

## DISABLED CHILDREN SCHOOL INCLUSION IN MASS PRE-SCHOOLS

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**ABSTRACT.** The school inclusion of disabled children in mass schools changed the schools principals' role and their relationship with inclusive education. A lot of research showed the principals' role is important in successfully applying the inclusion process. Thus, the principals' attitude towards the disabled children inclusion in mass schools may have either a positive or a negative impact. The results gathered after the data analysis in the study are important for the development and the implementation of professional training courses for teachers and for establishing some partnerships which offer the opportunity to interact with the included disabled children. These professional trainings will offer the opportunity to gain knowledge, skills and professional experiences which, in their turn, will lead to the increase of self-trust of being able to teach disabled children.

**Key Words:** *school inclusion, teachers' attitudes, disabled children*

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG.** Die schulische Inklusion der Kinder mit Behinderungen in den Regelschulen änderte die Rolle der Schuldirektoren und deren Beziehung mit der inklusiven Bildung. Zahlreiche Forschungen der letzten Jahre zeigten, dass die Rolle der Direktoren wichtig für die erfolgreiche Umsetzung der Inklusion ist. Dadurch kann das Verhalten der Direktoren in Hinsicht auf die schulische Inklusion der Kinder mit Behinderungen in den Regelschulen entweder eine positive oder eine negative Wirkung haben. Die Ergebnisse der Datenanalyse dieser Studie sind wichtig für die Umsetzung von Lehrerfortbildungen und die Bildung von Partnerschaften die Interaktionsgelegenheiten mit integrierten Kindern mit Behinderungen bieten. Diese Fortbildungen können Gelegenheiten um Wissen zu erlangen bieten, Kompetenzen und Berufserfahrungen, die zu einem erhöhten Vertrauen in die Fähigkeit Kinder mit Behinderungen zu unterrichten führen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** *schulische Inklusion, Haltungen der Lehrkräfte, Kinder mit Behinderungen*

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## Introduction

As the characteristics of an inclusive school go, Baglieri and Knopf (2004) claim that a truly inclusive one is the one reflecting a democratic philosophy which states that all pupils are evaluated, the teachers normalize the differences by differential instruction and the school's culture reflects an ethic built on communitarian responsibility.

Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996), in a complex analysis comprising 28 studies conducted between 1958 and 1995, concluded that while the majority of teachers in mass schools were in favor of the idea of school inclusion, a small percent of them considered to be ready to actually implement school inclusion programs. Teachers undergoing training classes in the field of inclusive education were more open to see inclusion as a possible to implement process and showed a higher confidence in their own skill of teaching inclusive classes. Further developing their research, the same authors showed in a recent study (2001) that the success of inclusion is associated with the support offered by the principals of the schools in applying correctly the process if inclusion. The manager is often the key person who can implement changes in school and develop new processes. The main responsibility is here a team-approach and maintaining focus on the key-aspects of school inclusion (Vrăsmaș, 2010).

Idol (1994) considers that the principals' support is decisive in order to implement inclusive practices, an idea underlined also by Daane et al. (2000). Gamos (1995) was talking about the role of a "*visionary principal*" who will accept the challenge of creating an inclusive environment for all pupils. The principals must support school inclusion in order to transmit these feelings to the teachers. Still, various research show that the principals' attitudes is often not positive, this effect affecting the whole inclusion process in schools.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the better understanding of principals' attitudes nature and provide them with factual information regarding the reality of inclusive education in mass school, especially because these issues constitute an ever-expanding phenomenon at a global level, which can not be ignored.

The present study is based on the following objectives and hypothesis, having as purpose the investigation of mass pre-school principals' attitudes towards the school inclusion of disabled children into mass kindergartens.

## Objectives

*Research goal 1:* To investigate the nature of kindergarten principals' attitudes towards the inclusion of disabled children in normal kindergartens.

*Research goal 2:* To investigate the impact the type of child disability has upon principals' decision to include them in normal kindergartens.

*General hypothesis:*

Pre-school principals will show different attitudes towards the disabled children's inclusion, depending on some of their social and professional features and the children's disability type.

*Specific hypothesis 1:* The social and professional particularities of teachers and the school environment have a significant effect over their attitudes to the school inclusion of disabled children in mass kindergartens.

*Specific hypothesis 2:* The disability type of children influences significantly the decision the principals' take towards their inclusion in normal kindergarten.

### **Materials and Method**

The research took place in the spring of 2012, in Cluj-Napoca city, on a lot of subjects consisting of 35 mass pre-school principals, who answered an online survey on [isondaje.ro](http://isondaje.ro).

The research, structured in two main parts, is of quantitative type. For the participants' data analysis, descriptive statistics have been used. Also, in order to reach our objectives and verify the proposed hypothesis, we used a multivariate analysis design, because these types of analysis offer quantitative statistical data in order to identify complex relationships among variables.

