learning programs and initiatives, in and/ or out of the school-organization.

At the level of initial teacher training, this assumption is expected to translate into explicit formative tasks directed at 'preparing people to enter a profession which accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of all children' (Florian and Rouse, 2009, p. 596). Emphasis is placed on concentrating formative efforts on the initial teacher education, under the assumption this will provide 'best means to create a generation of teachers who will insure the successful implementation of inclusive policies and practices' (Cardona, 2009).

However explicit, this is far from an easy to reach formative goal. In part, this is because the profession itself presents not a flat, uniform picture of understanding and implementing policies on learning and participation for all children. As Edwards notices, 'policies are mediated differently by different schools, and what for some teachers are impossible demands, are for others simply opportunities to respond, learn and move forward' (Edwards, 2015).

Also, the emphasis on the importance of quality training for teachers in the early stages of preparing to enter the profession for the benefit of the high quality teaching they will perform in the classrooms, has in some cases worked against itself. Often conceptualized as a form of apprenticeship that allows novice members access to historically valued manners of understanding and participating to the school life and the knowledge embedded in it, the programs aiming at training or inducing teachers into the profession are more likely to function as well oiled mechanisms assisting novices in getting acquainted with the existent meanings and practices and less on their ability to work on expanding ways of foreseeing possible courses of action and reactions in and out of the classroom, which teaching for diversity and inclusion is dependent on.

Not least, the picture of learning to teach for diversity and inclusion is not that simple because policy demands, however mediated are not the only elements in the dialectic of person and practice in teaching (Edwards, 2015). Unpacking what lays in the deep strata of the non-linearity of teachers learning to act increasingly more responsive to issues of diversity and inclusion in the classroom requires looking past the common understandings depicting teachers' learning as a straight forward, patterned focusing on self-image, procedures, and management, moving from self, to curriculum and then to students (Fuller, 1969; Kagan, 1992; Athanases et al. 2012).

It is proposed here shifting the focus of analysis on understanding how teachers conceptualize support and learning for diversity and inclusion in contexts of educational practice and, on how different enactments of the relational aspects of learning and working in schools shape and are being shaped in the course of teachers exploring and affirming professional agency.

## 2. Context And Method

### 2.1. Context

The data proposed for analysis and discussion here were produced in semi-structured interviews with teachers and a school manager from one Romanian school working towards integrating students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

The history of inclusive approaches to mainstream education in Romania is not necessarily of recent date. Some studies mention a documented political interest towards the education of children with mental and/or sensory health issues dating as early as 1924 (Ghergut, 2012). However, the path to including students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms reached most of its' milestones in recent, post-communist decades and it reflects, at least at the levels of policy and nongovernmental actions, a similar trajectory and pacing to those of adopting the homologue European policy acts.

Whilst significant actions have been documented in the direction of developing training programs for teachers and raising awareness on issues of social inclusion and educational rights of people with learning disabilities, with governmental and international support from major organizations such as UNESCO or UNICEF (Ghergut, 2012; Vrasmas and Vrasmas, 2007; Voicu and Baba, 2010), little if anything has been researched and published with regard to the learning participants have experienced in these programs. Whilst some reports document participant teachers' degree of satisfaction with the training programs, based on measurements of their perception of relevance of the proposed pedagogical knowledge (Vrasmas and Vrasmas, 2007), almost nothing is known of *how* they experienced, *if any*, the learning and professional development those programs and training initiatives intended for them. Nor is the literature richer in evidence of the ways in which the medium and long-term effects of these programs have manifested at individual and at collective (organizational) level. Yet, having to effectively make possible the seamless inclusion of learners with various typologies and degrees of learning disabilities in the mainstream classrooms was then and still is today one prominent national and continental priority in the political discourses on education.

It is argued that the language data from semi-structured interviews of practitioners attempting to produce everyday pedagogical responses to the challenges of teaching inclusive classrooms is the depositary of valuable insight into how teachers learn and into what matters most to them and to the schools, and may explain why and how they enact, individually and collectively, professional responses to everyday classroom realities.

