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**PREVIOUS SUCCESS IN RELATION TO PRIMARY TEACHERS'
ATTITUDE TOWARD INCLUSION**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between past success and attitude towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. A number of 75 Romanian primary school teachers filled in a questionnaire structured in three parts, with demographic items, attitudes towards the inclusion of pupils with different types of disabilities, perceptions regarding the benefits and inconveniences of inclusive practices and previous experience in teaching students with disabilities. The results of the study revealed an ambivalent attitude towards inclusive education. Although aware of the benefits of inclusion, the majority of the subjects considered that pupils with SEN should rather learn in special schools due to the lack of teachers' abilities to manage inclusive classrooms. Attitude towards inclusion also varies according to the nature and severity of the disability, teachers being more willing to accept pupils with social and mental/learning disabilities than students with behavioural or physical/sensory disabilities. The previous success in teaching students with disabilities was associated with more positive attitudes. Demographic variables like age, level of training or teaching experience had no significant impact on teachers' attitude. The findings of this study highlight the need for teacher support in the inclusive process. Positive inclusive teaching experiences are needed in order to create a sense of success, necessary to increase teachers' responsiveness to inclusive philosophy.

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Keywords: Inclusion, attitude, primary teachers, previous success.



1. Introduction

The alignment of Romania to the European and international standards has generated a new challenge in the mainstream schools in our country: acceptance and integration of a very diverse population of pupils, including pupils with disabilities or with SEN (special educational needs), such as pupils with mild mental retardation, with learning and behavioural disorders, sensory impairments, etc. The National Education Law mandates mainstream schools to provide students with disabilities with free and adequate education together with their colleagues without disabilities, as far as possible. It is specified that a student diagnosed by the Evaluation Committee as being a student with SEN benefits from a mass curriculum customized for the integrated education for special needs and the support and guidance of an itinerant teacher through an individualized intervention plan (PIP).

Inclusive school is a school open to all, regardless of their diversity or the severity of the deficiencies. Inclusive education aims at the elimination of all labels, ratings, classifications or value hierarchies of the pupils' performance, these pupils being seen as having their own chances and opportunities within the group (UNESCO, 1994).

Inclusion of pupils with different disabilities involves more or less significant changes at the level of the didactic process, depending on the nature and degree of the deficiency. A sustained effort of all the factors involved in inclusion is required: pupils with deficiency, their classmates, teachers, family, special education specialists, school and school management (Gherguț, 2006).

A key aspect in the successful implementation of any inclusive policy is represented by the attitude of the ones responsible for its application, namely, the teachers. The extent to which teachers accept or not the philosophy of inclusive education will be highlighted directly in the didactic and instruction-education process. Several studies have shown that attitudes towards inclusion are among the strongest predictors of successful inclusive reforms (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Antonak & Larrivee, 1995).

Forming attitudes is time consuming and is influenced by several factors that can act simultaneously. These factors have been divided into: student-related variables (such as the nature and severity of the disability), teacher-related variables (such as age, level of studies, personality traits) and environment-related variables (such as class size and perceived support) (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002).

2. Problem Statement

Over the past two decades, an impressive number of researches have focused both on measuring teachers' attitudes and knowledge regarding inclusive education, and on the factors influencing the formation of these perceptions and beliefs. Measuring teachers' perceptions is essential because teachers' attitudes may be barriers to inclusive education. However, the number of studies related to the experience and the way Romanian teachers perceive inclusion is quite low. This study aims to fill a gap and contribute to the study of inclusion. Examining teachers' attitudes contributes to a better understanding of the perception of integration and the factors that determine it. The results of this research will provide valuable insights to headmasters as well as other specialists involved in implementing inclusive policies regarding modalities to increase responsiveness to the principles and requirements of inclusive education.

3. Research Questions

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are influenced by many factors. In this study we investigate the effect of previous success on the perceptions about inclusion. Therefore, certain research questions have been formulated:

What is the attitude of primary school teachers towards the inclusion of students with physical, behavioural, academic or social disabilities?

To what extent do teachers support inclusive philosophy?

How do teachers perceive previous inclusive experience? Does the previous success contribute to the attitude towards inclusion?

4. Purpose of the Study

The main aim of the study is to investigate the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the integration of pupils with special educational needs and to analyze the relationship from previous success in including children with SEN and the perception of inclusive practices.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

This study involved the participation of 75 primary school teachers experienced in inclusive education. The subjects are females, aged between 22 and 59 and come from 6 schools in the municipality of Arad. The teachers have worked with the following types of disabilities: learning disorders (77,5%), speaking disorders (51,3%), behavior disorders (52,5%), mental deficiencies (28,8%), physical deficiencies (5%), neuromotor deficiencies (6,3%), sight and hearing deficiencies (3,8%), autism (8,8%), affective/psychological disorders (21,3%). Most subjects are trained in education for special needs, 82,5% of the respondents declared to have taken part in courses, seminars or work-shops regarding the inclusion of pupils with special needs.

