



Inclusive kindergarten education

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The early education of children with special educational needs in kindergarten with their typically developed peers is a great opportunity for the next generation to have experiential knowledge that diversity is a natural, everyday thing at the level of abilities as well. In our longitudinal qualitative research, we describe the integrational process of a kindergarten in Budapest, as we followed the institutional transformation almost from the beginning of the integration. Research methods: recording of semi-structured interviews and then qualitative text analysis using Atlas.ti software; and metaphor method with the target concept of kindergarten and integrated child. The results show that the actors in the process have mobilized their internal reserves to address inclusive education, both at the individual and institutional levels. The initiator and primary force behind the process was the director committed to integrated education, who steered the process along the way. During the process, the interviewees' awareness and critique of the task increased, and the relationship with special education teachers and parents became more important.

Keywords: kindergarten, inclusive education, longitudinal qualitative research, special educational needs

Theoretical background, research question

The integration of people with disabilities into society is a very important task and goal for the twenty-first-century Hungary. Two prerequisites are required to reach this goal. Firstly, the institutions used by the non-disadvantaged members of society – services, communities – must be available without limitations and made barrier-free. Secondly, people with disabilities must also be taught the competencies necessary for them to be independent and practice self-determination (to the greatest extent possible in their condition) within mainstream society (Zászkaliczky, 2012). Education is inevitable to reach these objectives, with a special emphasis on inclusive education, whose theory and practice is currently in the focus of (special) educational research conducted both in Hungary and abroad (see also Csányi & Perlusz, 2001; Zászkaliczky, 2002; Artiles, 2006; Mesterházi, 2007; Perlusz, 2008; Bánfalvy, 2008; Papp, 2012; Réthyné, 2013). The most relevant question currently is whether quality education can be realised within the framework of inclusive education. Proving this is currently one of the most important objectives of European Agency of Special Needs and Inclusive Education (European Agency, 2014). Parents generally wish their children to become more tolerant

and empathetic at school, but they also want to provide the best education to their (non-disadvantaged) children.

The early education of children with atypical development and special needs who learn together with their typical peers in mainstream institutions is a huge opportunity for the next generation to recognise diversity as a natural, common, normal phenomenon in terms of abilities as well (Kron, 2006, 2010; Zászkaliczky 2002; Kőpatakiné, 2004). Research results suggest that quality early education is realisable in an inclusive education environment (Odom, 2002; Kőpatakiné, 2008; Kron et al., 2010; Garai & Kron, 2009). Since a kindergarten is a natural educational environment for children displaying different levels of development, this type of institution is an excellent opportunity for introducing the inclusive education of children with special educational needs. When doing so, the assumption is that inclusive education is both beneficial for children with and without special needs. Inclusive early childhood education is prerequisite for rendering inclusive school education high quality, efficient and equitable. The European Agency defines five key factors for successful inclusive education: (1) *As early as possible*; this category includes early detection and assessment as well as early intervention, early admission to the kindergarten and the support of transitions. (2) *Inclusive education benefits all*; equity and high-level school performance is achievable at the same time. (3) *It requires highly qualified professionals*; highly qualified professionals are indispensable in training teachers for inclusive education, developing competencies and holding in-service trainings. (4) *Support systems and funding mechanisms*; inclusive education requires the involvement of additional resources. (5) *Inclusive education must be based on reliable data* (European Agency, 2014).

For social inclusion, it is very important that children – the would-be adults of the next generation – accept diversity as natural (Kőpatakiné, 2004). Kindergartens have a key role in the process of educating children in this spirit, with openness and modern pedagogy (Papp, 1995; Bakonyi, 2005). A central topic of special education research is finding the circumstances which make the education of children with special educational needs successful in the kindergarten (Odom, 2002; Papp, 2003; Kőpatakiné, 2008; Garai & Kron, 2009; Kron et al., 2010; European Agency 2014). The personality, attitude, knowledge, and actions of participants in the educational process have a tremendous impact on the success of inclusive education (Papp, 2002; Kókayné, 2007; Perlusz, 2008). It is therefore essential to clarify areas of competency and cooperation between professionals (Papp, 2007; Szekeres, et al., 2013; Mile, 2016).

Although the process of integration is gaining momentum, kindergarten professionals and parents are often puzzled and mistrustful when it comes to inclusive education. Yet more and more kindergartens admit children with disabilities, albeit sometimes influenced by outside pressure. Partly due to age-related characteristics, children with special educational needs are often admitted to kindergartens without any official diagnosis. As a result, they do not receive professional help and state-guaranteed, extra funding is not made available, which leaves kindergartens facing the problem alone. Although subjects on inclusive education and differentiation are part of the teacher

training curricula, teacher trainees rarely meet children with special needs during the practical part of their training (Baloghné Bakk, 2013).

