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## Teamwork between class teachers and support teachers as the basis of inclusion—A case study in Romanian primary school education

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify how primary school teachers understand the importance of inclusive education and the benefits of the collaboration between the class teachers and the support teachers. In order to identify the social representations of primary school teachers regarding the cooperation with the support teachers, we have used a questionnaire-based inquiry. We have organised the data into a case study at the level of primary school education. The responses to the open questions offered by the investigated teachers allowed a dramaturgical approach to the roles and the responsibilities of the actors in special education. Our results enhance the benefits of integration of students with special educational needs in the conditions of a distributed responsibility between parents, class teachers and support teachers. Therefore, the qualitative analysis of the written responses of primary school teachers reveals the need of continuous training in aspects related to special educational needs.

**Keywords:** Special educational needs, support teachers, primary school education.

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## 1. Introduction

Increasing the number of pupils with special educational needs has become a constant in the Romanian primary education. The effective integration of these pupils depends on how teachers for primary education understand the process of integration. The success of integrating students with special educational needs depends on how classroom teachers understand the role of the support teacher. In other words, the effective integration and inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in the mainstream education depend on the collaboration between the class teacher and the support teacher. Regardless the special educational needs of the pupils, their personal and academic achievements are improved when the class teachers efficiently collaborate with the support teachers. Therefore, the continuous teacher training should develop teachers' competences related to special education and cooperation to all the actors interacting to children with special educational needs.

According to The National Strategy, *A society without barriers for the person with disabilities 2016–2020*, Romania has committed to mobilise all the necessary resources in order to eliminate the risks of discrimination, exclusion or abuse in the case of people with disabilities (The Official Bulletin of Romania from September 22, 2016). In the educational field, the strategic framework is set by the sectorial strategies that are supposed to lead to high-quality education for all the children. The access to quality education for all pupils with special educational needs is provided through curricular adaptations according to the specific needs of the students and through educational and financial support. The Romanian Ministry of Education aims to integrate the children with learning difficulties in the mainstream education and to develop the educational support services. The first step in developing these services is to increase the number of support teachers and school counsellors and to provide continuous teacher training for all the teachers in the classes where children with special educational needs are integrated (Law no. 221/2010). Thus, the inclusive education represents an alternative to the special education for the children with special educational needs and real possibilities of recovery and reintegration (Bolborici & Bodi, 2019).

The inclusive education could be developed in inclusive schools. According to the specialists in the educational field, the inclusive school have some characteristics of the postmodern school (Ulrich, 2007). It embraces all the children, over and above their ethnicity, social risks or educational needs; ensures a safe and trustful environment, promotes positive emotions for a full development of children's personalities, adapts the curriculum according the particularities and needs of the students (Ciolan, 2008; Cozolino, 2017; Goleman, 2018; Senge, 2016; Walker, 2018). The inclusive school promotes certain values such as diversity, cooperation, tolerance and empathy. The development of inclusion culture depends on the promoted organisational culture. Furthermore, the cultural dimensions and differences influence the establishment of the organisational relationships (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2012). Therefore, an inclusive school is an authentic educational community, with all the features of the 21st century strategies.

## 2. Research questions and objectives

The effective integration and inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in the mainstream education depend on the collaboration between the class teacher and the support teacher. The question that have guided our research has been how primary school teachers understand the collaboration with the support teachers in order to ensure an effective inclusion of children with special educational needs who are integrated in their classes. According to the dramaturgical perspective of our study, we have reformulated the research question in the following terms: *How primary school teachers assume their roles in the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream education?* Therefore, to provide a holistic approach to the social representations of the teachers regarding the delicate issue of inclusion, we have set the following research objectives:

1. To identify the frequency of interactions between the class teachers and the support teachers;
2. To identify the means of collaboration between class teachers and support teachers in primary education and
3. To analyse the impression management of primary school teachers in their collaboration with the support teachers.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Procedure**

The research was carried out from March to September 2018. The aim was to establish the social representations of the primary school teachers regarding the collaboration with the support teachers in order to enhance the personal and academic achievements of children with special educational needs integrated in the mainstream education.

