TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON WHAT INCLUSION NEEDS

Ženiņa Bērziņa
Daugavpils University

Abstract

A decade has passed since the equal right of all children to quality education regardless of their mental or physical abilities was declared by the Education Law (Izglītības likums, 1998). During that interlude, the Latvian educational system went through a period of tremendous change from total segregation of children with special needs in special schools to so-called “correction” classes in general schools, then to the special classes in general schools and finally to inclusion of special needs children in regular classrooms. Thus, the idea of inclusive education has been developed and implemented in various forms, which causes people to have a different understanding of what inclusive education means and impedes children with special needs from learning together with their peers in general classrooms. This article reflects on the findings of a qualitative study that was designed and conducted to investigate different perceptions of pre-school and primary school teachers on the preconditions for inclusive education.

Key words: *inclusion of children with special needs, inclusive school, inclusive school culture*

Introduction

The most significant international document on the rights of the people with special needs, the Salamanka Statement, argues that general schools with inclusive orientation are “...the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1994, p. 9). The unique nature of inclusive education, which is growing in importance from year to year, is that more and more countries mandate its incorporation into the general school practice. In 1998 Latvia passed the Education Law (Izglītības likums, 1998) which requires that disabled children be educated with their peers in regular classrooms. The issue of the rights and the ways to implement the inclusive education approach has been discussed at various conferences and meetings and has been the subject of research. Many plans have been worked out but still need to be implemented in everyday practice at the school and classroom levels. Unfortunately, very few Latvian researchers have worked in the field of inclusive education. Therefore, it is important to seek information based on international research.

What does international research tell about inclusive education?

Research undertaken internationally over the past two decades has developed a clearer understanding of what inclusive schooling means and what factors enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of these schools. Numerous definitions are provided; however, one of these, which expresses the very essence of inclusive education, is stated by Mara Sapon-Shevin (UK), a professor of inclusive education:

The vision of inclusion is that all children would be served in their neighbourhood schools in regular classrooms with children of their own age. The idea is that these schools would be restructured so that they are supportive, nurturing communities that really meet the needs of all the children within them: rich in resources and support for both students and teachers. (O'Neil, 1994, p. 7).

Educational researchers have studied inclusive education through various perspectives: the systemic change (Ainscow & Haile-Giorgis, 1999), the forms of classroom practices and school organization (Ainscow, 1999) and teacher education (Ainscow, 1994; Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004). Years of international research into inclusive education have led to the conclusion that school culture largely determines the inclusiveness or non-inclusiveness schools in a significant way. A large number of investigations focused on school culture as part of the organizational change process, which considers it as a necessary condition for sustainable change to progress (Deal, 1993; Deal & Peterson, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; Harris, 2002; Hopkins, 2001; Sarason, 1996). Even more, Deal (1985) refers to organizational culture as “the epicentre of change” (p. 303). As Sarason (1996) states, school culture refers to the aspects of the school that are viewed by its personnel as ‘given’ or essential features, which they would defend against elimination or marked change. These beliefs are so much a part of a school setting that they are not given much thought and are difficult to express in words. They are simply “the way things are.” Perhaps, therefore, understanding and changing school culture is the most difficult aspect of systemic school change. An extensive body of research suggests three components that help explore and explain the school culture. These components are artefacts, beliefs and values and assumptions. Research on school culture indicates that the most essential categories that serve to describe organizational culture are values, beliefs, attitudes, ways of thinking, customs and rituals. Moreover, these categories are considered the main components of organisational culture (Schein, 1992; Senge, 1990). To summarise, international research suggests that school reform towards inclusive education demands more than inclusive education laws; it requires the rearranged environment of classrooms and school. It also calls for the reorientation of the whole school culture, especially for the change to be sustainable.

The author's experience of working in different inclusive projects and meeting with teachers and educational administrators at different levels shows that the most often expressed assumptions about the obstacles to implementing inclusive education are the lack of political decisions and insufficient funding. Therefore, this study was commenced under two assumptions: 1) the national educational policy clearly directs school reform towards inclusive education; 2) despite two decades of discussions about inclusive education, the availability of international research literature and numerous innovative projects that put the idea of inclusive education into practice, the complaints

of teachers and administrators of not-inclusive schools remain essentially the same. These complaints are largely due to inadequate educational policy and insufficient financial resources. The aim of this study is to test these two assumptions.