### 2.2. Method

Seven teachers of various specializations and one member of the managerial staff in a school in Northern Romania have responded to the early stage invitation for participation in a larger study examining how teachers learn to respond to the challenges of inclusive education, how they identify available resources for this purpose and how they use them in everyday school based actions. The invitation to this study was extended to the whole school teaching and managerial staff. The invitation included an explanation of the purposes of research. During the interview participants explored the issue of inclusion as they have experienced it since their professional debut, the connections to what they have learned during pre-service teacher education, their current understandings of what inclusive education

entails and of the resources available to them in crafting efficient pedagogical responses to the everyday challenges of inclusive teaching and learning. Interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed at a later stage.

Analysis of language data employs the conceptual tools of chronotopical analysis (Bakhtin, 1981; Bloome et al, 2009) and those of positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990). These analytical tools have also been employed in a previous, larger analysis engaging with identity affirming issues and language that beginning and experienced teachers use in exploring learning situated in the early stages of professional exercise. For a detailed explanation of these analytical tools, their use and proposed findings in that study see Mitescu (2012, 2014a, b).

A second independent researcher has coded a random selection the transcribed interviews with the teachers and the school manager (5 fully and verbatim transcribed interviews), identifying the dominant subject-positions and the juxtapositions of chronotopes in the speech acts subjected to analysis and assuring the goodness of fit in between the data and the coding. For the selection of text that was subjected to a second researcher's analysis, looking at every language sequence in every coding item identified, raters reached 90% agreement or above before concluding discussing the coding scheme.

## 3. Findings

Findings indicate the emergence of common practitioners' narratives on learning for diversity and inclusion. The language the seven participant teachers engaged in interviews is revelatory to contextualized, shared understandings of what constitutes a matter for differentiation and inclusion in their teaching focus, what the available resources are for solving differentiation and inclusion problems in the classroom and the kind of professional development and learning this type of solving problems entails.

*What constitutes a matter for differentiation and inclusion?* In the language of the teachers and the school manager participating in this interview phase of our study, the topic of inclusion and differentiation was structured in a number of subject-positions naming a variety of *learning challenges and disabilities* of either neuro-physiological, psychological or socio-economical nature.

T4: "I've met kids with Down syndrome, with ADHD, with Turner syndrome...and that's it, that is what we have in school". This manner of juxtaposing personal and shared chronotopes is frequent in the way teachers structure subject-positions when speaking of their daily life in the school. The frequency of this kind of speech determined the researchers to consider an additional topic of inquiry, one related to forming an understanding of the dynamic between the way narratives surface the language teachers employ in talking about themselves as professionals in a particular context of practice and their sense of professional agency in that context of practice.

The relationship is far from simplistic or linear. In some subject-positions, there is an emphasis on how the known didactic standards of the mainstream disciplinary curriculum apply to the teaching situation involving a student who remains un-responsive to every single one of the teacher's attempts to facilitate learning.

T2: "I thought I should look in the [student's] notebook and see what [she] is doing, and I could see she doesn't know how to write. And if she isn't writing, then she's nothing to do with History. And so I am thinking she's very likely the same with all the other disciplines".

In other subject-positions the emphasized relationship is that with one's own system of professional values, beyond the confines of the discipline taught and tapping into a sense of collective social responsibility.

T5: "We cannot ignore all the others for just one student, albeit that student may need our support and undivided attention most....still, we have a responsibility for not just one, and not just for most of them, but for all of them."

Speaking of what they understand to be matters of teaching for inclusion in their school, teachers depict a contextualized sense of the notion, as it affects their school ethos and their sense of professional agency. This brings to the forefront of the emerging narrative an emphasis on commitment, responsibility, strong judgements, self-evaluation, connection to the common good and attention to what people do, which deserves proper understanding and proper positioning.