Research on inclusion also places great emphasis on the various aspects of inclusion. Theoreticians of inclusive education describe inclusion as an infinite process that requires an ongoing effort by all participants (Odom, 2002; Kron, 2006; Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Inclusive education research suggests that the open attitude of teachers and peers is key to the success of inclusive education (Perlusz, 2008; Perlusz & Balázs, 2008; Szekeres, 2011a, 2011b). A special emphasis is placed on the teachers' view of human beings, children, and their emotional stability. All participants in the educational process must rethink how they see children, students, and the learning and developmental process.

Inclusive education also requires exploring the hidden resources of teachers and the educational institution. An institution can become a professional centre if it recognises this fact and views inclusive education as its central objective (Papp, 2002; Kókayné, 2007). The idea of inclusive education not only considers human diversity natural but sees heterogeneity as a resource and takes advantage of its opportunities in the educational methods, both in group and activity organisation (Kron, 2010). This approach rejects the view that homogeneous groups of students even exist. Inclusion assumes the adaptation of tools and methods, as it aims to create conditions which ensure the barrier-free participation of all children in the learning process and community activities while heavily relying upon special educational experience in doing so (Odom, 2002; Kőpatakiné, 2008; Kron, Papke & Windisch, 2009).

The quality of inclusion is affected by the cooperation of professionals and institutions (cf. Papp, 2002; Szekeres, et al., 2013), as they represent the sufficient expertise needed to educate children with special needs. The success of inclusive education requires establishing a partnership based on trust and the exchange of information between the parties of institutional education and the parents. In practice this cooperation often fails, and not only in Hungary (Meilinger, 2011; Podráczky & Marton, 2012; Belmont et al., 2012; Marton, 2019).

An inclusive approach utilised by early childhood teachers is key for the success of inclusive education. However, it seems that the formation of the culture of inclusion is not only a matter of determination and the fulfilment of conditions set out by the legislation, but a process that unfolds much more slowly. Creating the conditions for inclusion is a longer process on the institutional level as kindergartens proceed along their own learning curve.

Research methodology

In our research (Tamás, 2017), we analyse inclusive early childhood education by applying a qualitative strategy (Szabolcs, 2001). We describe the integrational process in a kindergarten community by means of a longitudinal qualitative examination. As for the epistemology of our research, this is closest to the constructivist paradigm (Nahalka, 2003). We were primarily interested not in objective facts, but in the beliefs and thoughts that early childhood teachers have constructed in connection with inclusive education.

The selected kindergarten began the process of integrating children with special educational needs in early and mid-2000 as a response to political priorities and demographic pressures (Békési & Kasza, 2008). Research suggests this example is not uncommon among kindergartens. The process of creating the conditions took place in parallel with the introduction of integrated education. The central question of our research is whether an inclusive identity can be formed in these circumstances and, if so, what factors contribute to moving this process forward.

Research question

1. *How do early childhood teachers see the tasks of a kindergarten at the beginning of an integrated education process and later? What modifications of the methods do they consider necessary? What differences in the choice of words signify a change in attitude toward integral education?*
2. *How do early education teachers see integrated children? How do children with special educational needs appear in the accounts of early childhood teachers?*
3. *What changes are generated in the day-to-day life of a kindergarten that undertakes inclusive education? What milestones can be identified in the integrational-inclusive process? What is the characteristic relationship network of kindergartens? What is the impact of inclusive education on institutional culture?*

The framework of the research

The location of our research is a kindergarten found in one of Budapest's outer districts, in a suburban environment. The institution has two sites and educates a total of 210 children in eight groups. In 2013, thirteen of these children exhibited special educational needs. The staff consists of seventeen early childhood teachers, with eleven nurses, two pedagogy assistants and two support staff responsible for day-to-day maintenance and repair. Six of the groups are mixed-age groups, while two are homogenous in terms of age.

The kindergarten had conducted inclusive education for about a decade. It received the official task of the integration of children with special educational needs in 2004 as a result of different motives stemming from an obligation (the maintainer municipality had an explicit demand to transform district kindergartens into integrating kindergartens) and the demand of the population (parents applied for admission of their children with special educational needs). Education policy trends (merging kindergartens, the threat of closing some kindergartens) and, finally, the head teacher's intention to innovate also contributed toward this decision. The duration of the research spanned the period between 2007 and 2014.