Methods

For the purpose of testing the initial assumptions, in this three years' study (2004–2006) the teachers' perceptions about the factors that influenced inclusion or non-inclusion of children with special needs in general schools or preschools were explored. The study involved collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Surveys and essays were used for data collection. For the purpose of validity, the method of randomly selected sample was used for the surveys. 303 in-service teachers and bachelor students of Daugavpils University were invited to respond to a survey: 49 teachers in the first year of the study in 2004; 123 teachers in the second year in 2005 and 124 in the third year of the study in 2006. The survey was not modified during the study in order to gather continuous data. It was structured in two parts. The first part of the survey consisted of questions aimed at collecting the background information about the participants of the study, such as *Do you work in an urban or rural school? Are you a pre-school or a primary class teacher? What instructional language do you have in your school – Latvian, Russian, other? Do you have children with special needs in your school/pre-school?* The options for answering the last question of this part of the survey were “yes”, “no”, “do not know”. Seven teachers' responses were discarded during the first screening since their answer to the last question of the first part of the survey was “do not know”. Thus, 296 surveys were analysed. The quantitative part of the survey indicates that all participants were early childhood teachers, both pre-school and primary teachers. In the first year of the study 30.6% were teachers from inclusive schools, in the second year – 64.2% and in the last year of the study – 56.5%. During the three years of the study, 72.3% of teachers represented inclusive schools, but 27.7% of participants were from schools, which did not have inclusive experiences. All respondents were female. Two largest cities and two regions of Latvia were represented: teachers from the capital city Riga and Daugavpils (68.3%), teachers from Riga region in the central part of the country and teachers from Latgale region in the Eastern part of the country (31.7%). Teachers from the cities mostly represented schools and pre-schools with Russian instructional language, whereas teachers from rural areas came mostly from schools and pre-schools with Latvian instructional language. It is also worth noting that economical situation in Riga and its region is better than in Latgale, which is the most deprived region of the country. Therefore, the schools' provision and maintenance might differ in the regions. Thus, the population of this study represents a broad spectrum of the schools and teachers of Latvia.

The second part of the survey included one open-ended question that was aimed to collect qualitative data on the teachers' perceptions about inclusive education, such as *What do you think, why your school has or has not accepted and implemented the inclusive education approach?* Teachers were not limited in terms of how detailed the answer may be. This strategy provided extensive qualitative data related to teachers' perceptions on the influential factors of inclusion.

The design of the essay was selected, proceeding from the need to examine deeper the perceptions that teachers hold regarding the features that underpin inclusive and

non-inclusive school practices. In 2006, the seven teachers who wrote essays “My Experience with Students with Disabilities” were part-time students of Daugavpils University, five of them worked in inclusive and two in non-inclusive schools. The teachers were instructed that, if they did not have such experience themselves, they could tell a story of their colleague or they might tell why they thought they had never had such students in their classrooms or schools.

Thus, the survey and the essays provided a rich qualitative material for further interpretation. Then, the challenge of the interpretation of qualitative data lied in grouping closely related characteristics into more general categories. Qualitative data analysis was partially based on the tactics suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). For generating meaning from the collected data, in this study the following tactics were applied: clustering, counting and making comparisons. At the first stage of the qualitative data analysis, during the screening of the respondents’ answers to the last question of the survey and the essays, all wording used in the participants responses and related to inclusion was categorised into two primary clusters reflecting the perceptions of those teachers who had inclusive experience in their schools (Group A – 72.3% of survey participants) and those who had no such experience (Group B – 27.7% of survey participants). Then the extracts of teachers’ answers were counted in each primary cluster and grouped in six categories: state policy, tolerant society, school and classroom environment, staff relationships, professional characteristics of teachers and personal characteristics of teachers. For the final stage of analysis these six categories were grouped in three larger clusters: 1) external factors that influence inclusion; 2) internal factors at school and classroom level; 3) personal factors (Figure 1). The results of this stage are reflected in the next chapter of this article. The final chapter reports on the findings of the comparison between the results obtained by the qualitative data of this study and its initial assumptions.

