



CIEA 2014

Are today's general education teachers prepared to face inclusion in the classroom?

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Abstract

Teachers have a key role to play in preparing pupils to take their place in society and in the world of work, and that is why the European Commission Communication Improving the Quality of Teacher Education calls for different policy measures on the level of member states in order to adapt the profession to meet the new challenges of the knowledge-based economy. Nowadays, the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in mainstream educational, occupational and societal frameworks has become an accepted concept worldwide. The schools across the nation are moving towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general classroom. The purpose of this study is to explore teachers level of preparation to deal with kids with special needs in the mainstream schools, the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion in schools and also if they felt the need to go through a training course in the field of special education in order to respond to the needs of the students with special educational needs. Another question included in this survey focuses on providing a list of training course teachers find necessary to go through in order to be able to face inclusion in the classroom.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University.

Keywords: teacher training; inclusive education;

1. Background of special education needs and inclusive education

The schools across the nation are moving towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general classroom. Inclusive education has been internationally recognized as a philosophy for attaining equity, justice and

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quality education for all children, especially those who have been traditionally excluded from mainstream education for reasons of disability, ethnicity, gender or other characteristics.

In the OECD 2007, the definition of special needs education agreed is that “those with special educational needs are defined by the additional public and/or private resources provided to support their education”. The use of this definition in a consistent manner calls for agreement about the term additional and an appreciation of the various kinds of possible resources provided which should be considered. “Additional resources” are those made available over and above the resources generally available to students who are unlikely to have particular difficulties in accessing the regular curriculum.

In a UNESCO (2011) report the definition of special needs is seen as ‘education designed to facilitate the learning of individuals who, for a wide variety of reasons, require additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives in an educational programme. Reasons may include (but are not limited to) disadvantages in physical, behavioural, intellectual, emotional and social capacities. Educational programmes in special needs education may follow a similar curriculum as that offered in the parallel regular education system, however they take individuals’ particular needs into account by providing specific resources (e.g. specially trained personnel, equipment, or space) and, if appropriate, modified educational content or learning objectives. These programmes can be offered for individual learners within already existing educational programmes, or be offered as a separate class in the same or separate educational institutions’.

All in all, we must recognise that all children have the right to a quality education that caters, to the extent possible, to their individual needs, so inclusive education is defined by UNESCO as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education (UNESCO, 2005).

Several official documents recognise the importance of this topic, starting with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), as well as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2008). Inclusive education for children with SEN is also addressed in several significant international declarations, including the World Declaration for Education for All (United Nations, 1990), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000).

Inclusive education can be seen as a process of strengthening the capacity of an education system to reach out to all learners. It is, therefore, an overall principle that should guide all educational policies and practices, starting from the belief that education is a fundamental human right and the foundation for a more just society. In this respect inclusive education must find ways of enabling schools and other centres of learning to serve all learners in their communities. An inclusive education system improves the efficiency and cost-benefit relationship of education systems. Inclusive education is perceived as an optimization of the use of resources. Schools are likely to be less expensive when all students are educated together, thus giving governments an economic justification to move towards an inclusive education system (UNESCO, 2008).

2. Preparing general teachers to meet the educational needs of students with special needs

The OECD Report ‘Teachers Matter’ recognises that the demands on schools and teachers are becoming more complex as society now expects schools to deal effectively with different languages and student backgrounds, to be sensitive to culture and gender issues, to promote tolerance and social cohesion, to respond effectively to disadvantaged students and students with learning or behavioural problems, to use new technologies, and to keep pace with rapidly developing fields of knowledge and approaches to student assessment.

Also, Florian and Rouse (2009) state: ‘the task of initial teacher education is to prepare people to enter a profession which accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of all children’. Savolainen (2009) notes that teachers play an essential role in quality education and quotes McKinsey and Company who say: ‘the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers’. Cardona (2009) notes that concentration on initial teacher education ‘... would seem to provide the best means to create a new generation of teachers who will ensure the successful implementation of inclusive policies and practices’.

Taking all this into consideration teachers must be aware of fact that “education and training systems can increase their capacity to include all learners and to achieve equitable outcomes for all, while meeting the increasing diversity of learners’ needs, maintaining cultural diversity and improving quality” (OECD, 2001a).

3. Methodology: Survey on how well prepared are general education teachers to face inclusion in the classroom

3.1. The topic and objectives

The topic of this study is related to inclusive education and the objectives of this study is to identify teacher's opinion related to how prepared are schools to face a new reality, that of inclusion of all children into the mainstream schools.

3.2. Research Design

A quantitative approach was chosen for this investigation. This quantitative approach was specifically chosen to enable collecting information from teachers. A number of 213 teachers participated in this study. Among them, 41% of teachers work in the preschool educational sector, 26% of them work in the primary educational sector, 15% work in the gymnasium, and the rest of 18% work in a high school. The data provided by this research was analysed by frequency analysis using SPSS.