Research methods

To answer our first and second research question, which is concerned with the views of early childhood teachers on the tasks of an inclusive kindergarten, the transformation of their work, and integrated children, we chose the qualitative interview method and the metaphor method. The narrative method is suitable

for exploring several world views (Ehmann, 2002), by which the interviewee's interpretation of a part of the world can be mapped. The interview method describes phenomena in their context, with a limited possibility of generalisation (Sántha, 2009).

In the course of the research, we conducted 11-11 semi-structured interviews with the teachers of the kindergarten in both 2009/2010 and 2013/2014. We compiled the interview questions to cover three main topics: (1) The preliminary knowledge and experiences of the interviewee, the positive aspects of inclusive education: [How long have you worked with an integratory approach? What preliminary knowledge did you possess when starting the integrational process? What are your experiences? What have the difficulties been? What were the positive aspects of integrational work?] (2) Changes in the administrative work resulting from the integration: [What did you have to change in your work?] (3) The relationship of the early childhood teacher with his or her colleagues, the parents, and the special needs teacher: [Where did you receive help from? How was your relationship with the special needs teacher? How was your relationship with the parents? How did other parents react to integration? Would you continue the process in the future?] We used open-ended questions to avoid suggesting any answers to the interviewees and to give them the opportunity to elaborate on their opinions.

The metaphor method uses metaphors as a part of the qualitative research methodology, to explore human thinking. It helps in examining phenomena and concepts that are too abstract or too common, both of which make them hard to describe (Vámos, 2003). The analysis of metaphors brings us closer to understand how the person sees the world.

In our studies we evoked the use of metaphors for the target concepts of the kindergarten and integrated children. I performed this examination with every staff member of the kindergarten in December 2009 (N=30) and April 2014 (N=32). I instructed them to produce metaphors in writing, with an explanation. Interviewees were requested to finish the following sentences: Kindergarten is like... and An integrated child is like... I also instructed them to provide a short explanation to the metaphors.

Our third research question concerned any identifiable milestones in the integrational inclusive process, the relationship network of the kindergarten, and the impact of inclusive education on institutional culture. Beyond the interview method, we chose the method of document analysis. Document analysis is a non-intrusive technique. The basic documents of the kindergarten (articles of incorporation, the local educational program, annual reports, job descriptions, organizational and operational rules, institutional quality assurance program) were analysed from the aspect of inclusive education (physical, legal, personnel and organizational conditions, relationship network, initiatives to involve the parents).

The method of processing the interviews

We systematically followed the methods of qualitative content analysis in our work. As a novel approach in the research of inclusive education, we used content analysis software and followed an inductive path of analysis

(Szokolszky, 2004; Sántha, 2009) in forming the category system giving the results of our research. This kind of a system made it possible to compare the data and to form a theory.

Content analysis was based on the interview packages conducted in 2009/2010 (A) and 2013/2014 (B). During the preparation phase, we generated two hermeneutic units in the Atlas.ti 5.5 content analysis software. We did not use a preliminary category system for the coding of the interviews: instead, we coded based on the text and by using the methodology of the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967 quoted by Szokolszky, 2004), following an inductive path of research.

After cleaning up the codes (filtering out redundant and empty codes) we received 331 codes. These served as the basis of our analysis; we first ordered them, organised them into groups we named 'code families', then we generated new categories (supercodes) based on the exploration of their connections and the unfolding system of aspects. As regards qualitative research strategy, the majority of the dilemmas come from the need for the objectivity, reliability, and validity expected from scientific research (Szokolszky, 2004). Although qualitative strategy factors in subjectivity on the part of the researcher, the professional approach requires as much objectivity as possible. In order to attain this, we used a systematic method to process and analyse the data used for the research.

Research results

To answer our first two research questions, we have applied the code system gained by processing the interviews, and the results of the metaphor analysis. An important basic principle is that everything learned about the kindergarten is indirect information gained through the filters of the early childhood teachers: their views and personal beliefs are heavily reflected in the research material. The statements on other participants of the educational process cannot be seen as objective facts on the practice of integration but give information about how the interviewee perceives them. One of the most important results of this research is the code system gained by the content analysis of the interviews. We extracted the answers to our questions by unfolding certain segments of the code system.

How do early childhood teachers see the tasks of a kindergarten at the beginning of integrated education process and later?

Based on the interviews made with early childhood teachers, the primary purpose of the kindergarten is to support the development of healthy children. Initially, the early childhood teachers relied on their own beliefs, meaning that they thought they did not need to change anything and would be able to achieve success by instinct, by depending upon their inherent personality. In reply to the question, '*What did you have to change in your work?*', they usually emphasised personality traits rather than methods or changes in the

environment. In their opinion, socialisation and raising integrated children was exclusively the task of other special needs educators. One positive element can be found in the fact that the teachers considered it their task to realise differentiated education and development.

