

SPECIAL EDUCATION VERSUS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: EXAMINING CONCERNS AND ATTITUDES OF TEACHING PROFESSIONALS TOWARD CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the perceptions and experiences of head teachers, teachers and conductor teachers towards students with disabilities, in the five schools of Budapest (Hungary). The study relied on a qualitative methodology. Qualitative instruments, i.e. semi-structured interviews were used to examine the participants' day to day experiences with students with disabilities, their contribution in the learning process and their viewpoints on different aspects of special, as well as inclusive education in the overall development of students with disabilities. Fourteen interviews (both in English and Hungarian) were conducted in one inclusive and four special schools. Two teachers with disabilities also participated in this study. Results show that participants value an inclusive approach in the overall development of students with disabilities, but display mixed attitudes towards the 'full' participation of pupils with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. However, the majority of participants believed that every child with a disability has different education needs. Therefore, the type and severity of disability, ideally, should be a deciding factor in selecting an educational approach. The results also discuss the impact of teachers' and children's factors on the attitudes of teachers towards the participation of children with disabilities in general classrooms. There are very few published research papers in English concerning special/inclusive education in Hungary and this was one of biggest challenges faced by the authors in gathering information for this article. This study ends with recommendations for further studies.

KEY WORDS

Children with disabilities, gender, Hungary, inclusive education, special schools, special teachers.

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Introduction

Children with disabilities all over the world are experiencing discriminating behaviour and are being exposed to stereotypes and social prejudice. It has been claimed by many academic experts that children with learning, mental and some specific physi-

cal disabilities should be educated in “special” schools and this ideology encourages segregation of children with disabilities from children without disabilities (United Nations 2014). Every individual in the world is entitled to basic human rights and experience his/her freedom in all spheres of life regardless of gender, race, religion, or language. Conscious of such confrontation, governmental and non-governmental organisations worldwide are encouraging new thinking, designing and implementing policies to spread awareness, and empowering the rights and dignity of children with disabilities. For many decades, there has been a debate going on in the context of education for children with disabilities i.e. an inclusive or segregated approach. In the last few years, the inclusive school ideology for children with disabilities has revolutionised the education system all over the world. Moore et al. (1998: 2) examine the meaning of the term, “inclusion” and how phenomenon of “inclusion” is different from “integration” and “mainstream” approaches (these words are often used interchangeably):

Mainstreaming brought students with special education needs into general classrooms only when they didn't need specially designed instruction-when they could keep up with the “mainstream”. Integration presumes that “segregation” exists and students are with their peers without disabilities part-time. In reality, students who were integrated part-time were not truly a part of the class and were often involved in activities very different from the other students in the class. Inclusion, a philosophy of acceptance, belonging and community, also means that general education classes are structured to meet the needs of all the students in the class.

Indeed, inclusive education indicates the acceptance of a student in a re-structured environment irrespective of his/her disability, and to create the same sense of belonging within the social community for these children (Avramidis, Norwich 2002). Like two sides of the same coin, there are two different ways of looking at inclusive ideology, i.e. advantages or disadvantages for students with disabilities in an inclusive environment. Addressing the advantages, many researchers have reported that inclusive education has provided a platform which benefits students with disabilities in many ways, for example, it provides ample opportunities to interact and communicate with students with no disabilities (Horrocks et al. 2008), spreads social awareness and integration (Lambe, Bones 2006), increases independence and growth in academic skills (Moore et al. 1998), improves behavior (Rea et al. 2002; Moore et al. 1998) and further professional competencies, and provides a competitive edge with which to enter the labour market (Khudorenko 2011). Concerning disadvantages, the biggest concern of teaching and non teaching staff is that students with disabilities can be a victim of bullying (De Monchy et al. 2004).

Inclusive education in any society not only demands the active role of teachers, but also full participation from education specialists/professionals, non teaching staff and parents (Waligore 2002: 2). Addressing this inclusion debate, the success of an inclusion program in any school depends on two important factors i.e. attitudes of teachers and style of teaching approach in the context of students with disabilities (Carrington 2007). There are various professionals involved in providing support to students with disabilities so that they can fully integrate into society but teachers in general and special schools have the upmost responsibility to make

sure that the students with disabilities are successful, both socially and academically (Jackson et al. 2000). The academic success of students with disabilities is dependent on many variables and the attitude of teacher is one of the most important factors which influences child's performance in school. The teacher's role in inclusive education is not debatable as it is quite evident from previous studies, i.e. the attitude of the teacher', either negative (Bhatnagar, Das 2013; Chhabra et al. 2009; Vaughn et al. 1996) or positive (Gal et al. 2010; Lambe, Bones 2006; Avramidis, Norwich (2002), to be one of the key elements in determining the success or failure of inclusive education in any country.