*What are the resources available to teachers in crafting efficient pedagogical responses to the everyday challenges of inclusive teaching and learning*? Experiencing not being able to teach some of their students to the professional standards they are accustomed to, has become revelatory for different layers of discomfort. For the teachers, confronting the disruption between who they think they are as professionals, what they know and are able to do and who the students need them to be does not come, in any case, as a simple matter, easy to toss aside and carry on without concern. On the contrary, the stress and anxiety on the teachers is significant. The sources of it are generally positioned as external, a consequence of a decision imposed on the teachers without proper validation from their part.

T1: "It had such an impact on me...before 2011 I have not head of...before 2011 they were supposed to go to special schools. Since 2011, we had to integrate them."

T2: "And I asked the others [colleagues], what is happening with [student name], what is she doing in your class, what are you doing with her?"

At personal level, this may come with questioning the ways in which one's own personal teaching repertoire of methods could be improved to accustom better strategies for inclusion.

T3: "It all started with [student name]. Before the [lesson] plan was for the whole class; nothing special, I was teaching all kids the same because I didn't need anything different. But since [student name] I felt the need to change as a teacher, because not all children are the same and I had to, I had to help these kids too somehow. Specifically, I changed my methods. I don't focus on traditional teaching methods anymore, like exercising or demonstrating. I focus on play, for instance I use music and ask them to draw what they felt listening to music [..] or I would hide objects inside a soft hat and have them feel the objects without seeing them and then draw from imagination [...] I am not as much interested in having the kids draw the perfect contour, but I am more interested in having them all use their imagination".

At collective level, it brings to the forefront of the common narrative elicited from the discourses of the interviewees a series of disruptions, which may not be visible in the language of teachers exploring the resources available for teaching in non-inclusive, mainstream schools. For instance, although teachers identify in their colleagues important, resourceful others, with whom they relate to in experiencing mutual

feelings of discomfort and anxiety in front of the students they don't know how to teach, it is seldom the interviewees have identified their peers as resources for learning how to cope with the challenges of inclusive classrooms. The constraints to learning that would stem out of collaboratively teaching, planning, assessing or reflecting on the demands of the inclusive classrooms may be, of personal nature, but in most cases systemic impediments are the ones being noted as baring the greater load on collaborative professional learning and development.

T4: "We talk, but we never plan together...we may get to attune our efforts in extracurricular projects, maybe. Of course, of the top of imagination, we may get to do stuff like Literary Geography or something like that, but that is so seldom, because we are supposed to have individual lessons and individual lesson plans, by discipline."

T3: "on paper, maybe....and I am sorry to have to say this. I mean we may get to plan an adapted learning unit, but we don't care for it in the classrooms: we still have to train the Olympic lot, the national competition prize go-getters...we cannot include these kids. We are too focused on excellence, which means I get to the classroom, I find the best ones and I work with them for results."

A lack of trust strongly emphasized in the speech acts we have analyzed, completes the picture of the significant constraints on learning and professional development in the school setting. This lack of trust unpacks like an umbrella with many facets, as it afflicts communication between the teaching staff and the management in the school, the management and the higher decision makers at the county school inspectorate and the school staff and parents.

T2: "In teaching staff council meeting where we were being talked about how we need to be careful because our school is inclusive, you know bla bla [...] I suggested to someone already in conflict with the management of the school to ask [him] what would he do with [student name] in the classroom? The answer was you have to find your way of working with the child and the child has to pass the class. So, the message was, the child has to pass [...] I want a school with 100% graduation."

M1: "The school is asked for a personal report on the child's development which is very brief and very vague and I don't think anyone cares for it [...] In this report the teacher is being asked for suggestions concerning next steps in development from an educational point of view, and there are options there to tick, like mainstream school, special school, with support teacher...and we tick but I don't think anyone cares for it"

T4: "I was under the impression we speak of what actually happens and not what we would like to say it happens and I think the distance between the two is very big and that is clearly due to the fact that some care and some don't [...] We may do the best we can to keep these children in school for as long as possible, but further [than lower secondary school] I don't know of situations in which these children are valued."