#### **3.2. Participants**

The target population of the study consisted in 41 primary school teachers from several schools of Brasov. They are aged between 21 and 62 years, the most frequent value being 41 ( $N = 37$ ;  $M = 43$ ;  $SD = 11$ ). Only 37 out of 41 respondents have shown their age. Regarding their gender, 39 are female and two are male ( $N = 41$ ;  $M = 1.95$ ;  $SD = 0.21$ ). Related to the deployment environment, 35 of the primary school teachers work in the urban area and seven in rural area ( $N = 41$ ;  $M = 1.17$ ;  $SD = 0.38$ ).

#### **3.3. Measures**

This study is a part of an interdisciplinary research project aimed at investigating the social representation of the support teachers in in the local community in Brasov. The questionnaire-based inquiry has been addressed to several actors of education, namely, teachers from the pre-university education, support teacher and parents. For a comprehensive approach to one level of the education, we have selected only the responses of primary school teachers and grouped them into a case study at this level of education. The unsolicited information written by the teachers on the questionnaires have been linked to the impression management and to dramaturgical analysis. Therefore, we have used the following research methods: questionnaire based inquiry, case study and dramaturgical analysis. The research instrument has been a self-administered attitude questionnaire with multiple choice questions on Likert scale and open questions.

### **4. Findings**

#### **4.1. Findings regarding the importance of the integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream education**

The statistical analysis has shown that one primary school teacher consider the integration is important to a very small extend, five to a small extend, 15 neither to a small extend, nor to a large extend, 14 to a large extend and five to a very large extend ( $N = 40$ ;  $M = 3.42$ ;  $SD = 0.95$ ). Thus, 15% of the investigated teachers find the integration processes less important, 37.5% adopt a neutral attitude and 47.5% consider it is important. Table 1 presents the results.

**Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of the responses of primary school teachers regarding the importance of integration and inclusion**

Answer options	Frequencies	Percentages
To a very small extend	1	2.5
To a small extend	5	12.5
Neither to a small extend, nor to a large extend	15	37.5
To a large extend	14	35
To a very large extend	5	12.5

**4.2. Findings regarding the necessity of the integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream education**

Regarding the necessity of integration and inclusion of children with SEN, two primary school teachers have the opinion, it is necessary to a very small extend, three to a small extend, 20 neither to a small extend, nor to a large extend, 13 to a large extend and three to a very large extend ( $N = 41$ ;  $M = 3.29$ ;  $SD = 0.90$ ). In these terms, 12.2% do not see the necessity of integration, 48.8% propose a neutral answer and 39.0% consider the inclusion of SEN cases necessary, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of the responses of primary school teachers regarding the necessity of integration and inclusion**

Answer options	Frequencies	Percentages
To a very small extend	2	4.9
To a small extend	3	7.3
Neither to a small extend, nor to a large extend	20	48.8
To a large extend	13	31.7
To a very large extend	3	7.3

**4.3. Findings regarding the benefits of the integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream education**

Regarding the benefits of integration and inclusion, seven primary school teachers have chosen to a very small extend, 24 to a small extend, 29 teachers have chosen to a large extend and 10 to a very large extend ( $N = 41$ ;  $M = 2.90$ ;  $SD = 0.96$ ). Thus, 36.6% of the investigated teachers could not see the benefits of integration of children with special educational needs in mainstream education, 36.6% have chosen a neutral answer and 26.9 consider that the benefits of integration and inclusion are important or very important, as in Table 3.

**Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of the responses of primary school teachers regarding the benefits of integration and inclusion**

Answer options	Frequencies	Percentages
To a very small extend	2	4.9
To a small extend	13	31.7
Neither to a small extend, nor to a large extend	15	36.6
To a large extend	9	22.0
To a very large extend	2	4.9

**4.4. Findings regarding the impact of the integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream education**

Regarding the impact of integration and inclusion of SEN cases in mainstream education, only four primary school teachers have chosen a neutral answer. All the others consider integration and inclusion a subject with high impact in the Romanian educational system ( $N = 41$ ;  $M = 4.26$ ;  $SD = 0.63$ ).

In these conditions, 90.3% of the respondents find integration and inclusion an impact issue in everyday life.

**Table 4. Frequencies and percentages of the responses of primary school teachers regarding the impact of integration and inclusion**

Answer options	Frequencies	Percentages
Neither to a small extend, nor to a large extend	4	9.8
To a large extend	22	53.7
To a very large extend	15	36.6

**4.5. Findings regarding the frequencies of interaction between class teachers and support teachers in integrated special educational needs cases**

Regarding the interaction with the support teachers, two of the respondents have declared they interact to a very small extend, two to a small extend, four neither to a small extend, nor to a large extend, 17 primary school teachers have shown they interact to a large extend and 13 to a very large extend ( $N = 38$ ;  $M = 3.97$ ;  $SD = 1.97$ ). Thus, 10.6% of the respondents declare they find the interaction with the support teacher less important, 10.5% show a neutral attitude and 80.8% declare they usually collaborate with the support teachers, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5. Frequencies and percentages of the responses of primary school teachers regarding the collaboration with the support teachers**

Answer options	Frequencies	Percentages
To a very small extend	2	5.3
To a small extend	2	5.3
Neither to a small extend, nor to a large extend	4	10.5
To a large extend	17	44.7
To a very large extend	13	36.1

Related to the frequency of the intervention request addressed to the support teachers, 22 of the primary school teachers have declared that they request the intervention of the support teacher weekly, two have declared they request monthly and 10 have written a different, unsolicited answer ( $N = 38$ ;  $M = 1.34$ ;  $SD = 1.79$ ). Therefore, 57.9% have requested the counseling of the support teachers in every week, 5.3 in every month and 26.3% have given unsolicited responses, as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6. Frequencies and percentages of the responses of primary school teachers regarding the request for the support teachers**

Answer options	Frequencies	Percentages
Weekly	22	57.9
Monthly	2	5.3
Another answer	10	26.3

**4.6. Findings regarding the responsibility of integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream education**

Regarding the responsibility of the integration and inclusion of the students with SEN in the mainstream education, the majority of the respondents have indicated the support teachers (75.6%), as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7. Frequencies and percentages of the responses of primary school teachers regarding the responsibility of integration and inclusion**

	Frequencies	Percentages
Class teachers	23	56.1
Support teachers	31	75.6
Parents	13	31.8
Other children	15	36.6
Directors	15	36.6

The findings regarding the impact of integration and inclusion, the interaction between the class teachers and the support teachers, and the responsibility of integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs in primary school mainstream education have led us to the conclusion of the inconsistency between what the teachers declare they do and what they are actually doing. Therefore, we have started a deeper analysis of the primary school teacher's behaviour.

A behaviour could be explained as an instance of a general causal pattern even if the production of the model itself lies beyond explanations (Elster, 2013, p. 48). Compliance or nonconformity mechanisms, spreading or offsetting mechanisms are very general, but inclusion of individual behaviour in the instances of one of the mechanisms could provide a pertinent explanation. The social behaviour of individuals explains their behaviour at the interactive level. Therefore, the dramaturgical analysis allows the understanding of how impression management is used. The dramaturgical analysis could also provide the intrinsic meaning of social interactions. Dramaturgy is a research direction that uses the theatrical metaphor to explain social interactions because humans, in specific spatial and temporal conditions, perform to create meanings and achieve certain goals (Burke, 1945 in Miller & Dingwall, 1997; Perinbayagam, 1982). Thus, they manage how others perceive them by maintaining the delivered images, intentionally built but given to others naturally, spontaneously (Goffman, 2007; Harre, 1998).