1. Hungarian Context: education system and teacher training program

Hungary was one of the first countries in the world to ratify United Nations Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Article 24 recognises the right of people with disabilities to free primary and secondary education, emphasises equal opportunities without any kind of discrimination and creates an all inclusive education system at all levels (United Nations n.d.).

On an international level, Hungary's presence has been instrumental in the field of special education in Europe. For example, the establishment of the first special school for children with hearing disabilities in 1802 in Vac and the first teacher training college for special teachers was founded in 1906 in Budapest, however it was later integrated into one of the faculties of Eötvös Lorand University (Toth 2014). Presently in Hungary, children with special needs are integrated into the education system in the following ways: an inclusive mainstream class, a special class in a mainstream

school or in a special school (Toth 2014).

In the 2016/2017 school year, the number of students enrolled for special and integrated education was 85,730 which is approximately 7.0% more than the previous year (KSH 2016). The number of students with special education needs at primary schools in the 2016-2017 academic year was 54,686. In the same academic year, 2658 students with special academic needs were active at secondary general schools. Children in Hungary, as laid down in the Fundamental law, have the right to receive special education comprising of children with mild and moderate mental disabilities, sensory or locomotor disturbances, autism spectrum disturbances, learning disabilities, multiple disabilities or any other disability (OKTATAS 2012). In Hungary, special needs are assessed in two stages, first by the Educational Advisory Team (Nevelési Tanácsadó), then by an Expert and Rehabilitation Committee for Examining Learning Abilities (TKVSZRB) if a child displays a severe and long-lasting disability (Toth 2014). TKVSZRB is a second level committee which identifies the type and severity of disability, and provides assistance in school-related matters. Nevelési Tanácsadó consists of special teachers, psychologists and therapists and committee members in TKVSZRB are special teachers, medical doctors, pediatric neurologists, psychologists, etc. Parents have an active participation in all stages of the review process and are aware of their rights to appeal against the decision. As discussed above, children with disabilities are also taught in mainstream schools and these schools also receive pedagogical and professional support from the integrated methodological services (Egységes Gyógypedagógiai Módszertani Központ: EGYMI) which provide access to the 'travelling' teacher network to help school and

teachers, and to smoothen the process of inclusive education in schools (Toth 2014).

The Ministry of Human Capacities is the governing body who is in-charge of the entire education system in Hungary and the Ministry for National Economy portfolio handles vocational education and training (VET) and adult training, including maintenance and monitoring of VET institutions in the country (OECD 2015). In Hungary, Act CXC 2011 on Public Education is an important legal instrument which guarantees "free and compulsory primary education, free and generally accessible secondary education, until obtaining secondary school-leaving certificate as well as the training for the first vocational qualification for the overall development of children and young individuals" (OKTATAS 2012). One of the objectives of this act is to provide public education and facilitate social integration of children with disabilities according to their special needs and capabilities. There are mainstream schools (supporting an inclusive education system) as well as special schools (from preschools to vocational schools) in Hungary. Mainstream schools admit students from different sections of society regardless of gender, social status, race, or disability. There are approximately 792 special schools in Hungary, however students with disabilities are placed according to a recommendation by an expert committee and also after taking parents preferences into account (OKTATAS 2012).

The Hungarian education system is facing many challenges which affects high-quality inclusive mainstream education, ageing workforce (approximately 30% of teachers in Hungary are below the age of 40) and shortage of qualified teachers (particularly in mathematics and science) in certain regions (OECD 2015). In a report by the Commissioner for Fundamental

Rights it was stated that there could be increased drop outs by children with disabilities in Hungary due to the dearth of well-qualified specialists in the majority of schools and lack of awareness about the concept and different types of disabilities by teaching and non-teaching staff at schools to provide inclusive education (UNICEF 2017).