5.2. Research Items

The subjects voluntarily filled in a questionnaire containing three parts. The first part consisted of filling in the questionnaire regarding the *Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Scale* (ATIES) (Wilczenski 1992), which measures teachers' attitudes towards integrating students with SEN into mainstream schools. It contains 16 items, each item being evaluated on a Likert scale with 6 points from 1 (I do not agree at all) to 6 (I totally agree), the higher score indicating a more favourable general attitude towards inclusive education. The questionnaire consists of 4 sub-scales describing four aspects of the disability: physical, academic, behavioural and social. The scale has good psychometric properties, on this sample Cronbach's alpha fidelity coefficient being .89 for the entire scale.

In the second part, the subjects completed the scale for the *Opinions Relative to the Integration of Students with Disabilities* (ORI), (Antonak and Larrivee, 1995), measuring overall views regarding inclusion philosophy, the benefits and inconveniences of inclusive practices. The scale contains 25 items,

each item being evaluated on a Likert scale with 6 points from 1 (I do not agree at all) to 6 (I totally agree), the higher score indicating a more favourable attitude. ORI measures both general perceptions and views on four factors: Benefits of inclusion, Inclusive classroom management, Perceived ability to teach students with disabilities, and Special education versus inclusive settings. The reliability analysis of the ORI showed an Alpha coefficient of 0.87, suggesting good psychometric properties of the scale.

The third section included items regarding demographics, experience and vocational training in inclusive education. The previous success was measured through a single item (Do you consider that the inclusion of these pupils was successful?), measured on a scale of 1 (to a small extent) to 6 (to a large extent).

6. Findings

The results from ATIES and ORI were coded according to the six point scale, with a data range of 1-6. The statistical analysis highlighted the fact that on this sample, between the demographic variables (age, teaching experience, vocational training) and attitude towards inclusion, there are no significant relations.

Regarding the attitude towards the inclusion of pupils with different types of disabilities, descriptive statistics indicated a general average score of 3.61, between *I somewhat disagree* and *I somewhat agree*, which shows a slightly favourable attitude towards inclusion (the author of the questionnaire considers that a total average of over 3.5 indicates a positive attitude) (Table 01).

Table 01. Average values and correlations between the previous success and attitude towards inclusion (ATIES scores)

	M	AS	FD	AD	BD	SD	G
Physical disabilities (FD)	2.79	1.06					
Academic disabilities (AD)	3.62	.93	.603**				
Behaviour disabilities (BD)	3.48	1.07	.374**	.448**			
Social disabilities (SD)	4.56	.83	.482**	.560**	.599**		
General attitudes (G)	3.61	.77	.784**	.814**	.771**	.811**	
Previous success	3.76	1.42	.334**	.527**	.267*	.415**	.473**

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

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

As for the average result for factors, the lowest agreement is manifested towards the physical/sensorial aspects (M=2.79) and the behavioural ones (M=3.48), followed by academic aspects (M=3.62) and the social ones (M=4.56) that the subjects are more likely to agree with.

Inferential processing suggests a strong positive relationship between previous success and the attitude towards the inclusion of pupils with different types of disabilities, the simple linear regression

showing that previous success is a predictor of the attitude towards inclusion ($F(1,74) = 21,314$, $p < 0,001$; R^2 adjusted = .213).

The descriptive analysis of the ORI scores indicates a general average of 3.11, with the predominant answer being *I somewhat disagree* (Table 02).

Table 02. Average values and correlations between the previous success and the perceptions regarding the inclusive practices (ORI scores)

	M	AS	BI	ICM	TA	SI	G
Benefits of inclusion (BI)	3.84	1.16					
Inclusive classroom management (ICM)	2.90	.87	.772**				
Teachers' abilities (TA)	2.74	1.14	.461**	.502**			
Special education vs. inclusive settings (SI)	2.46	1.01	.700**	.658**	.548**		
General perceptions on ORI (G)	3.11	.88	.924**	.917**	.647**	.821**	
Previous success	3.76	1.42	.568**	.509**	.458**	.504**	.603**

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

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

In terms of factor responses, the factor with the highest average score refers to the *Benefits of inclusion* ($M=3.84$), the subjects somewhat agreeing that inclusion promotes acceptance of differences among pupils. As regards *Classroom Management* ($M=2.9$), teachers have a rather negative perception, considering that students with SEN need more patience and attention, to the detriment of other children. Furthermore, a negative perception is also concluded regarding the *Perception of the Teachers' Abilities* to teach students with SEN ($M = 2.74$), the subjects considering that primary school teachers do not have the necessary skills to teach students with various types of disabilities. The *Special Education vs. Inclusive Education* factor ($M=2.46$) reaffirms the position of the teachers, the low score indicating the agreement with the orientation of children with SEN to schools for special educational needs.