3.3. Instrument

The instrument uses in this research was a questionnaire. In this present paper we took into consideration 4 quantitative items, whose aims were to investigate in what extend teachers feel the need to take training courses in order to be prepared to face children with special needs into the classroom.

4. Results

The integration of kids with special educational needs (SEN) has appeared as a necessary reaction to provide high quality education for all children regardless their *mental* health issues, emotional and *behavioural* disorders, race, sex, creed, ethnicity or disability. This question is entitled to show if kids with SEN are a constant in mainstream schools.

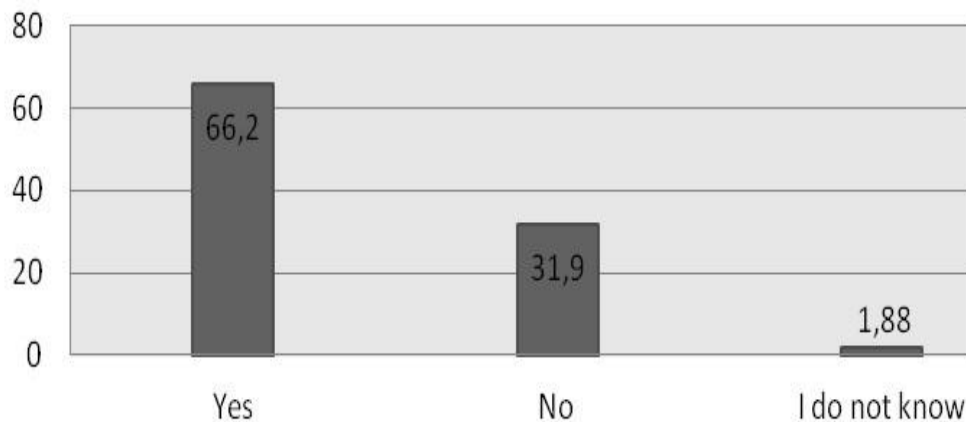


Fig. 1. The amount of teachers that have worked with children with SEN

As shown in the figure above approximately 66, 2% of the questioned teachers report that they have encountered kids with SEN in the classes they have worked, which suggest that teachers have to be prepared to respond to those kids' needs and to respond to diversity in the classroom. A percentage of 32% of teachers said that they have never

worked with SEN children, meanwhile 1,9% of teachers admit that they do not know if they have worked in an inclusive school environment. (See Fig.1)

The statistic presented above is designed to evaluate the way teachers feel prepared to work in an inclusive classroom. As the results show a great majority of teachers declare themselves slightly prepared to teach children with SEN. A vast majority of about 48% of teachers say that they feel moderately ready to work with SEN kids, whereas 24% of them consider themselves considerably ready to receive children with SEN. Also, 8% of them are feeling confident in their capacity of dealing with students.

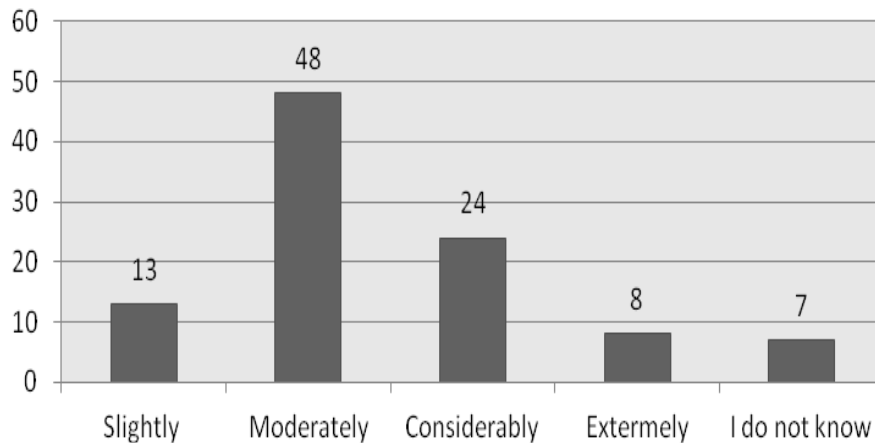


Fig. 2. Teachers' preparedness to receive children with special needs

The fundamental theory which inclusive policies are based on is related to the training of teachers in order to feel ready and sufficiently skilled to work in an inclusive setting. The result of this study (see Fig. 3) shows a real necessity of training teachers regarding inclusive education, and teachers agree that they need training in order to achieve a set of skills to prepare them to work in an inclusive classroom. A significantly percentage of teachers, 91% of them, say that a set of skills, a set of teaching methods and of course knowledge is necessary in order to create an adequate environment in the classroom, an environment that respects each others' needs and diversity. A relatively low percentage of teachers, approximately 6% of them, do not consider necessary to held a specific set of skills in order to teach teachers with SEN.