Special school teachers are trained in institutions and must possess a special educator qualification (along with specialization in each type or category of disability) (T-tudok Zrt 2016). Bachelor's and Master's degree programs in special education studies were introduced in Hungary in 2006 (EASNIE n.d.). In addition to the aforementioned programs, the government has also introduced a few specialist training courses to encourage individuals to pursue a career in the special education stream, and to meet the shortage of special education teachers in Hungary.

In Hungary, individuals had an option to select from seven different specialized programs, namely, the education of students with hearing impairments; the education of students with visual impairments; speech therapy; the education of students with learning difficulties; the education of students with intellectual impairments; psychopedagogy for students who are difficult to teach; and somatic pedagogy for students with disabilities (EASNIE n.d.). Like many countries in the world, Hungary also faced a shortage of special education teachers and experts who could provide assistance for individuals with autism. To overcome this shortage of trained professionals in the country, the government introduced a postgraduate specialist training course entitled 'Autistic Spectrum Disorder Pedagogy' in 2009 (EASNIE n.d.).

The main objective of this study was to investigate the views of head teachers,

teachers and conductor teachers towards the children with disabilities in special and inclusive schools. For a greater understanding, the authors would like to address following research objectives:

- In their opinion (head teachers, teachers and conductor teachers), which ideology, i.e. special or inclusive education, is better for the development of children with disabilities?
- What are the variables that influence the attitudes of teachers at schools toward inclusive education?

A brief review of the literature regarding each of the findings is discussed in the following sections.

2. Methodology

A qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews) was adopted for this study. Qualitative research is a “means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (Creswell 2009: 4).

Despite of many interview techniques, the authors decided to adopt the semi-structured interview for this study. According to Harrell and Bradley (2009: 27), “in semi-structured interviewing, a guide is used, with questions and topics that must be covered. The interviewer has some discretion about the order in which questions are asked, but the questions are standardized, and probes may be provided to ensure that the researcher covers the correct material. This kind of interview collects detailed information in a style that is somewhat conversational. Semi-structured

interviews are often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided”.

Two questionnaires (QI and QII) were designed after an exhaustive literature review, one specifically for head teachers (QI) and the other for head teachers, teachers and conductor teachers (QII). International literature illustrates diverse results regarding inclusive education and teachers attitudes towards inclusive environment in schools. The QII included questions on gender, age, educational qualifications, total years of experience at special schools, designation, knowledge about disability and teaching responsibilities, whereas QI was designed for head teachers in order to gain a comprehensive picture of each school and other important instruments were also borrowed from QII.

All schools were selected within Budapest city from kindergartens, to primary and secondary schools with the assistance of the Nem Adom Fel Foundation. The schools were contacted via email explaining the purpose of the study, the importance of this study in the Hungarian context and assurance of complete anonymity to be maintained during and after the completion of the study. Only 5 schools responded to the initial email sent. The interviews were scheduled in advance with the head teachers keeping in mind the busy schedule and also not to disrupt the day-to-day operation of the schools or to interrupt working schedule of the staff. Media hyperlinks and the website of the schools were reviewed to have background information about the organisation, mission and other relevant details.

The aim was to interview only head teachers and teachers from selected schools but few conductor teachers showed interest in this study and expressed their de-

sire to be interviewed with the rest of the respondents. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 of the participants; head teachers, teachers and conductor teachers. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant from all five schools in order to protect the confidentiality of all the participants.

Prior to the interviews, the administrative staff/head teachers informed all respondents of the purpose of the interview and received their verbal consent to participate in the interview. It was also shared with them that they could voluntarily abstain themselves from answering any question which they felt too personal to answer or would make them uncomfortable. Interviews were conducted in both the English and the Hungarian languages on a one-to-one basis with each respondent at their own school premises. Interviews were recorded with the help of a voice recorder and notes were also taken by using paper and a laptop to maintain the dependability of the data. The interviews lasted from 20 to 85 minutes. The comments and perceptions from the respondents were combined as there was hardly any difference in their viewpoints. The main points were listed after the data was transcribed manually and themes were identified. Audio recordings and manual notes were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy of the data analysed.

The authors decided to use certain quotations from all interviews to highlight relevant points and also encouraged the participants to share personal experiences and elaborate with professional examples for the betterment of this study. Foster et al. (1999: 227) highlight the benefits of such practice, "this approach often yields information inaccessible through traditional quantitative collection strategies".

3. Results

The results presented in this study display head teachers, teachers and conductor teachers attitudes to inclusion in the context of children with disabilities. The key demographic details of the participants are summarised in Table 1.

