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**OPTIMIZING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF
COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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Abstract

Students with special educational needs represent a vulnerable category of persons that was significantly affected during the Covid-19 Pandemic due to the contradiction between their specific needs to benefit from direct contact with different specialists, with teachers and peers so that their needs are respected according to their own learning rhythm and the strict rules on social distancing imposed by authorities in order to limit and prevent the extension of this new disease. The impact of these measures on the category of students with special educational needs can be observed both physically, emotionally and socially. This context becomes more delicate when we think about the preschool children with special educational needs. In order for teachers to be able to intervene in this complex situation, we propose, within the present article, a series of educational recommendations for valuing and optimizing inclusion. These guidelines are based both on the study of literature in this field and on the opinions expressed by teachers, who find themselves in the above mentioned context. The category of preschool children with special educational needs should be taken into consideration in order to optimize future distance learning approaches, but also the ones specific to traditional education. Reorganizing education has become one of the major present goals, since education has important, long-term implications over many other fields of the society.

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1. Introduction

The existing diversity in the Romanian education system at the level of children's groups is part of the current reality, representing a characteristic of them, which must be respected. The special educational needs of children, frequently identified in this context, are considered to be the result of the interaction of a group of factors, some related to the child, others related to the community, and others related to the responsibilities of educational institutions. In the recent years, many efforts have been made in our country to ensure the right to education for all members of the community, considering the differences as a specific element of humanity. The current vision on an inclusive educational institution is that of a friendly and democratic school, “which values the social, ethnic and cultural diversity, a school in which all children are respected and integrated without discrimination and exclusion, generated by ethnicity or mother tongue, disability and / or special educational needs, socio-economic status of family, place of residence or school performance of the primary beneficiaries of education.” (Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research, 2016).

Though this open perspective and attitude, the 2019 pandemic affected significantly all vulnerable groups. One among these is represented by the preschool children with special educational needs. Their independence within this situation was strongly limited, due to their developmental stage, but also due to the specific regulations imposed by authorities (Oltean 2020; Trzcińska-Król, 2020). Within this delicate context we intended to find out how teachers stimulate and facilitate the proper social and emotional development of these children and also, which were the solutions proposed in order to improve the inclusive education teaching strategies in the pandemic context. The schools closure and forced isolation has confirmed that the simple access to an educational institution, to the kindergarten or school building, to the classroom, is not equal to access to education. Inclusion within the actual epidemiological context involves creating optimal conditions to ensure the progress of each child, no matter where he or she starts. The attention paid to inclusion is motivated lately also by “very compelling economic arguments: Let's think of one of the categories of disadvantaged students - Roma students - at high risk of early school leaving, a phenomenon widely documented in various publications in recent decades. According to information provided by the European Commission (2015), the inclusion of Roma students is a vital social investment with benefits for society as a whole, given the growing percentage of Roma people in the Romanian labor market, where one in five new entrants in the field of work belongs to this ethnic group. The quality of the workforce in our economy depends on the quality of learning and the facilitation of learning that we provide to all students in the education system” (Kovacs, 2020, p. 10).

2. Problem statement

The inclusion process can be valued not only in case of preschool children with special educational needs, but also in the case of typical pre-schoolers. Point and Desmarais (2011) show that educational inclusion of children with special educational needs determines benefits for these children and also for their peers. Thus, the inclusion of these children in the ordinary preschool can represent the base for the inclusive future school environment (Băiescu, 2013; Odom, 2000).

When the teacher prepares learning situations and activities in which preschool children without special educational needs can play, become friends, cooperate and solve tasks together with their peers with special educational needs, the training of a prosocial behaviour will be facilitated for the children without special educational needs; they will learn about the respect towards diversity and acceptance (Ministry of National Education - Romanian curriculum for early education, 2019). At the same time, the typical preschool children will gain a real, proper image regarding special educational needs, different disabilities, social disadvantages, social inclusion, and will more easily accept the differences between individuals, becoming more attentive to the needs of others, more tolerant and developing their develop empathy, a sense of unconditional acceptance and their socio-emotional intelligence (Băiescu, 2013).

Preparing didactic activities for a group of preschool children, which includes also children with special educational needs, requires, in addition to the usual procedure for designing activities, that the teacher analyses the following aspects (Unicef, 1995):

1. "What materials / toys does the child need to carry out his / her activity? Are these different from those used by other children?"
2. What skills must the child possess in order to be able to use the chosen materials / toys?"
3. 3. What sensory channels or areas of development are involved in the carrying out that activity? The emphasis is on hearing, sight, fine motor skills etc.?" (p. 121).

The preschool curricular program enables adapting didactic activities to different ages, needs, interests of children, which facilitates also the inclusion process of preschool children with special educational needs in the ordinary kindergartens. Cook et al. (2000) think that any kindergarten in which there is a proper educational program can represent an inclusive environment, if the staff is trained and there are necessary resources to meet the special educational requirements.