Results

The differences and similarities in the views of the two groups of teachers about why their school has or has not accepted and has or has not implemented the inclusive education approach are displayed in Figure 1 and described in this chapter.

Figure 1. Number of responses on teachers’ views on the main factors influencing the implementation of inclusive education

External factors that influence inclusion

State policy. Surprisingly little number of teachers of both groups, those who work in inclusive school (group A) and those who work in non-inclusive schools (group B), refer to the state educational policy: only 2% from group A and 17% from group B. To a certain extent, it could be explained by the fact that in the period of the study the Law of Education (1998) and a range of supporting documents were already in place. The tendency to stress the financial resourcefulness characterises group B:

My proposal to our politicians is to increase salaries of those teachers who have disabled children in their classrooms. I consider that it would promote and fasten the inclusion process in Latvian pre-schools. My second proposal would be to finance all additional expenses from the state budget.

Expectations regarding additional staff are expressed similarly by group A and group B teachers (48% and 49%). More significant differences are revealed in the expectations of the state curriculum for inclusive classrooms: 7% of group A and 23% of group B. It should be added that one of the most frequently mentioned reasons that group B teachers (72%) suggest to explain why there are no children with special needs in their school is the existence of a broad net of special schools and other institutions for disabled children in the neighbourhood:

I work near A city in B civil parish. We do not have children with special needs in our school, and I think we will not have them because there are many special pre-schools, special schools and boarding schools and special children care centres in the city and in our region.

Tolerant society. Tolerance towards inclusion in the society is considered by both groups, though the perspective on this factor differs. In most of their answers group B teachers (61%) point that "Latvian society is not yet ready to accept the disabled people as equals". A teacher tries to explain the reasons for this situation:

To my mind, it is a very difficult and complicated process to change the old traditions. The old views from the soviet period still remain in the consciousness of most people – they pretend that we do not have such people at all.

"We do not have children with special needs in our school. Perhaps it is because their parents do not want it. We do not know whether we have such children in our town.

There are less teachers of group A (12%) who mention intolerance of the society as one of the obstacles to inclusion. They try to notice the positive changes:

There are few such people in our streets because they 'do not fit' in the society of those who are successful, healthy and handsome. But, little by little, we are forced to accept the reality – we do have such people and children in our society.

Typically, the negative attitude towards inclusion from the side of the parents of normally developed children has been stressed by the teachers of group B (36%).

We had (a child with special needs) last year. But other parents had a very negative attitude to him, because the child threatened the others. Speech therapist and director decided that parents need to be advised to take the child out. And the mother did.

Internal factors at school and classroom level

School and classroom environment. Adaptation of school and classroom environment to the specific needs of the disabled children is mentioned in a considerable number of responses. For many (49%) teachers of non-inclusive schools (group B) the problem is inappropriate classroom and school environment. They almost always include references to providing safe and specifically rearranged environment, which would encourage them to accept a disabled child in their classroom. One teacher argues:

Not a single child with disabilities attends our pre-school. Though I am not sure that we do not have these children in our city. I just do not know anything about them. Our pre-schools and schools are simply not ready to accept these children, because all premises should be reconstructed and special equipment and special learning material should be provided.

Another teacher states:

A child in a wheelchair could not attend our pre-school, because we do not have a ramp. The older children's classrooms are on the second floor, but the toddlers' classrooms are on the first one. The canteen is in the other building. The child could not attend our school either, because they also have the same problems.

Staff relationships. The attitudes and relationships between staff members are related to administrators, teachers and support personnel. Surprisingly high percentage of teachers of group B have emphasised the school directors' negative attitude towards inclusion – 35%.

The director has the exclusive role to implement inclusive education. If she considers that it is good for the school, she will agree.

Administrative support was often perceived as a preferential condition. Several teachers assume that once the administration has not “accepted” a disabled child in the school, “there is no way to further influence the administration's decision”.