The study consisted of female ($n=12$) and males participants ($n=2$, one head teacher and one class teacher). Two female teachers with disabilities also participated in the study. The participants were highly qualified teaching professionals, some with a Masters' degree in their related fields. All of the conductor teachers ($n=4$) had degree from PETO institute, Hungary.

The total length of teaching experience ranged from 3 to 38 years. In terms of teaching experience with pupil with disabilities at special schools, four participants had less than 5 years of experience, while five participants had between 5 and 15 years of experience. Five participants reported more than 15 years of teaching experience with children with disabilities at special schools.

According to the interviewees, children with a learning disability, physical disability, Down syndrome, sensory disability and/or autism were the most common disability groups in their classrooms. One important thing to be noted in the study is that participants expressed their views based on their personal and professional experiences in context of 'full' and 'conditional' (depending on the severity and type of disability, and educational needs) inclusiveness.

Table 1. Demographic details of participants (Head teachers, teachers and conductor teacher)* in five schools of Budapest city.

Description	Participant details (pseudonyms)	Gender	Job title	Total years of experience
School A	A 1	Female	Head teacher	36
	A2	Female	Teacher	27
	A3	Female	Teacher	3.5
School B	B1	Female	Head teacher	23
School C	C1	Male	Head teacher	22
	C2	Male	Teacher	9
	C3*	Female	Teacher	38
School D	D1	Female	Head teacher	35
	D2	Female	Conductor teacher	7
School E	E1	Female	Head teacher	25
	E2*	Female	Teacher	12
	E3	Female	Conductor teacher	11
	E4	Female	Conductor teacher	3
	E5	Female	Conductor teacher	4

Source: Own elaboration.

(*) C3 and E2 teachers with disabilities

(#) Head teacher, teacher and conductor teacher: Teachers and head teachers play an imperative role in upholding and improving education standards in learning institutions. Head teachers are charged with the responsibility of overseeing the day-to-day operations of a school. Teachers on the other hand are very instrumental when it comes to imparting knowledge, discipline, beliefs and values to students (UK Essays 2015). Conductor teacher is the professional who delivers the conductive education (CE) program. Conductors use a "hand off" philosophy which means that they assist the child physically to learn movements that require skill and sensitivity but allow the child to understand the movement required, initiate that movement and thus be as independent as possible in the execution of that movement (Step and smile, n.d.).

3.1. Teachers' attitude towards inclusion and disability

Although 'inclusive' education is the

call of the hour and many research articles have provided evidences in favor of inclusive education phenomenon, there are a few experts who have reservations about the presence of children with special needs at general schools. In the past, the literature was full of several important studies, both qualitative and quantitative, highlighting the impact of various demographic variables on the attitudes of teachers (Bhatnagar, Das 2013; Abu-Hamour 2013, Leyser et al. 2011). These variables concerning successful inclusion, as addressed by previous studies, are identified in three groups:

- **Teacher variables**, for example, age (De Boer et al. 2011; Briggs et al. 2002; Forlin 1995), gender (Avramidis, Norwich 2002; Briggs et al. 2002; Forlin 1995), teaching experience (Briggs et al. 2002; Forlin 1995), previous experience with students with disabilities (Briggs et al. 2002), experience with inclusive education (De Boer et al. 2011), prior contacts with individuals with disabilities (Avramidis, Norwich

- 2002; Briggs et al. 2002);
- **Student variables**, for example, age (Briggs et al. 2002), grade level (Briggs et al. 2002), the severity and type of disability (Briggs et al. 2002; Forlin 1995);
 - **Environmental variables**, for example, financial support (Avramidis, Norwich 2002), Infrastructural factors (Bhatnagar, Das 2014).

The authors have made an attempt to explore the relationship between selected variables which are, in many ways, inter-related, between the attitude of teachers towards the students with disabilities and their participation in an inclusive and special education environment.

In this article it is important to emphasise that several early studies on disability used the terms, 'integration', 'mainstream' or 'inclusion'. The main emphasis has always been to provide a platform for children with disabilities where their academic needs are met in regular classrooms, regardless of the terminology used (Chhabra et al. 2009). As some of the interviews were conducted in the Hungarian language, there may be a scenario where respondents expressed their opinions without realising the inherent difference in meaning of terms i.e. integration or inclusion. There are definitely some differences in these terms as discussed by many researchers in their studies and the authors have also clarified the difference in the introduction section. In such a scenario, language barriers and interpretation of words can complicate the true definition of, words; however there is not a big difference between the meanings of these two words. The authors have tried to be careful in the usage of terminology, i.e. integration vs. inclusion, and have tried to avoid the overlap of two different concepts in this research as they both represent two different ideologies and practices.