The inclusion process can also become a challenge for teachers. Munteanu and Munteanu (2009) list some of the main reasons that determine teachers to perceive inclusion in this manner: lack of previous experience with pre-schoolers with special educational needs, severity of disabilities, existence of multiple disabilities, large number of pre-schoolers in the group, a certain mentality regarding the special educational needs of some children, lack of support from other specialists, lack of resources for designing an inclusive educational environment. However, research regarding the inclusion (Bricker, 1995; Jones & Rapport, 1997; Rose & Smith, 1993) demonstrates that the teacher is the one who has to structure the environment, adapt the materials, and determine the way in which the preschool child learns most effectively, so that the child has a positive experience of inclusion.

3. Research questions

The present study was based on the main two research questions:

1. To what extent do teachers apply in the teaching approach the principles of inclusive pedagogy, in order to stimulate the social and emotional development of pre-schoolers with special educational needs?
2. Which are the possible solutions that teachers propose in order to optimize specific inclusive education teaching strategies?

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study aims to establish the impact that working techniques specific to inclusive education had on the optimizing process of the didactic approach, including the social and emotional development of preschool children with special educational needs.

The research followed the principles of the inclusive pedagogy regarding the approach of the didactic activities by teachers from the preschool education, the way in which they value the inclusion paradigm, but also their centeredness on active and interactive participation of learners, included in early intervention educational programs, at institutional and local level.

5. Research Methods

The current ascertaining pedagogical study aimed to investigate which are the results of a systematic implementation of assessment techniques and early intervention proposals in organization and realization of the didactic activity on the degree of understanding and acceptance of similarities and differences between children for the socio-emotional development of pre-schoolers. In order to gather the data, an online focus-group was conducted. The obtained results are presented descriptive below.

Regarding the group of participants to the current study we mention that this was composed of teachers working in the preschool educational system, both tenured and substitute. The selection of these participants took into consideration the following criteria: initial and continuous teacher training, completion of training programs for professional development in the field of inclusive education, seniority in the education system, seniority in the current institution and the socio-economic and cultural environment from which the pre-schoolers these teachers work with come. Thus, 36% of the respondents are teachers graduated from the pedagogical college and 74% are teachers graduated from the bachelor study program with the specialization in preschool and primary education. Regarding the seniority of the respondents at work: 30% have a seniority between 0 and 2 years, 16% have obtained the final degree, 14% have obtained the second degree, 17% have obtained the first degree, 6% are enrolled in the continuous training program for teachers in order to obtain the final degree, 8% are enrolled in the program of continuous training for teachers in order to obtain the didactic second degree and 14% are enrolled in the program of continuous training for teachers in order to obtain the first didactic degree. From the point of view of seniority in the workplace, the sample of respondents is as follows: 35% of respondents work in the urban area, 40% of them work in the rural area; 10% of the respondents work in institutions located in the centre and 6% of them work in institutions located in neighbourhood and / or marginal area, 4% of the investigated teachers work in educational institutions that have the status of inclusive educational units and 5% of the respondents work in the institution that manages pre-schoolers, which come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

6. Findings

After conducting the study regarding the optimizing of strategies specific for inclusive education within the didactic approach, the data presented below was collected.

Taking the pandemic context into consideration, a percentage of 87.5% of teachers focused during the didactic activities on promoting and applying the principles of inclusive education, because the respondents state that this stage of development of learners is an essential foundation for their entire cognitive and non-cognitive future evolution, influencing the lifestyle, with subsequent impact on the quality of life of the individual. From this point of view, the respondents underlined that for building an inclusive school institution it is necessary to practice an institutional management focused on the democratic-participatory typology, a responsible, transparent management, of involvement and assumption, with a high degree of commitment and immixture at institutional and community level that implements programs for the training and professional development of teachers, valuing their pedagogical expertise. Teachers stated also that the managerial team builds at the school level projects focused on the qualitative curriculum design in the domain of inclusive education, of the management of inclusive institutions and of the preschool groups. These projects aim the development and the extension of didactic competences regarding the organization, management and improvement of the strategic performance specific to inclusive education, but also the development of the self-control element and of the reflective analysis of one's own activity.

In this context, of the professional development specific for inclusive education of the teachers, 87,5 % of the participants are concerned in their counselling work with maximizing communication and interpersonal relationships between children with special educational needs and their preschool peers. In pursuing this objective the intervention programs have used both in individual and group counselling the development of the emotional resilience, by forming the ability to choose own thoughts, feelings, actions by which the learner can optimal function at personal and group level, gaining positive results within social relations. From this point of view, the interviewees emphasized the increase of the level of perception of students with special educational needs, these pupils being unconditionally accepted by others, and their persona values are accepted, without being judged, labeled, criticized or why not, controlled (Cuc, 2013, 2014, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Ghergut, 2016; Gherguț et al., 2016; Ghergut & Frumos, 2019;).