There is a strong correlation between the previous success and the perceptions regarding the inclusive practices, the simple linear regression showing that previous success has a significant effect on the perceptions of inclusive practices and explains 35.5% of their variation ($F(1,74)=42.209$, $p < 0.001$; R^2 adjusted = .355).

7. Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the relationship between previous success and attitudes towards inclusive education.

The results have highlighted an “undecided” attitude of teachers towards inclusion. In accordance with the theory of Vigotsky’s social development and Bandura’s social learning, teachers acknowledge the

benefits of inclusion resulting from shaping, imitation and observation of others. However, respondents consider that pupils with SEN should learn in special schools because teachers in mainstream schools do not have the necessary skills and training in order to meet the needs of those children whose behaviour is difficult to manage.

Attitude towards inclusion also varies according to the nature and severity of the disability, teachers being more willing to accept pupils with social deficiencies in their class than students with mental/ learning, behavioural or physical/ sensory disabilities.

Thaver, Lim and Liau (2014) also found that teachers have an undecided attitude, between positive and negative. Teachers generally have positive opinions regarding the integration of pupils that do not require substantial changes in the teaching-learning process or changes concerning classroom management (Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Subban & Sharma, 2006; O'Toole & Burke, 2013). It seems that classroom management skills are the main concern regarding inclusive education (Rosas & West, 2009), especially when students with behavioural disorders are integrated. A defective classroom management interferes with the teaching-learning process and leads to negative perceptions regarding the integration. These results can be explained by the fact that teacher training focuses mainly on the pedagogical aspect, on the transmission of knowledge and the planning of didactic content and less on the psychological aspects of learning in the case of the children with special needs.

Previous success is strongly related to attitudes towards inclusion. The more the subjects perceive that the inclusion of these children has been successfully achieved, the more likely they are to have a more positive attitude towards the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. The relationship is weaker on the variable inclusion of pupils with behavioural disabilities, the previous success not having such a significant effect in this case.

These conclusions have been formulated in other studies, as well. Ahmmed, et. al. (2012) highlighted that previous success, together with the perceived support, were the strongest predictors of the attitude towards inclusion. Other authors (Avramidis et al., 2000, Campbell, et al., 2003) have also supported the idea that previous success is associated with more positive attitudes towards inclusion. The emergence of success in any activity confirms that we are on the right track and gives us the force to move on. Assessing children's progress is a key point in the learning process. The evaluation data is a factor correcting the activity of the teacher (Radu, 2004) as it warns them as regards the sources of error, what needs to be repeated step by step, etc. It seems, however, that repeated failures lead to exhaustion. The negative experience of integrating these children and the lack of progress both from a social and from a cognitive point of view no longer activates the correction function, repetition of the educational cycle, but leads to a negative attitude towards inclusive education and to the conclusion that these children should be educated in special schools.

The results of this research highlight *the need for teacher support* in the integrative process. The attitudes of primary school teachers are between "yes" and "no", on the one hand they are willing to accept students with SEN, but on the other hand, they highlight the lack of skills necessary to manage inclusive classes. Probably the balance will tilt to one side or another depending on the amount of help they will receive in the future. Those responsible for implementing inclusive education should make sure that teachers receive adequate support to teach pupils with disabilities.

Learning techniques to manage problematic behaviours could also increase the *perception of successful inclusion*. The results of the study highlighted a very strong relationship between the perception of previous success and the attitude towards inclusive education. Although we cannot specify the direction of this relationship, whether the attitudes influence the perception of success, or whether the latter influences attitudes, these findings still have an important implication in changing attitudes towards students with SEN.

Firstly, it is necessary to discover the meaning of successful integration in the teachers' perceptions and the expectations regarding the progress of children with SEN. Secondly, in collaboration with the support team and the family, lists of specific and realistic goals should be established regarding the competences expected in the academic and social areas, so that teachers also become aware of the progress made by the integrated student, even if they are lower compared to the class level. Pupils with SEN have their own rhythm of learning, and often the progress made by these children is not observed by teachers, whose expectations might be too high. If we relate to Vítkovsky's dynamic evaluation theory, it is much more important to assess the learning potential and the capacity for progress of individuals than their level of knowledge. In other words, we are interested not in pre-existing acquisitions, but in assessing the degree of transferability and integration in the cognitive operating structures of knowledge induced in the educational phase.

Intensification and better collaboration between teachers and special education specialists could also increase the feeling of successful inclusive education.

Finally, a strategy that has proven to be effective in other countries, is the exchange of experience between teachers who have been successfully teaching SEN students and those who have considered that the success rate is low (Birkett, 2010, Ahmmed, et. al.; 2012). Teachers who claimed that inclusion was successful might use different teaching methods or means, or simply address children with a favourable attitude, which could have beneficial effects on integrating students with SEN.

Future research should operationalize the term “successful inclusion” and examine modalities to change attitudes, in order to create more positive perceptions towards inclusive policies and practices.

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