One of the questions was: what do you think about the ideology of inclusive education for children with disabilities? Participants were requested to share their views on special and inclusive education systems. All of the respondents recognized the importance of an inclusive education for the development of children with disabilities, but when asked if they think studying in inclusive school is beneficial for children with disabilities?

Many participants (n=5) did not approve of the idea of 'full' inclusion of students with disabilities in general classrooms. A study by Gaad and Khan (2007) found that some teachers displayed positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with behavioral disorders, physical disability and health impairments in general classrooms. This study was conducted in two different private mainstream schools in Dubai, UAE where two qualitative methods i.e. questionnaires, and interviews, were adopted to obtain the participants' attitudes toward inclusion of students with special education needs. The important finding of the Gaad and Khan study was that the teachers felt that pupils with a hearing impairment, communication disorder, intellectual challenges and PMLD (profound and multiple learning disabilities) are unable to cope with the general classroom curriculum. These findings are in agreement with the qualitative study of Avramidis and Norwich (2002: 142) "Although positive towards the general philosophy of inclusive education, do not share a 'total inclusion' approach to special educational provision. Instead, they hold differing attitudes about school placements, based largely upon the nature of the students' disabilities". One of the teachers (A2) shared her experiences in context to a girl with sensory disability. This girl was integrated in inclusive education at a very early age. She said:

An acquaintance of mine has a daughter who is deaf (Child with a hearing disability), and studied in an inclusive school. I feel that she should have been in a segregated school initially and then integrated into a mainstream school later. Children around her learned a lot about her disability but the inclusive education environment wasn't good for her development. She struggled academically and I personally feel that her ability to communicate in sign language also suffered a lot.

One of the respondents (A1), held a viewpoint in agreement with the above remark, noting:

Segregation is not good but full integration is also not beneficial for children with disabilities. There are some subjects that can be taught in general classrooms, for example, art and music, however subjects like mathematics and natural sciences need more dedicated attention. I feel that children with disabilities would suffer academically if they learn advanced subjects with other students.

For most schools, the inclusion of children with disabilities appeared to be taking place regardless of the type and severity of the disability possessed by the student. But when asked if they believe that all disabilities can be integrated into general classrooms, all participants said that they did not. More than one response was reported.

Participants demonstrated positive inclination toward the inclusion of students with physical disabilities (n=9), autism with mild behavioral problems (n=3), sensory disabilities (n=2) and learning disabilities (n=4) at mainstream schools. However, a few respondents had a negative opinion toward participation of students with severe autism (n=8), multiple disabilities

(n= 3), cerebral palsy (n=5) and severe disabilities (n= 7) in general classrooms. Many previous studies have highlighted the different opinions of teachers on the inclusion of children with different disabilities at schools, for example, researchers have investigated the effects of including children with learning disabilities, intellectual, multiple disabilities and mild mental disabilities. There are definitely differences in academic performances of students with different types of disabilities, for example, a child with a physical disability will show different academic needs than a child with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

International literature has put forward consistent differential effects of attitudes of teachers towards children possessing a disability irrespective of type and severity, and the impact on successful inclusion. Teachers tend to display positive, neutral and negative attitudes towards students with certain disabilities and such difficulties present a bigger challenge for them to teach these students in general classrooms. Chhabra et al. (2009) in their three-part questionnaire study adopted, the Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES) and the Concerns Inclusive Education Scale (CIES) instruments to identify the attitudes and concerns of teachers toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in Botswana. They reported that teachers at mainstream schools display somewhat negative attitudes towards the inclusion of students with emotional or behavioral disorders in the general classrooms.