The importance of collegial relationships dominates in group A answers – 44%. A teacher recounts her experience:

Of course we were shocked at the beginning (a child with Down syndrome was included). One teacher changed her work after half a year. She could not accept the child's oddity. But our assistant, very young, loved him. Soon the rest of us – teachers, director, kitchen workers and teachers of the next doors classroom – started to notice the love and the kindness of this child. He did not speak when he entered our pre-school, but in three months he started to speak. Everybody was happy when we noticed how much better he spoke – us, adults, and the children, too.

To tell the truth, it was very difficult at the beginning, but it was great later. It was due to the cooperation with my colleagues and our director. We speak, share information and support each other.

When a school has adopted inclusive education approach and implemented it in its everyday practice, the teachers feel cooperation and learning from each other to be much more important than the teachers of non-inclusive schools. One participant (group A) concluded that “shared beliefs are important”.

Personal factors

Professional characteristics of the teachers. “Teachers must know about the child’s disability”, “some special methods should be acquired”, “individual work is very important”, “play is what can help to start to communicate and to speak”, “you must observe the development of the disabled child very carefully”... In one sense, these examples may appear to represent too general abstractions. However, they demonstrate which professional characteristics are meaningful for the teachers. Interestingly, the greatest difference between the views of group A and B is about the role of observation: it was three times more strongly distinguished by the teachers of inclusive schools (group A – 47%, group B – 16%).

The relationship between inclusion and cooperation with parents is considered as consistently positive by both groups. Even more, most of the survey participants (42% from group A and 45% from group B) seem to grant that the teacher of inclusive classroom must cooperate with parents:

We must cooperate; we cannot reach good results alone. I have spent hours in discussions with parents. (Parents of the child with special needs were quite shamed and suspicious at the beginning. Z. B.). But it was worth it. We all know and feel it.

Even if the parents are not interested and it is a family at risk, we should explain and help them to develop their child with special needs. We have more special pedagogical knowledge. But we must also listen to them. In my experience, I was very surprised when a father who drinks often told me so much about his son (The boy has Cerebral Palsy. Z. B.). Now we always talk with him when we meet.

However, a notable number of surveys and life stories contain a lot of complaints about parents who “do not want, are not interested and refuse to cooperate”.

The profession demands that teachers need to ‘renew’ themselves periodically and get new perspectives for their work from educational theory or from different conferences and seminars. The need to improve their knowledge in the field of special education and inclusion is defined three times more frequently by the participants of group B – 64% (35% in group A). The very few objections against the necessity of the continuing professional development are based on the assumption that after “all life spent in this profession, there is enough practical knowledge and life wisdom” (2 participants).

Personal characteristics of the teachers. References to love and respect towards each child regardless of his or her abilities are often mentioned by group A and B (42%

and 78%). But the following explanations reveal that the teachers of group A understood these terms as more related to the child's achievements and development. They do not mention the words 'love' and 'respect' so much, but their love is more expressed by the context of their stories:

I was so happy when M. graduated the first grade. He had learned so much during the year. It was not easy for him but he did.

I spoke with other children about N. I told them that he is like us, only he does everything slower. Soon the children started to notice and to tell me every little success they had noticed in N. It was a kind of competition among them later, who will tell me the good news first.

I know that I spent more time with D. But she does need my help. I hope she could become more independent, but not yet.

A large number of teachers (62% of group A and 51% of group B) expressed an opinion that equal attitude to all children, responsibility, patience, endurance, responsiveness and generosity are necessary to work with the children with special needs. Similarly, the need for risk taking and responsibility were stressed.

It should be noted that though the study was limited to preschool and primary school teachers, its findings may also be applied to the other stages of education – basic and secondary schools.

Conclusions

This study was started with two assumptions to test: 1) the national educational policy sets clear direction of school reforms towards inclusive education and 2) despite the two decades of educational reform towards inclusive education, the complaints of non-inclusive schools remain essentially the same – about the inadequate policy and insufficient financial resources. The results of the analysis of teachers' perceptions overthrow these initial assumptions. Contrary to the wide spread views in Latvian educational community that political and financial factors are the most influential for the change towards inclusive education, this study distinguished the issues of the human dimension in teachers' perception of their work for the change that has occurred or has been considered to occur when a school implements inclusive education approach. The study reveals that human and professional factors prevail considerably over the policy and financial resources factors. It is the first conclusion of this study that the problem with development of inclusive schools lays not so much in the lack of policy or financial and material resources. It rests more in something more fundamental: in the organizational culture of the schools in Latvia. This conclusion coincides with international research findings. It also matches some local research findings. Salite (2006) concludes on teachers' perceptions of the present and future education that "the teachers' hopes for the future education claimed for the need of more spiritual relationships, common aim of upbringing" (p. 407).