Starting from intensive case study approach (Swanborn, 2010), we had as a point of articulation the principle that social reality investigation strategies are complementary, not incompatible, and that there is a methodological congruence of case studies with other types of research. We have considered that, in defining the case study, a distinction between the extensive approach and the intensive approach has to be made and we have chosen the case study perspective as intensive research as deeply studying the perceptions, interactions and decisions of the participants. The case study as an applied research method presents the possibility of a holistic approach in which the researcher seeks to explain phenomena if not general, at least generalizable, and focusing on one or several of the essential aspects of organising research in an attempt to understand how these variables influence the process as a whole.

## 5. Conclusions and discussions

The effective collaboration between class teachers and support teachers enhance the academic achievements of the pupils with special educational needs. The suitable definition of the professional roles of all the actors involved in the educational process facilitate the effective cooperation among individuals. On the one hand, the primary school teachers have to redefine their professional roles according to the challenges of the 21st century in the Romanian society. On the other hand, the support teachers have to define their professional roles despite legal limitations and lack of coherence. Both primary school teachers and support teachers construct their professional identities according with their different statutes. They belong to different performing teams. In order to provide the unitary image, the primary school teachers manage the impression perceived by the others using some dramatic techniques that characterise performance, such as dramaturgical loyalty and discipline. The performance is made from the perspective of assuming moral obligations, adhering to unwritten

codes and to the rules and limitations of the group (Miller & Dingwall, 1997, pp. 106–118). We have taken into account that from a dramaturgical perspective, there is no clear distinction between obviousness and dissimulation, as there is no clear distinction between impression management and manipulation. The performance, the activity of an individual deployed in a period marked by the presence continues in front of a group of observers, presupposes the existence of the façade, the standardised expressive equipment that is intentionally used by the individual during performance. The expressive consistency required in performance suggests a distance between our human and the socialised self. As human beings, we are dominated by variable impulses, but as characters, we must ensure a perfectly homogeneous performance (Goffman, 2007). The performer uses the personal facet, not because it allows him to appear, as he would like to appear, but because his appearance and attitude can contribute to a wider perspective, that of the performing team (Goffman, 2007). Nevertheless, the compliance mechanisms could explain the individual social behaviour of teachers as an effect of assuming the roles and the compliance with the operating rules of the school organisation.

The real inclusion of children with special educational needs in the mainstream education involves co-operation within a team. The same team for class teachers, support teachers, parents, school managers and other children. Performing their roles, they should have into consideration only the benefits of children with SEN. Therefore, the responsibility of integration and inclusion of the pupils with special educational needs should be distributed between class teacher, support teacher, parents and other children.

The analysis of the responses of the investigated primary school teachers reveals an inconsistency between the impact of the inclusion and the necessity of the integration. Even though 90.3% of the participants declare the integration of the children with special educational needs in mainstream education in a subject with high impact in everyday life, only 24.9% consider integration beneficial and 39.0% believe the inclusion to be necessary. Regarding the collaboration with the support teachers, 78.9% declare that they frequently interact with the support teachers, meanwhile 57.9% of the primary school teachers indicate weekly meetings with the support teachers. This percentage might be interpreted as a cooperation for the activity planning, more than for identifying the real means of inclusion. The primary school teacher is often one who discovers the learning difficulties of a child with special educational needs. The support teacher is the one who guides the implementation of intervention planes. The class teachers and the support teachers have different professional competences needed to enhance the achievements of integrated children. Therefore, the continuous teacher training should develop teachers' competences related to special education and cooperation to all the actors interacting to children with special educational needs.

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\*\*\*The National Strategy *A society without barriers for the person with disabilities* 2016–2020 published The Official Bulletin of Romania from, September 22, 2016.

\*\*\*The Law no. 221/2010 on the ratification of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* adopted at New York by the United Nations General Assembly on December 13, 2006, opened for signature on March 30, 2007 and signed by Romania on September 26, 2007.