The study of Campbell et al. (2003) was designed to identify different avenues to modify inclusive education practices and the attitudes of teachers toward the concept of disability by adopting different programs which combined formal instruction with experiential learning activities. This

one semester survey about teachers' attitudes toward pupils with Down syndrome and their inclusion in general education classrooms reported that raising awareness of one disability may lead to changes in attitudes towards disability in general through study and associated fieldwork activities. Another study by Dessemon-tet et al. (2014) at elementary schools in Canada investigated the relations between teachers' attitudes toward a person with an intellectual disability (ID), in-service training on ID, and prior contacts with people with an ID. 118 teachers participated in this quantitative research and the study reported that people with frequent contacts with people with an ID, including children demonstrate positive behavior and a willing attitude to include children with an ID in general classrooms. The study of Lifshitz et al. (2004) on attitudes toward inclusion of students with six types of disability among Israeli and Palestinian teachers reported the highest scores, i.e. positive attitudes toward learning disabilities, mild emotional disorders, and visual and hearing impairments. Another study by Robertson et al. (2003) conducted in inclusive classrooms from two urban middle-class school districts examined the relationship of general education teachers and students with autism. In this study containing 187 students (including twelve students with autism) suggested that children with autism can be taught in general classrooms as long as these children display lower behavioral problems. In turn, the study by Leung and Mak (2010), investigating the factors which affect the implementation of inclusion education in Hong Kong concluded that a significant number of participants believed that pupils with a hearing impairment, gifted children, learning difficulties and visual impairment were capable of participating in mainstream schools. The sample con-

sisted of 51 primary school teachers from two schools in Hong Kong who thought that students with brain trauma and intellectual disabilities (moderate) were not suitable for inclusive classrooms.

Many participants also stressed the importance of inclusive education for students who do not possess any disability or who have not had any exposure to the concept of disability. Inclusive education provides an opportunity for regular students to interact with other students with disabilities and understand the complexities of phenomenon of disability at a very early age (Flem, Keller 2000). As one of the participant conductor teacher, E3, from school E said:

Inclusive education is very important for other students in order for them to learn about children with disabilities. People have a habit of staring at people with disabilities. They would not stare at them if they had already interacted with them or knew how to communicate with people with disabilities. Everything is possible if people want to help. It is not about children with disabilities, rather it is important for ordinary children to understand other people who are different in many ways.

Lambe and Bones (2006) in their study also point out the benefits of having a diverse culture in classrooms, for example upholding human rights and equality, social integration, building self-esteem and promoting a better understanding between children with special needs and other children. Many teachers stressed the behavior of children with no disabilities in general class room as one of the barriers to an inclusive environment. Explaining this further, one of the teachers (C2) said:

Integration depends on both the personality of the students and the degree of disability. It also depends on the men-

ality of the other students. They get integrated easily if the other students are friendly and accepting, otherwise students with disabilities feel rejected and isolated.

In addition, participants' viewpoint on the relevant age of children with disabilities to be included in general classrooms was another dilemma in question. A few teachers (n=3) in this study shared their views on the importance of segregated education at an early age of students with disabilities and some participants (n=5) even advocated the combination of both practices i.e. special and inclusive education. They feel that with a few disabilities, for example students with a mild learning disability and/or physical disability could initially be enrolled in segregated schools and these children with special needs later integrated into mainstream schools when they are physically, emotionally and mentally prepared for the transition. One of the participants said:

In a special school, teachers can give more attention to children with disabilities within the early stages of the child's education. They can be integrated into a mainstream environment later. It is like putting them into deep water without teaching them how to swim. We should teach them to swim before putting them into deep waters.

But there could be a problem in adopting this ideology as teachers in mainstream schools will not owe the responsibility of the student with disabilities once admitted to inclusive schools (Flem, Keller 2000: 195).

In contrast, principal (C1) from School C has a different view on inclusion of children with disabilities at an early age. He stated:

The earlier they get integrated into mainstream schools the better it is for them. To avoid problems later, integra-

tion at an early age should be encouraged. We all get punches in our lives but it is better to get punches when we are young. It becomes a problem to adjust when we are older.

Hastings and Oakford (2003: 88) have addressed this age group variable in their article by comparing younger with older age circumstances, "results are mixed in that several studies have found that inclusion of children at lower grades in the school system is viewed more positively (Scruggs, Mastropieri 1996), but some others have suggested that teachers working with older children are more positive (Balboni, Pedrabissi 2000)".

