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Promoting inclusive school culture through leadership—Case study in Romanian schools

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges for 21st century school is to rethinking school culture for human diversity. Among the factors contributing to the ethos of the inclusive school, most specialists emphasise the importance of leadership, of the managerial team that both through conception and through its own behaviour promotes cooperation, human diversity, tolerance, open mind-set and help offering. The purpose of this research was to identify the factors of the leadership, which are involved in promoting a culture of inclusion. The research in question was embedded in a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. The study included the analysis of school culture and interviews with school managers and teachers. The institutional analysis of schools addressed the physical/material aspects of the school and the social dimension (of human resources). One of the main conclusions of the research is that the leader and his team have a decisive role to play in promoting values of diversity.

Keywords: Inclusive school, leadership, school culture, inclusive education.

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1. Introduction

The issue of inclusion has been a debate topic in all school systems, especially in recent years following the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education, which endorsed the idea of inclusive education. The research in the educational field focuses on the inclusive school features: a school where all students are welcomed regardless of their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background or educational needs; a school where children's wellbeing is present; it has a differentiated/personalised curriculum; a school that promotes the principles of the constructivist pedagogy and a school geared towards change and innovation.

Among the factors contributing to the ethos of the inclusive school, most specialists (Ainscow, 1999; 2005; Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick & West, 2016; Fullan, 2007; Senge, 2016) emphasise the importance of leadership, of the managerial team that both through conception and through its own behaviour promotes cooperation, human diversity, tolerance, open mind-set and help offering. According to the specialists in the educational field, an inclusive school is a school that functions as a therapeutic community: it is safe (the students experiment wellbeing, they feel protected), a feeling of belonging is created (the school is mine), it is permanent (always available for the students' need).

This paper is focused on identifying the extent to which these features are promoted through school leadership. It is a continuation of the research (Voinea, 2018; Voinea, Topala & Bota, 2018) on the educational actors' perceptions (students, teachers, managers and parents) regarding integrating children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. In the previous studies, we found that the integration of children with special educational needs depends on several factors: from the school culture that promotes social values, such as tolerance, respect for difference, to teachers directly involved in integration activities, school leadership and parents who accept and understand the benefits of integration for all the children.

2. The school leadership and culture of inclusion

One of the greatest challenges for 21st century school is to rethinking school culture for human diversity (UNESCO, 2015), for all the children in a new way (in a holistic way). It is important to have a whole system of education based on the culture of inclusion, not only a few schools in the system. Developing inclusive practice (Ainscow, 2005) in mainstream schools involves some factors: social learning processes, a community of practice, *participation* (as the shared experiences and negotiation that result from social interactions within a purposive community) and 'reification' (the process by which communities of practice produce concrete representations of their practices, such as tools, symbols, rules and documents). All the teachers (support teachers and classroom teachers) need to reflect, to share and to discuss about professional experiences in their work with students with special educational needs. The school leadership has an important role in promoting this culture of inclusion through efforts to link schools with community, to share the values of acceptance and respect with teachers, students and parents.

Classical studies in the field of educational change show that the organisational structure of the school makes the difference between schools. High expectations, goals, atmosphere, climate and collaborative leadership characterise effective schools. In his turn, Fullan (1993) identifies four essential attributes of the ability to change the teacher's role as an agent of change: building personal vision, research, mastery and collaboration. Each of these has an institutional correlation: sharing the built vision, the organisational structure, the research norms and practice, focusing on organisational development and a culture of collaboration. The collaboration must be understood not only as a link between teachers, parents and students or other educational specialists, but as a larger/open point of view: school-to-school collaboration (Ainscow et al., 2012) and school-to-community collaboration. Collaboration between schools, argue Ainscow et al., 'can provide an effective means of solving immediate problems' (idem, p. 8) and 'can have a positive impact on students' learning in all of the participating schools' (idem, p. 9). However, this kind of collaboration depends on the school

manager's ability to adopt a new vision about the role of schools in community and the role of teachers in all the students' life and community life. This is a real challenge for school managers and their teams.