The second conclusion of this study is that while almost all teachers, those having or lacking inclusive education experience in their schools, place the teachers' professional and personal categories at the top of the preconditions for inclusive education (98% in total), they do not relate it to beliefs and values – the most essential component of

school culture. Actually, they do not mention the term 'culture' or the term 'climate', which would sound more used in Latvian context. Although, curiously, many of the statements are semantically close, for example, I am sure..., I believe..., I do think that.... This may be explained by insufficient attention to the issues of the school culture in pre-service and in-service training of teachers. While the study shows that the obstacles for the change towards inclusive education are less connected with external factors, it suggests: 1) that the change is much more difficult; 2) that there is much more risk of it being unsustainable. Consequently, the current reform efforts require considerably greater emphasis on school culture. To address this need, the issues of school culture should be more thoroughly investigated and reflected in pre-service and in-service teacher education.

This study only partly reflects what teachers value as important factors in implementing inclusive education. There may be many other factors that influence the development and sustainability of inclusive school culture. However, this study revealed that effective and sustainable change to inclusive education requires reorientation from solely external and knowledge-based factors to the cultural factors in our efforts to build inclusive schools. The research area, which should be considered in future studies, is how to build the understanding of inclusive school culture and how to implement and sustain changes related to inclusive education.

References:

- Ainscow, M. (1994). *Special needs in the classroom: A teacher education guide*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Ainscow, M. (1999). *Understanding the development of inclusive schools*. London: Falmer Press.
- Ainscow, M., & Haile-Giorgis, M. (1999). Educational arrangements for children categorised as having special needs, in Central and Eastern Europe [Electronic version]. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 14(2), 103–121.
- Carrington, S., & Robinson, R. (2004). A case study of inclusive school development: A journey of learning. *The International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8(2), 141–153.
- Deal, T. E. (1985). Cultural change: Opportunity, silent killer, or metamorphosis? In M. J. Kilman, Saxton, & R. Serpa (Eds.), *Gaining control of the corporate culture* (pp. 292–331). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Deal, T. E. (1993). The culture of schools. In M. Shaskin & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Educational leadership and school culture* (pp. 3–18). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Company.
- Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (1994). *The leadership paradox: Balancing logic and artistry in schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (2004). School change and teacher knowledge: A reciprocal relationship. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 27(1), 57–67.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers: Changing times*. London: Cassell.
- Harris, A. (2002). *School improvement: What's in it for schools?* New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Hopkins, D. (2001). *School improvement for real*. London: Falmer Press.

- Izglītības likums [Education Law]. (1998, November 7). *Vēstnesis* [Messenger], pp. 343–344.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data nanalysis: An expended sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- O'Neil, J. (1994). Can inclusion work? A conversation with Jim Kauffman and Mara Sapon-Shevin. *Educational Leadership*, 52(4), 7–11.
- Salite, I. (2006). Aim of education in the context of present and future educational issues: Perspectives of teachers. In A. Pipere, (Ed.), *Education and Sustainable Development: First Steps toward Changes* (Vol. 1, pp. 390–407). Daugavpils: Daugavpils University Publishing House “Saule”.
- Sarason, S. (1996). *Revising the culture of the school and the problem of change*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Schein, E. H. (1992). *Organizational culture and leadership* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday Currency.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on special needs education*. Retrieved October 26, 2004, from http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF

Data analysis and conclusions on the findings of this study are prepared with the support of the ESF project “Atbalsts Daugavpils Universitātes doktora studiju īstenošanai” (contract Nr. 2009/0140/1DP/1.1.2.1.2/09/IPIA/VIAA/015).

Correspondence:

Ženija Bērziņa, PhD student, Daugavpils University, Faculty of Education and Management. Email: zenijab@tvnet.lv