3.2. Gender and inclusion

Both male participants (n=2) and the majority of female participants (n=9) in this study displayed positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in general class rooms. In this context, it cannot be generalised that all male teachers in Hungary hold positive attitudes towards inclusion of children with special education needs in regular class rooms. There are many studies which highlighted the acceptable behavior and positive attitude of females teachers towards children with disabilities than the male teachers in general classrooms (Tsakiridou, Polyzopoulou 2014; Abu-Hamour 2013; Lombardi, Murray 2011; Miller 2010; Nabors, Larson 2002) and that they are more flexible in providing accommodations as compared to male teachers (Leyser et al. 2011). Some studies found that males are more inclined (Bhatnagar, Das 2013), and a few (Batsiou et al. 2008) found no association between gender and teacher attitudes towards an inclusive environment. Regardless of gender, all of the participants in this study showed a positive approach towards inclusion but the responses on "full inclusion" appeared

to vary according to the educational needs and nature of disabilities possessed by a child.

3.3. Teaching experience and inclusion

Regardless of years of overall teaching experience in special or general schools, the majority of participants ($n=12$) displayed positive opinions towards the inclusion of students with disabilities. Of the fourteen participants, three had less than 5 years of experience, while the remaining eleven participants had more than 10 years of experience in both special and inclusive classrooms. Research-based studies conducted in the past observed, differences in the relationship between teachers' professional experience and their attitude towards inclusive education programs. Professional working experience with students with disabilities is perceived to be directly related to the attitude of teachers, i.e. the more classroom interaction with students with disabilities, the more positive the attitude (Briggs et al. 2002). This finding is consistent with the study of Leung and Mak (2010), teachers who have had more than ten years of teaching experience display a positive attitude towards inclusive education.

Alternatively, international studies conducted by Tsakiridou and Polyzopoulou (2014) and Gal et al. (2010) revealed that younger teacher with less years demonstrate more positive behavior towards inclusion of students with disabilities in general classrooms. A study by Bhatnagar and Das (2013) also indicated that teachers with fewer years of experience are more open towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classrooms than the teachers with many years of experience. It was discussed in the study by Forlin (1995) that teachers with more experience

have less favorable attitudes toward inclusive education. Similarly, MacFarlane and Woolfson (2013) reported in their study based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) that teachers with more experience were less willing to work with children with social, emotional and behavioral difficulties (SEBD).

3.4. Personal and professional experiences and inclusion

The aim of this section is to explore two sources of experiences, personal and professional, which generate either a positive or negative perception on inclusion. Findings of previous studies have shown that experiences and social contact with people with disabilities help in the formation of positive attitudes (Sahin, Akyol 2010; Chen et al. 2002). In this study, a few respondents had contact (mainly positive) with people with disabilities prior to joining the teaching profession and some did not have such closeness (neutral response). All responses were neutral to positive towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in general classrooms irrespective of the prior degree of closeness with people with disabilities.

With respect to personal contacts, the majority of the respondents had family members, relatives, friends or neighbors with disabilities. Some participants had occasional contact with strangers with disabilities on the streets, in shopping malls and on public transport. All respondents claim that they have professional closeness with students with disabilities and teaching and non teaching colleagues with disabilities on a day-to-day basis. As shown in Table 2, prior contact of respondents in regards to contact with individuals with disabilities.

The study of Dessemontet et al. (2014) entitled 'Exploring the relations between in-

service training, prior contacts and teachers' attitudes towards persons with intellectual disability, suggests that positive prior contact with people with intellectual

disabilities, directly or indirectly, helps to reduce the discomfort level and individuals show an inclined approach to interact with people with disabilities.

Table 2. Participants personal and professional information

Content description	Participants	Remarks
How many individuals participated in the study? • Male • Female	14 2 12	
How many participants possess any kind of disability? • Yes • No	2 12	
How many male and female participants possess any kind of disability? • Male • Female	- 2	
What is the designation of the participants? • Principal • Teachers • Conductor teachers	5 5 4	
Any prior personal contact with a person with disability? • Do you have a family member or relative with a disability? • Do you have a close friend with a disability? • Do you have a neighbor or relative with a disability? • How often do you meet strangers with disabilities?	Yes Yes Yes Yes	Low to high level of personal contact with family members, relatives and friends with disabilities Occasional contacts with strangers with disabilities on the streets, in shopping malls and on public transport.
Professional contact with person with disability: • Students with disabilities • Colleagues (academic and non academic)	Yes Yes	Daily/frequent professional contacts.

Source: Own elaboration.