M1: "It depends on the family's involvement too, as there are parents who have time and stay by their side and do homework with them and help them and in those cases the progress is double compared to the kids who are left mainly to what we manage to do in school with them."

In this multi-directionally layered mistrust it comes almost as no surprise that when asked to specifically address the topic of their learning, the interviewees mainly referred to learning as a matter of access to knowledge, with the former being positioned as a process charged with the capacity of

ultimately 'fixing what is not working' and the latter as a fix and remote set of information, which can deliberately either be made accessible or restricted to some.

The perspective of knowledge being constructed with the significant contribution of the teachers, or of a collective, contextualized cooperative effort of working out new conceptual and procedural knowledge whilst creating and developing a climate of on-going professional learning and development was not transparent even in one of the interviews so far.

## 4. Discussion

The insight into how teachers learn, and into what matters most to them and to the schools, gained in this initial phase of an exploratory study of teachers' professional agency, indicates that holding on to the existing narratives appears to be the practitioners' preferred strategy in finding and affirming a position regarding the common discourse on teaching and learning for diversity and inclusion in the space of the schools' common practices. The production and deployment of new mental or material tools to learn and teach for diversity and inclusion seems to be obstructed by what teachers experience as a lack of relevant information on specific educational needs of learners in their classrooms, a sense of isolation in the classroom practice and an impermeable boundary structure of the timely delivery of disciplinary contents expected of teachers in mainstream education.

The implications of the proposed approach to understanding how teachers learn to respond to the challenges of inclusive education based on understanding how they identify available resources for this purpose and how they use them in everyday school based actions are two-folded.

First, explicitly exploring the dynamic between the way narratives surface the language teachers employ in talking about themselves as professionals in a particular context of practice and their sense of professional agency in that context of practice unpacks important implications for understanding learning and professional development in teaching: learning is taking place over time (is not a one-off event) and is happening in real classrooms with real pupils, who matter for those who teach them in a far more intricate way than current approaches to professional development care to acknowledge. Understanding the manifold dynamic of the relational nature of professional agency in teaching may constitute the corner stone of actually understanding what teachers need in terms of programs of professional development. Notions of 'trust' and of 'knowledge' surface in the language of the participants to this study as discursive centrepieces of a common narrative on teaching for diversity and inclusion.

And secondly, paying attention to the voices of teachers presents itself as a research practice that needs expanding its' roots into the educational inquiry in Romania. This means dwelling deep not only at the levels of what teachers have to say about the various aspects of their work, but also attempting to understand *why* and *how* they engage with their conceptual and procedural tools in trying to solve a problem or improve an approach. Maintaining a restrictive representation of professional learning as a matter of simply transferring knowledge has proved its inefficiency time and time again in producing the expected effects in the classrooms. Increasing empirical evidence support the idea that the professional learning that impacts most classroom teaching and learning involves an element collaborative enquiry or experiment between teachers (Dudley, 2013; Athanases et al., 2012).

## 5. Conclusion

Although the transferability of the findings in this small, introductory analysis of teachers' language in exploring their experiences with teaching for diversity and inclusion is very limited, given the scope and the highly contextualized nature of the language data it presents, it has the merit of raising awareness on the importance of bringing to the forefront of educational inquiry the voices of practitioners in education. In these professionals' language lay manifold insights into not only what, but why, how and when a pedagogical resource (albeit material, conceptual or procedural) could work to the desired effects in the classroom. It also raises attention to the lack of interest the literature on educational inquiry in Romania has shown to collaborative practices in schools. Emphasis on confinement to the traditional boundaries of specialization and the habitual approach to educational change by deploying ready-made meanings and procedural prescriptions for action in a top-down dynamic of delegating responsibility for efficient action in the classroom, have restricted practitioners from developing contextualized, collaborative practices of professional learning by inquiring and experimenting with the various tools of the profession available in their schools. Research deepening our understanding of the relational aspects of teachers' exercise of professional agency, of learning, and of professional development is, in these circumstances, of utmost importance and immediacy.

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