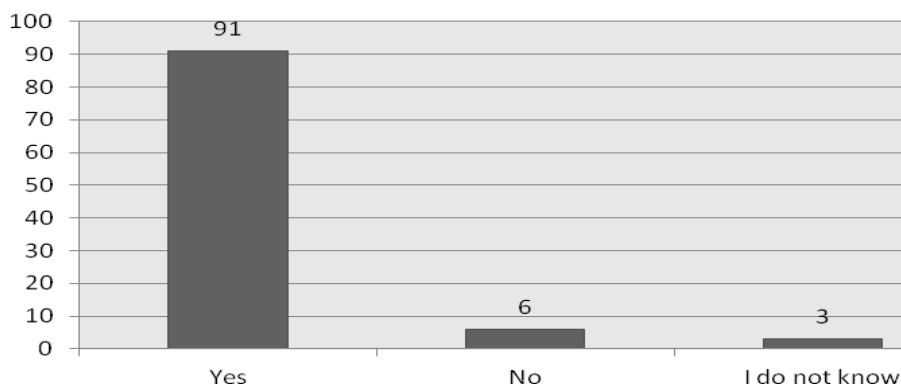


Fig. 3. Teachers' skills to face inclusion in the classroom

If the previous figure showed that teachers agree with the statement that all teachers must held specific set of skills the below question (Fig. 4) is designed to evaluate in what extend teachers are ready to use a specific strategy in order to adapt their lesson to the needs of children with special educational needs. So, a percentage of 41,3% of teachers fell slightly ready to use a specific instructional strategies and methodologies that will meet the requirements of an inclusive classroom.

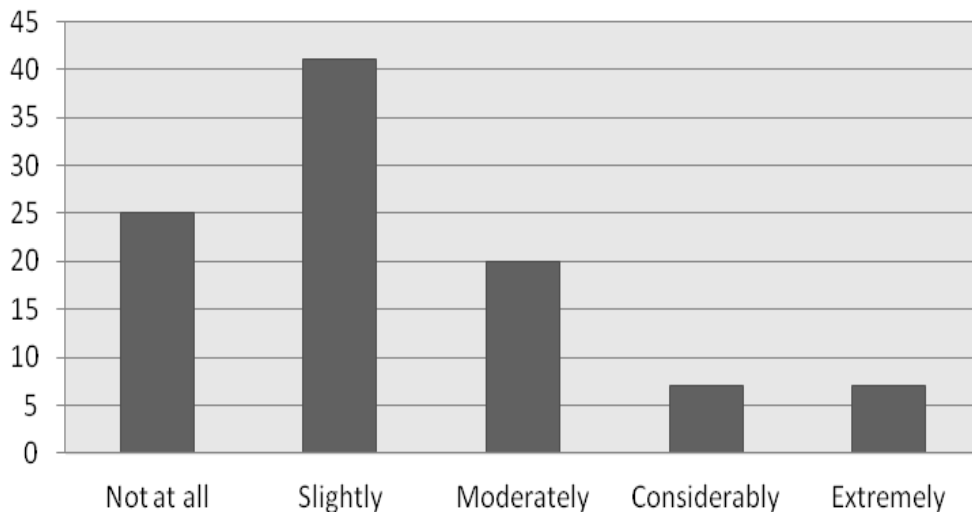


Fig. 4. Specific strategies teachers need to use in inclusive classrooms

In Fig. 4 can be seen that approximately 27% of teachers feel moderately ready to use specific strategies and another quarter of teachers interviewed have declared that they have never heard or used instructional strategies specially designed for inclusive education. Only 7% of teachers feel considerably ready to use specific strategies, whereas 8% of them feel extremely confident on using these strategies when planning a lesson that must take into consideration all the aspects that are involved into the learning process.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that a great majority of teachers feel the need for training when it comes to meet the requirements of an inclusive school system. The presence of children with special educational needs is a reality into the Romanian schools, so now, more than ever teachers must be prepared to be ready to teach all children regardless of their learning needs, behavioural, intellectual, emotional and social and physical capacities.

In order to do that, teachers must have access to a high qualitative teaching training system that will allow them to get access to information and that will prepare them to become professionals in what they do.

As shown previously, teachers feel the need for training to get ready to teach in an inclusive environment and at the same time a majority of teachers are in favour of the assertion that all teachers must held a set of specific skills, teaching methods and tools that will provide children with a qualitative learning experience, that has as a main goal, to value classroom diversity.

The results of this study, along with other studies can be seen as a good starting point for policy makers to start developing new training opportunities for teachers, opportunities that will be in favour of meeting the requirements of the new educational system, a system that promotes creativity, innovation, and gives equal opportunities to all children.

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