The interviews made in the second round showed that the early childhood teachers had become more critical of the task and dared to communicate their negative and controversial feelings as well. It was an improvement that they did not disregard problems but rather recognised them and took them seriously. The main problems they mentioned were related to organisation and conflict resolution. It was hard for them to experience failure even when they had done their best with a given child, yet still did not achieve results. The factors pointing to inclusion could be detected in the interviews: the teachers recognised that teaching the children to play was also their responsibility. Recognising this role is especially important in inclusive education as it is hard for these children to start to play spontaneously: doing so requires the help of an adult. Progress had been made compared to the past in the sense that the educators tried to get to know the children, make them happy through individual activities, and noticed their individual differences and positive traits (diversity).

It was further considered a task of the kindergarten to form a habit system of children including special needs children as well; they did not exclude them but considered them members of the community. The use of special equipment was incorporated into everyday work, and the environment was made more suitable to inclusive education by structuring the available time and space. Early childhood teachers did not keep their problems to themselves but talked about their work-related demands. In the beginning, the early childhood teachers mentioned very few critical remarks regarding the task itself. They stated that the teachers had an accepting attitude, and groups were inclusive, everybody did their best in their work, but their wording also signified ambivalence and uncertainty.

The metaphor analysis of the role of the kindergarten suggests that the metaphors connected with the kindergarten were very similar in both cases. According to these, a kindergarten is naturally associated with a family, a home. In 2009, twenty respondents (compared to seventeen in 2014) completed the analogy to convey the meaning 'kindergarten is like a family', or 'kindergarten is like home/a second home'.

How do children with special educational needs appear in the accounts of early childhood teachers?

The interviews revealed that teachers mainly considered integrated children the ones whose behaviour caused problems for them and for the group. The most serious problems they mentioned were aggressive behaviour and unclear communication on the children's part. Education in a mainstream kindergarten with its social and physical environment and its incompatibility with children with special needs resulted in the failure of inclusion in several cases. Educators saw the children as the primary cause of this failure. However, they considered

temporary inclusion a success that they ascribed to the competencies of the child in question. Early childhood teachers defined the following traits and competencies as factors supporting inclusion: quiet, calm, non-aggressive, cheerful, resilient, and cute. They considered it a child's positive trait if he or she did not disturb the life of the group. A competency helping the child to fit in was if they were adaptable, they liked going to the kindergarten, and were independent.

Later, the educators still mentioned aggressive behaviour as the primary obstacle to the inclusion of certain children. A factor leading towards inclusion was that the educators had become more reflective regarding the topic. They reported successes that they merited to their own work, but also mentioned some failures. Interviewees considered even small changes as results and noticed the improvement of children. Another important change was that interviewees realised that the children had different characteristics from what educators had expected, and that the problems were not exclusively related to the children's disadvantages.

Out of the metaphors received in 2014 (N=32, twelve of which were not metaphors) the following ones emphasise the differences: *Martian, black sheep, odd one out*. The number of metaphors meaning 'something to be deciphered, to be understood' had increased since the previous interviews. They included *a great mystery, an undiscovered continent, a special planet or star*. There were some metaphors with the meaning sensitive, vulnerable: *nestling, a sensitive little instrument, a special flower and a defenceless little being*. In 2014, we did not find any metaphors suggesting danger as these had been replaced by the notion of *task*. A characteristic element of the explanation of the metaphors was that interviewees gave feedback that was relevant to integrated children and working with them, but was not related to the given metaphors (e.g. the description of *miracle*: 'A curiosity, a task. It is a tremendous responsibility for everybody, it leads people to recognize that there is no connection without each other, and it is love that enables successful outcomes'). When examining the explanation of the metaphors, five of the interviewees mentioned that integrated children posed a special task to them. In summary, the metaphors recorded in 2014 suggested that an integrated child is a *sensitive, mysterious being, who shall be understood and poses a task*.

What changes are generated in the day-to-day life of a kindergarten that undertakes inclusive education?

Our results suggest that the initiator and primary force behind the process was the director committed to integrated education, who steered the process along the way. This process resulted in the transformation of the organisation. She organised the alignment of the institution documents to the task, participated in a training on integrated education, and joined the international research on inclusive early childhood education with her kindergarten. By modifying the organisation and forming work groups, she involved her colleagues and fostered their cooperation. An important aspect of employing new colleagues

was their background knowledge, experience of integration, and their inclusive approach. Those who could not identify with the integrational ambitions of the staff changed jobs.