The new trends in school leadership underline the role of the constructivist leader (Lambert et al., 1995) who is able to cultivate the social context of learning for personal and professional development. Fullan (2007) underlines that the collegiality is a strong indicator of whether change will be implemented. The new trends in school leadership underline the role of the transformative leader who is able to develop a social context of learning for personal and professional development for all.

A synthesis of the school leadership characteristics emphasises that an effective leadership involves:

- Cooperation/collaboration/collegiality. This is the first condition for an inclusion culture. Many studies (Cozolino, 2016; Walker, 2018) demonstrated that the positive emotions are a powerful developing engine. Experiencing well-being depends on positive relationships with others. Cooperation, collaboration, tolerance, empathy, critical thinking, assertive communication and other social skills and social values could not be formed without being practiced in the various social contexts offered by school, especially offered by the leader and his team.
- A coherent system of values.
- Inclusive practices (equity requires educators to teach the same thing in different ways for different students)

According to Ainscow (2005), inclusion is an ongoing process and it involves collecting and evaluating information from different educational actors in order to remove stereotypes and make school a better place for all the students.

3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research was to identify the factors of leadership, which are involved in promoting a culture of inclusion. The research in question was embedded in a constructivist paradigm. We are interested in deeply understanding specific cases within a particular context (Patton, 2002).

4. Methodology

The research was carried out by analysing the institutional culture of three schools in Romania (one in rural area and two in urban area). Using a set of criteria, we selected three school managers. We used interviews, confirmatory interviews with others (teachers) and observations. The institutional analysis of schools addressed the physical/material aspects of the school and the social dimension (of human resources). The schools were selected to be homogeneous in terms of size and number of teachers.

A number of 100 participants, teachers and school managers from three schools of Brasov, Romania were included in the study.

5. Results and discussion

The institutional analysis of the three schools addressed the physical/material aspects of the school and the social dimension (of human resources).

From the point of view of the material dimension, N.O. school is a school situated in the urban area and has three buildings, recently renovated, with educational areas appropriate to students' age and fitted with the necessary equipment for a modern 21st century education. In two of the buildings, they teach primary school pupils and in the third one (located 1 km from the other two), they teach the secondary school students. The school is located in an area on the outskirts of the city, in a

developing neighbourhood, within a very attractive environment (the area is known for its forests, the nearby lake, the zoological garden and the recreational park).

The buildings where primary school students are taught are arranged in a welcoming, joyful manner specific to pupils in this learning cycle. We note the large spaces in the schoolyard, and especially a garden where the students participating in a project planted trees. The schoolyard is full of children’s asphalt drawings; the cardinal points are marked and the sports grounds are there.

The results of projects in which the school participated (national and international projects), since the inauguration of the school, are presented and the guiding values are written on the steps of the school.

The second school, also from the urban area, is located in the city centre, also in a newly renovated building. Its schoolyard is not very large. Here, too, there are exhibited pupils’ products from various projects.

The third school, from the countryside, is distinguished by generous spaces, newly renovated and equipped with teaching materials specific to a modern school.

In Table 1, the three analysed schools are compared.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the three school cultures

Criterion Area	School N.O. Urban (suburban)	School I.M. Urban (centre)	School V. Rural
Number of integrated students	12	8	16
Number of projects for inclusion/year	5	2	2
Values of school leadership	Inclusion collaboration results for all students	Collaboration life-long learning inclusion	Collaboration inclusion learning for all students

If, from the point of view of the material aspects (buildings, equipment and number of tenure teachers), the three schools do not differ very much, leaving aside the specifics of each school, from the point of view of the organisational culture, they are individualised/differentiated.

For example, in the first analysed school (N.O.), which can be an example of good practice for the development of an inclusion culture, as we have shown in a previous study (Voinea et al., 2018), the values at the level of the school leadership are *translated* for pupils and their parents in order to be understood and accepted, or for any other person coming to the school. The school creates a sense of belonging and security not only through the physical, material aspects (beautiful colourful spaces, the students’ works and drawings are present everywhere in the school) but also through the projects and the various extra-curricular activities that are organised together with the pupils.