One of the participants (D2) shared her early year experiences which motivated her to get professionally associated with people with disabilities. She said:

I wanted to study Hungarian literature. I visited PETO institute with my ex boyfriend who was a conductor student. He introduced me to a boy who was walking with 2 sticks (crutches). He told me that this boy could not even walk 2 weeks

ago. He was restricted to a wheel chair. I was so interested to know how he started walking with the help of crutches. Such physical transformation was possible only because of PETO procedures. So that very moment I decided to pursue my career in special education and I am proud of my decision.

Hence, personal and professional experiences together determine how success-

ful teachers are in providing an inclusive environment for children with disabilities. Linton et al. (2015) in their study on social representations (SR), highlighted that experience of teachers (work related or private) is key to understanding why teachers do or do not support inclusion. Such experience shapes teachers' social representation of students with autism spectrum diagnosis (Asperger) relative to teachers with no experience. Also, teachers with private experience displayed fewer positive elements compared to those with work-related experience in this study conducted in Sweden. Barr (2013) in his research titled, "A student-teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities: associations with contact and empathy", found that the quantity of contact is not the only variable associated with positive attitudes, but empathic functioning is also associated with positive attitudes. Similarly, a study conducted by Parasuram (2006) reported that teachers who had prior contact with individuals with disabilities demonstrate more positive attitudes towards inclusive education than teachers with no contact.

Conclusions

This study cogitates some of the major concerns and dilemmas of head teachers, teachers and conductor teachers in the special and inclusive education system in Hungary. The information shared in this article is to give an opportunity for the readers to have an overview of the Hungarian special education system and, at the same time, share a professional understanding of head teachers, teachers and conductor teachers, on the ongoing inclusion debate.

However, the majority of academic personnel who participated in this research displayed an overall positive attitude (from the most positive to the least positive display of attitudes) toward participation of

children with disabilities in an inclusive education environment. A few were not convinced with 'total inclusion' as they feel that every child is different, therefore, a systematic and careful approach needs to be adopted, based largely upon the severity and type of disability possessed by a child. In theory, students with disabilities have an equal right like other students with no disabilities to have equal access to an inclusive environment but they cannot receive an effective education in general classrooms (Daane et al. 2000). Since interviews were conducted in Budapest, results cannot be generalized to all teachers in Hungary and also the authors feel that interviews with teachers in other cities would generate different results if the same study was replicated.

The current study also highlights the fact that previous studies in Hungary have not been able to investigate the phenomenon of disability thoroughly and this is one of the limitations faced by the authors to find published literature and theoretical frameworks in the English language in high quality research journals. Therefore, it is recommended that future qualitative and quantitative studies focus on the attitudes of various groups in the teaching process (non teaching staff, helpers, social workers, etc.). While the article is mainly targeted at head teachers and teachers at special and inclusive schools, it also acknowledges that parents, siblings, friends, relatives and administration staff have a role in spreading awareness and creating an inclusive environment for children with disabilities. The authors feel that there could be another limitation to this article as the present study entirely focused on the interviews of the teachers. Therefore, the authors recommend future research emphasising on on-site classroom observation to establish the actual beliefs and behavior of the teachers

which could add another dimension to the inclusion of pupils with special needs. De Boer et al. (2011) confirm the importance of incorporating an interview framework with an observation methodology in the context of students with disabilities to establish the actual behavior of teachers in the classrooms to the intentions shared during the interview.

To support the education system, handle diverse student groups and overcome the shortage of teachers in special and mainstream schools, the government of Hungary needs to attract, encourage and retain young talent in teachers. In this respect, careful planning, monitoring and review of the process is required in all schools irrespective of special or general institutions.

Although this study focused only on city of Budapest, this article adds to sectional exploration based on the attitudes of teachers at Hungarian schools and provides a different perspective on their professional experiences with children with disabilities. It can be interpreted from this study that the participants have shown positive beliefs towards the children with disabilities and their participation in the education system. Such optimistic results could be due to awareness of the phenomenon of disability within various strata of society and also the information framework on e-platforms helps in removing negative stereotypes and prejudices against the people with disabilities. Bhatnagar and Das (2013) in their study on attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education in India reported an optimistic outlook in the attitude of teachers towards inclusive education as compared to international studies conducted by other authors in last few decades. According to them, in an Indian context, factors such as awareness of disability in society, the abundance of teacher education programs and professional development op-

portunities provided by governmental and non-governmental organisations have led to positive changes.

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