These changes pointed towards inclusion. The interviews that were recorded at a later date suggest that the early childhood teachers had become more critical toward the task over time. They recognised integrated children's improvement and did their best to support that process. They were proud of their achievements. They shared their experiences with each other, tried to get to know what the children were interested in, and approached them with individual methods. They marvelled at the uniqueness of each child and realised their special needs. This realisation also made them uncertain: upon feeling that their knowledge was insufficient, they became motivated to take part in trainings. After attending a methodological training organised by the director, they began to rearrange the environment and to use special tools. It was important that the whole staff of teachers took part in the trainings together at their own institution, and incorporated the methods learned in their work, thus enriching their own knowledge as well as practical skills.

The support given by special needs teachers is controversial. In the beginning of the process, there was no special needs teacher present who could have coordinated the transformation of the institution towards inclusive education and prepared the staff for the new task. Such preparatory work is needed to settle legal, technical, and organisational matters while also providing consultation in order to facilitate discussion of emerging issues. When approaching the issue from the task system of special needs teachers, it would be important to form a working relationship between the kindergarten or the special needs institution and the children's homes.

The admission of children with special needs was rarely preceded by any preparation on the part of special needs teachers. A close coherence exists between the extent of such work and the success of the inclusion process. In cases when the kindergarten teacher previously developing the child shared his or her experiences with the new kindergarten, the inclusion of the child was successful and long-lasting. A common trait of those cases was that this contact was established at the initiative of a cooperative, highly qualified parent.

In many cases, children were admitted to the kindergarten before the travelling special needs teacher could give them support. The roles of the travelling special needs teachers changed frequently (at the beginning it was customary that as many as three special needs teachers developed one child in one year). The special support of children admitted to the kindergarten was not always organised properly: one child was taken out of the kindergarten for this reason. In the beginning, the travelling special needs teacher only dealt with the child assigned to him or her, with minimal interaction with the early childhood teacher. In short, there was almost no cooperation among the various educators. The early childhood teachers did not know about the work of the special needs teachers: their experience was that the child was taken out of the group, allowing the early childhood teacher to concentrate on the other kids. The interviews revealed that, although special needs teachers spent a lot of time in the

kindergarten, the staff members did not ‘experience’ their presence. Individual development and group work was not always coordinated; there were some cases when the child was taken out for individual development in the middle of his or her favourite group activity. The special needs teacher did not participate in informing the parents; in a questionnaire survey filled in by parents, none of the parents named the special needs teacher as a source of information.

However, a visible improvement did occur during the process, as the level of professionalism rose in the course of the educators’ work. Kindergarten staff members took part in a methodology training on children with special educational needs (visual support, time, and space structuring). The process of implementing the material started, meaning that the environment, visual support, and the use of daily schedules were rearranged. Since 2013, the same teacher has supported the children and not only performs individual development, but also discusses her experiences with the early childhood teachers, attends kindergarten events, and supports the children in the group, together with the regular staff. Since the Public Education Act has entered into force, three educational assistants have also worked in the kindergarten; the director considered this to be a significant improvement. One of the assistants has meanwhile received a degree in special needs education and is constantly available as a counsellor and source of information.

The message of the research

Based on the findings of our kindergarten research, the peculiar way in which the obligations had been undertaken before the conditions even existed may be, in spite of all the difficulties it involved, successful after all. A very hard and slow process has begun, with all its pitfalls and hardships, but our research suggests that this approach may be viable in the long run. These results reflect that the stakeholders mobilised their internal reserves to manage the situation, both on an individual and institutional level. Early childhood teachers often quoted the director, who said that a good enough starting point is for the teachers to love the children. This approach has proved to be successful in that it helped reduce anxiety at the beginning. As a reference point, love corresponds with a great amount of work, if taken seriously. In this kindergarten this approach was followed by action and taking responsibility for the admitted children.

This research additionally suggests that it is necessary to transform special needs support. The tasks of the special needs teachers supporting inclusive education must include consultation with early childhood teachers: a necessary timeframe and institutional background must also be provided for this service. It is also essential that there be a person who has an overview of the administrative and professional tasks as well and maintains his or her sensitivity in working with people at various stages of the inclusion process who experience the natural ebb and flow of acceptance and refusal throughout these stages (Reiser et al., 1994).

A subject of further research may be to evaluate the state of special education in kindergartens, and the impact on the inclusive identity of the institution if the special needs teacher is a travelling teacher or the member of the regular

staff. It would also be interesting to examine the consequences of separating professional tasks in kindergarten childcare. Another important question is what kind of organisation, cooperation, and educational policy development is needed to make the special education of small children flexible and easy to organize, since the time element is very important in their lives.

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