Although in the second analysed school (I.M.), the pupils’ products are present on the walls of the school, the formal atmosphere tends to dominate (pupils wear uniforms specific to this school, the rules of collaboration are displayed in all the classes). Students and teachers are more oriented towards *achieving performance (especially a cognitive one)* and less on the quality of interpersonal relationships. A possible explanation may be *the good school* image that this school enjoys in the community and which it tends to conserve.

The school in the rural area is highlighted by a welcoming atmosphere from the school entrance, where pupils' products and school-specific values are exposed. In this school, too, it is easy to notice

the care for the student resulting from the projects developed and aimed at integrating students with SEN. One of the problems faced by rural schools is school abandonment.

Interviews with school managers have revealed that all three managers have over 10 years of managerial experience and have a clear vision of the goals to follow and have an open attitude towards integration issues.

Everyone said they worked very well with the teachers’ team on the board of the school, with the support teacher and the students’ parents. In Table 2, we can see, comparatively, the specificity of the three school managers.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the three school managers

Criterion	School N.O.	School I.M.	School V.
Managerial experience	10 years	22 years	11 years
Subjects taught	Social sciences	Mathematics	Physical education
Personal values	Work, creativity, empathy	Helping the others, involvement, openness	Involvement, creativity sobriety
Attitude towards integration	Positive (openness)	Formal openness towards integration	Positive towards integration

It is interesting to note that there is a continuity between the manager’s personal values and the vision that he imprints into the school, which is also reflected in their behaviour.

What differentiates the three managers is their attitude towards the integration of children with SEN in school. As it can be seen from the comparative analysis carried out, in I.M. school, a rather formal (at the declarative level) attitude dominates. It is a gap between ‘what is good for all students’ and what there is in practice, in every day school life. This manager thinks about the children with SEN in medical model, not in social model of disabilities, as the interview with the school manager showed. A possible explanation may be the fact that this school is centred on achieving performance in order to maintain the image of a good school in the community. The school manager has a lot of experience and she slipped into a routine area.

The N.O. school manager has a different point of view regarding students with SEN. She shares the social model of disabilities and she is involved in many projects about children with SEN. In this school, we can see a congruence between the manager’s statements, teachers, students and the whole school atmosphere. The same was noticed in the third manager interviewed. The direct involvement of the manager in integration issues is likely to promote a culture of inclusion across the community. All these managers share the same consistency between their personal and social values, their vision of education, school, integration and specific behaviour reflected in the co-workers’ perceptions on the manager.

This was also confirmed by the interviewed teachers, who replied that they see the school principal not as a leader but *as a colleague with whom they collaborate for the good of the school, or as a teacher supporter*.

The most common traits of the managers from the three schools, as perceived by colleagues are:

- Determination/ambition/involvement in school life;
- Courage to make changes in school;
- People who learn all the time/open to new;
- A person with whom you can collaborate and communicate easily/has a team spirit.

The fact that all these managers are involved in the integration projects becomes a model for both colleagues and pupils. A good example for what an effective leadership means is manager of school N.O.: the school teachers are supported by the school manager to capitalise on the physical environment in which the school is located through formal and non-formal activities in the area where

the school is located (e.g., tourist orientation contests, visits to the zoo, trips, etc.). In addition, the concern to attract funds to enhance integration or to combat school dropout is a good example of promoting values specific to our society. Last, but not the least, the availability to learn alongside other colleagues is a clue that the leader is the one who through his own behaviour creates contexts for personal, professional and organisational development.

6. Conclusion

Although the research carried out has the constraints specific to the constructivist-interpretative approach, where the truth is built through the dialogue between the participants and the researchers, from the adjustment of the perspectives and the impossibility of generalising the conclusions, we can state, based on the presented case study, that an effective leadership has an important role in promoting a culture of inclusion for all the students. The results of the analysis of the culture of the three school organisations highlighted that the most important factors of leadership are: vision, a coherent system of values (individual and social) and collaboration with the community. The school leader's positive attitudes towards the problems of the school and society and his direct involvement in the collaboration with various institutions in the community gradually leads to an ethos of a dynamic school, adaptable to the demands of all pupils and contributes to the promotion of a culture of diversity.

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