Also, 78% of teachers presented as an adjusted pedagogical solution within the direct work with preschoolers the use of specific counselling techniques that had success in their activities and that supported the report of positive effects at the level of social and emotional development of children. Regarding this aspect, we mention: active listening to the children; demonstration of interest and attention towards the problems that the child encounters; the counsellor's ability to paraphrase by emphasizing the emotional content of the learner's message; techniques for reflecting emotions through which learners with special needs are supported in the dynamic of the process of narrative interpretation of their own emotional experience, but also in the development of the ability of active listening; offering constructive feed-back focused on positive aspects, on attitudes and behaviours that can be changed, but also a descriptive feed-back that reinforces desirable behaviours.

A percentage of 90% of the respondents highlighted as a possible advanced solution for optimizing the strategies specific to inclusive education in the teaching approach the quality of interpersonal relations built at group and society level by practicing desirable communication and relationship models. At the interpersonal level, the emphasis fell in the didactic approach both on the development of the social

relationship competence, which through role plays engaged the learners in a diversity of social situations and social interactions with others aiming at initiating interactions, models of social messages, reactions, expressions that show feelings, group empathy, etc., but also on the dimension of developing the ability to solve social problems with the help of an adult, by developing behavioural strategies to negotiate and avoid conflicts (Cuc, 2013, 2014, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Stan, 2016a). The interviewees emphasized that in their activity they are concerned to diversify strategies also regarding the development of learner's intrapersonal social skills, because their adaptability is influenced from the first years of life by the way in which in the diversity of the social context through spontaneous learning he becomes able to control his own behaviour, and through the development of emotional regulation skills the learner acquires self-control of his own behaviour. Thus, in the counselling work the accent is put on the compliance, a fundamental premise of interpersonal relationships and their improvement, because the interviewees state the group or personal rules are functional when they are rationally constructed, are realistic according to the resources of the subjects and are based on their, others, school or society preferences, so that the learners can easier become more aware of the positive consequences of these rules adopted by the individual (Miclea & Lemeni, 2010; Nelson-Jones, 2007; Roşan, 2015; Stan, 2016a, 2016b; Ştefan & Kallay, 2010). Based on this construct, 75 % of the interviewees stated that, in their counselling work, they are also focusing on developing the ability to tolerate situations that cause frustration with adult support, and by practicing role-playing games or collaboration and cooperation the pre-schoolers' tolerance to conflict situations and situations which causes frustration increases. Adult support, whether is received from the teacher or the family, becomes reduced by practicing models of social relationships.

7. Conclusion

The education of children with special educational needs represents a field in continuous development, whose methodology is evolving progressively, so that the practices considered effective at present, may be very different from those that will be outlined in the coming years (taking also into consideration the effect of the pandemic on the educational sector in general). Therefore, teachers working with preschool children with special educational needs should be constantly looking for information in order to be able to develop the skills required to adequately meet these children's needs (Prenton & Andruszkiewicz, 2006). The belief on which the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream education should be based is that any child, regardless of his or her particularities, should benefit from best educational practices, carried out in an environment, which ensures the care and training of all children (Lerner et al., 1998).

The centeredness of the current Romanian curriculum for early childhood on the child, on his needs and particularities, as well as on ensuring his well-being and his adequate social and emotional development, represents the fundament for the identification of efficient instruction and intervention practices. Thus, beyond the availability to try new ideas, to persevere when unseen aspects appear, the teacher working in the preschool education has to be aware that his main role is that of a facilitator of the child's learning process and not that of a knowledge transmitter (Unicef, 1995).

Inclusive education represents a system that respects the diverse character of children's groups and reflects the opportunity of education for all the children of a country by including the children with special educational needs in ordinary educational institutions. In order to carry out these actions in an efficient way, there is also a need to optimize the training of teachers. The continuous training of teachers is required when, unavoidable, the educational institutions don't manage to remedy children's disabilities (Muste, 2014). In order to develop effective strategies that could be used in this context, examples of educational institutions that "successfully solve all problems related to the diversity of children" (UNESCO, 1993, p. 11) can be considered. The essential role, as the main factor of action and coordination in the realization of a pedagogical program that responds to the diverse particularities of the children, belongs to the teacher. The teacher must act in such a way that all children feel valued and welcomed within the group to which they belong.

The existence of inclusive educational contexts can also have results in the medium and long term, in terms of reducing marginalization, negative attitudes towards different vulnerable groups, exclusion of certain groups from society, prejudices and stereotypes, prevention of school failure and dropout and achieving overall higher school results (Unicef, 2021).

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