The social and professional features of the participants: regarding the "gender" variable, as expected, for this educational level – pre-school – the majority of study participants (32 out of 35 principals) are female. Due to this reality, we didn't assess the existence of differences regarding attitudes towards school inclusion depending on this variable. Also, 22 out of 35 principals have more than 21 years experience in mass schooling, but more than a half don't have any experience in the inclusion of disabled children, while the rest of them have few years of experience in the inclusion process, between 1 and 3 years (8 out of 35 principals). Regarding the personal contact with children with various disabilities they manage, 29 out of 35 principals declared they have personal contact with this children. More than a half of the assessed principals stated that they didn't took part to any professional training courses in the field of inclusive education.

The instrument used in this research, the PIS Scale „*Principals and Inclusion Survey*”, Cindy Praisner (2003) consists of two sections: Section I: The SASI Scale, “*Superintendents' Attitude Survey on Integration*”, adapted by G.H. Stainback (1986) from „*The Autism Attitude Scale for Teachers*” (Olley et al., 1981) and Section II: „*Most Appropriate Placements for Students with Disabilities*”, Cindy Praisner (2003).

## Results

In order to examine the internal consistency of the PIS Scale, section 1, *attitudes towards school inclusion*, we calculated the Alpha Cronbach coefficient for the entire scale and for the entire participants' lot (N= 35). We obtained  $\alpha = 0,715$ , which means a good coefficient, very close to the internal consistency result of the original instrument obtained by the author, of  $\alpha = 0,889$  (Praisner, 2000).

Section I from PIS consists of 10 items, grouped under one sub-scale (Annex) among which 5 items have reverse quotation, while 5 have direct quotation. (Score interval: 10-50, resulted by summing the scores for all of the 10 items). Because there are two types of items, the score calculation towards favorable attitudes will go as follows: if the item has a direct quoting – strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral / don't know = 3, agree = 4, strongly agree = 5, and if the item has a reverse quotation: iar dacă itemul este cu cotare inversă: strongly disagree = 5, disagree = 4, neutral / don't know = 3, agree = 2, strongly agree = 1 (Praisner, 2003).

We calculated the scores from the participants for the whole PIS Scale and then the means and the standard deviation which helped us to interpret the data. Because this scale was used for the first time in Romania for a participants' lot in mass pre-schools, with a reduced experience in school inclusion, we can not compare the results offered by the author with the results obtained in the present research study. Nonetheless, the indications offered by Praisner, 2003, allowed us to calculate the minimum and the maximum scores for the entire scale and each sub-scale, so we could measure the participants' tendency towards a more or less favorable attitude regarding school inclusion.

Thus, the principals' scores varied between a minimum score of 22 and a maximum score of 44, with a means of  $m=35,91$  and  $\sigma=4,86$ , which shows a slightly favorable attitude towards school inclusion among the investigated principals.

To compare the two principals groups, distributed according to the variable *personal contact with children with various disabilities*, we used the Mann-Whitney U Test, which considered one of the most powerful non-parametric methods. This test takes into account every result's rank into the general classification and serves to test the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ), through which the scale scores distribution is the same in the population of principals who have in their kindergarten included disabled children, and in the population of principals who do not have in their kindergarten included disabled children.

We can observe that the scores distributions of the two scales don't differ in a significant manner (at  $p=0,05$ ) between the two principals categories, distributed according to the personal contact with children with various disabilities.

**Table 1.** Ranks mean calculation with Mann-Whitney U Test

Scale	Personal contact with children with various disabilities	N	Ranks mean	U	z	p
PIS section I	No	6	13,50	34,50	0,798	0,425
	Yes	29	18,42			

In order to compare the two groups of principals, parted based on the variable „being professionally trained in the field of inclusive education”, we also used the Mann-Whitney U Test, starting from the null hypothesis: the distribution of scale scores is the same in both populations: the one consisting of principals that were professionally trained in the field of inclusive education, and the one consisting of principals that weren't.

**Table 2.** Ranks mean calculation with Mann-Whitney U Test

Scale	Training course in the field of inclusive education	N	Ranks mean	U	z	p
PIS section I	No	20	15,90	108,00	1,404	0,160
	Yes	15	20,80			

We can observe that the scores distribution of the two scales don't significantly differ (at  $p=0,05$ ) between the two categories distributed according to receiving or not a professional training in the field of inclusive education.

Following the data analysis, we can conclude that the specific hypothesis which states that there are significant differences between the pre-school principals's attitudes towards inclusion, depending on the presence of included children in the educational unit and the completion of professional training in the field of inclusive education, can not be confirmed.

In the second part of the study we analyzed the way in which the disability type significantly influences the principals' decision to integrate disabled children into the normal pre-school.

For doing so, the next types of disabilities were presented to the principals: learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, visual deficiency, auditory deficiency, speech impairments, physical disabilities, autism/pervasive developmental disorders, other health problems. The research subjects were presented with six school environments, placed on a continuum, from the segregation school environment to the inclusive school environment, having the possibility to choose among them the one that they considered to be best suited for the needs of disabled children, according to their disability type.

These school environments are: special education services, outside the mass kindergarten (in Special Kindergarten)-1, special education services within the mass kindergarten (in special classrooms)-2, partial integration in the mass kindergarten (schooling trial)-3, mass classrooms education and offering of

individual therapy in specialized consultation room / special education support -4, mass classrooms education for the largest part of the day-5, total mass kindergarten inclusion with special support / special education teacher assistant-6.

**Table 3.** The response frequency at items in Section II – PIS Scale for principals (N=35)

Deficiency type	Most appropriate placements for students with different disabilities					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Learning difficulties</b>	1		6	7		21
<b>Intellectual disability</b>	2	2	5	9	2	15
<b>Emotional impairments</b>	2	1	5	17	1	9
<b>Visual impairments</b>	15	5	4	3	2	6
<b>Hearing impairments</b>	13	6	7	2	1	6
<b>Language impairments</b>	2	1	3	12	1	16
<b>Physical disability</b>	3	2	9	5	3	13
<b>Autism / Pervasive Development Disorders</b>	3	4	6	12		10
<b>Other health issues</b>	2		7	6	3	17

The data presented in the table show us that half of the investigated pre-school principals consider that the hearing impaired children and visually impaired children (15 principals out of N=35) should be included in special pre-schools and more than half of the respondents consider that children with learning disabilities should be included in mass pre-schools if specialized support is provided for them (21 principals out of N=35). Also, almost half of the investigated principals place intellectually impaired children (15 principals out N= 35), physically impaired children (13 principals out N= 35), children with language deficiencies (16 principals out N=35) and other health issues (17 principals out = 35) also in mass pre-schools, if specialized care is provided.

It is easily observable that the child's disability type influences principals' decision regarding the proper environment in which these children can be integrated, so we can say the specific hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

These school environments are presented in the same order for each disability type, thus beginning with the most segregating school type (special kindergarten) to end with the most inclusive school environment – total inclusion in mass schooling, with specialty support from special education teaching assistants.

## Result discussion

The final results of the present study show that the mass kindergartens principals in Cluj-Napoca city present slightly favorable attitudes towards the inclusion of disabled children in their educational units. It was easily observed

a lack or an insufficient level of preparation in the research subjects in the field of inclusive education and short or inexistent practical experience in the inclusion of disabled children, aspects that will reflect upon our research results.

The principals' attitudes are not influenced significantly by the pre-existence of children with disabilities included in their kindergartens, nor the professional training received in the field of inclusive education, but there are differences among the principals regarding their decision towards inclusion of differently disabled children.

Almost half of the principals participating to the study consider that visually and auditory impaired children should be included in special educational units, and more than half of the participants consider that the children with learning disabilities would do better in mass kindergartens with specialized aid. Also, almost half of the principals place the children with intellectual and physical deficiencies and the ones with speech impairments and other health problems also in the mass kindergarten, provided they receive special care.

## **Conclusions**

The combination of social and professional data gathered from the research subjects with scale items answers, allowed us a better and more detailed understanding of their attitudes towards the inclusion of disabled children. The more or less rich experience regarding the teaching process in general and teaching in the inclusive environment, in particular, make a difference for the results gathered for these attitudes scales.

The main limits of this research refer to the means of investigation of the pre-school principals' attitudes, which are not always an accurate indicator for the participants' behavior. That's why it is important to further develop the research with some qualitative methods of investigation, such as the interview, in order to detail some aspects of school inclusion and also to investigate the other people that work in a kindergarten.

Another limit of this study refers to the participants' lot, relatively small in number, which makes impossible to generalize the results – this fact emphasizing the necessity of investigating the pre-school principals' attitudes at a national level.

The results gathered after the data analysis are important to implement a series of professional training courses for teachers and the building of some reliable partnerships in order to offer real opportunities for teachers to interact with included disabled children. Also, there appears to be an emerging necessity to develop professional training courses for those students who will become teachers and work with disabled children. These training courses can offer the

opportunity for them to gather knowledge, skills and professional experiences which in their turn will lead to the increase of self-trust in the teaching process of disabled children.

At this point, emerges the necessity of conducting further research to stress out other aspects regarding school inclusion and of completing the gathered data with supplementary information from parents, children, and other community members. The knowledge in the inclusive education field must be also enhanced, both at a continuous professional training for teachers and initial professional formation of future teachers.

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