

Inclusive education inside the classroom: the case of the "Horea" School in Cluj, Romania

2nd phase research report

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Introduction

The second phase of the research intends to add depth and scope to the original project (first phase research) by looking at inclusion from a "bottom-up" perspective in addition to a "top-down" view. We aimed to examine how inclusion in the 'smallest' unit of the school (the classroom), the teacher-pupil relationship and the pupil-learning relationship, related to inclusionary practices at school level.

By exploring active inclusion in classroom, we tried to discover the strategies that foster "bottom-up" inclusion in schools if teachers are continuously involved in creating opportunities for pupils to participate actively in the class.

This research continues and completes the *Case Study of Horea Secondary School in Cluj* introduced in the first phase, therefore we suggest the reader to go through the texts accordingly.

The research had three stages of work:

1. **Preliminary desk research** – Preliminary background reading and design of instruments. We received a very rich and pertinent bibliography about *inclusive pedagogy* from the Argentine and Mexican teams.
2. **Field research** – Application of instruments to pupils and teachers within the selected inclusive schools in each country. We also received the research-instruments and after a short process of adjustment, translation, and a pilot phase, we were ready to use the *Class Observation Matrix*, the *Focus Group for Students* (guideline) and *Interview for Teachers* (semi-structured guide).

We had to choose from the three selected schools the one for the second research. After a few discussions regarding the willingness of the teaching staff to let us attend classes – which was also a good indicator of transparency and will to improve inclusive practices – we have chosen the *Horea Secondary School in Cluj*.

We attended 14 classes using the Class Observation Matrix: 4 in the third grade (3rd A and 3rd C) observing two primary teachers/ two hours each, a Romanian language and a Math lesson; and 10 in 3 seventh grade classes (7th A, 7th B and 7th C): one Chemistry, one History and one Mathematics class in each (3x3) + 1 Physics lesson. This way, we could observe both the same teacher teaching the same subject to three different classes, and the pupils' behaviour and involvement with three different teachers. Special mention should be made of Mathematics since each of the 7th grades had a different Maths teacher.

We performed 7 interviews: two with the two primary teachers, one with the Chemistry teacher, one with the History teacher and three with the three different Maths teachers.

We organised three Focus groups with pupils: one with nine children from the 3rd A and 3rd C grades, one with the whole 7thC grade (23 pupils) and one with 11 pupils from the 7thB and 7thA grades.

Then, we proceeded to analyse the survey data and draw conclusions about the best practices.

3. **Best practices diffusion** – Dissemination of results in two workshop events, in two cities; editing a leaflet; editing a *Methodology on inclusive pedagogy* practices and oral presentations at meetings with pedagogical high school students /university students.

Teaching practices with affective purposes

Classroom atmosphere

The atmosphere during classes – without exception – is warm; pupils and teachers respect and trust each other. Teachers are giving positive messages to pupils (there were some exceptions), encourage them to keep trying, showing trust in their capacity of learning – but this happens mostly for the whole classroom, not individually. Teachers are kind and patient, but they do not tolerate if pupils are not respectful to each other.

Space for self-expression of spontaneity

Theoretically, almost all of the interviewed teachers accepted and valued the children's spontaneity. In practice, their behaviour and acceptance varied from class to class. By the end of the day, teachers were asking for more discipline and less willing to accept the children's spontaneous interventions. In classrooms with 25-29 children, it is impossible to meet the needs of all the pupils in the classroom, however, ADHD or SEN children are allowed all possible concessions: they can move around, stand or walk, eat or drink water during classes, provided they do not disturb the others. During focus groups with 7thA and 7thB graders, a few children said that some teachers had never seemed to notice them, even if they strived, so now, they do not feel encouraged to express themselves and their thoughts into class discussions.

Children are also in the same mood all the time. Sometimes, for instance by the end of the school day or school year or when they are exhausted after some tough tests/exams, many children cannot concentrate as much as during other days/classes. Teachers adapt their teaching and learning approaches according to the children's academic skills, change their design lessons or introduce some activities to help them relax when they are feeling stressed.

Observations conducted during classes confirmed that children in 3rdA grade especially, and those in all the three 7th grades (Chemistry and one of the Maths classes) acted very spontaneously, even if some pupils intervened quite out of topic (barely connected to the teacher's questions). However, the teacher did not interrupt them, thanked for their interesting insight and then simply continued to teach or discuss about the topic. Thus, it is obvious that children feel encouraged to express their views, attitudes, and feelings even during classes.

The children who attended focus groups (7thA, 7th B) said that atmosphere during Romanian classes was always tense; the teacher was demanding/severe, impatient with slower thinking children and highly discriminatory against those who were not among the best ones/ Olympics in Romanian language.

Taking into account the pupils' opinions and decisions on forms of learning

The children's involvement in decision making about where, when and with whom they learn is an unknown experience in Romanian schools. This also applies to the *Horea School*. It probably can happen in private schools, but definitely not (YET) in public schools. According to the interviews with different teachers, there is only small room for children's participation in decision making, especially when it comes to content and forms of learning. Pupils cannot decide on what and how they have to learn. School curriculum is to a large extent determined by the state, and school itself provides no room for manoeuvre. Nevertheless, in some cases, teachers (primary school teachers, especially) change the form of instruction when pupils come up with some suggestions for different activities during classes.

Children usually are asked or they can make decisions on extracurricular activities. Headmasters and class masters consult them and decide on the optional subjects/ courses or when and how to organise trips or other events in or out of school.

Teaching practices with social purposes

Though **classroom spatial arrangement** can have a serious impact on the way of teaching and learning, the school as such does not have any common policy.

Children who are now in the 3rd grade have started school following the new school system: they enrolled in the preparatory class at 6 years old, benefited from a better organised classroom layout, adjusted to their preschool age needs, and a friendly and easy programme/curricula as well. They had more leisure and artistic activities, which improved the quality of social interactions between them: meeting daily on the carpet at their first class, many classes for reading stories, playing, drawing, singing, and physical exercises/ relaxation.

During class observations, we noticed the beneficial effects of this different "starting school for the first time": smiling, relaxed, cheerful, active, cooperative, confident children, and warm relationships with their primary school teacher. However, the two primary school teachers' attitudes are different. The primary school teacher (an elder one, nearing retirement age) of the 3rdC grade is more authoritative, more eager to ensure discipline during classes, but very attentive to each child and full of devotion. The other primary school teacher (3rdA grade), who also has university studies in the field of special education, uses more activities and alternative methods. It was easier for her to answer some interview questions, for example:

Do you consider student's self-confidence as an important factor in the learning process? How many of your students are self-confident and in control of their learning? Do you implement strategies to foster self-confidence in learning? Such as?

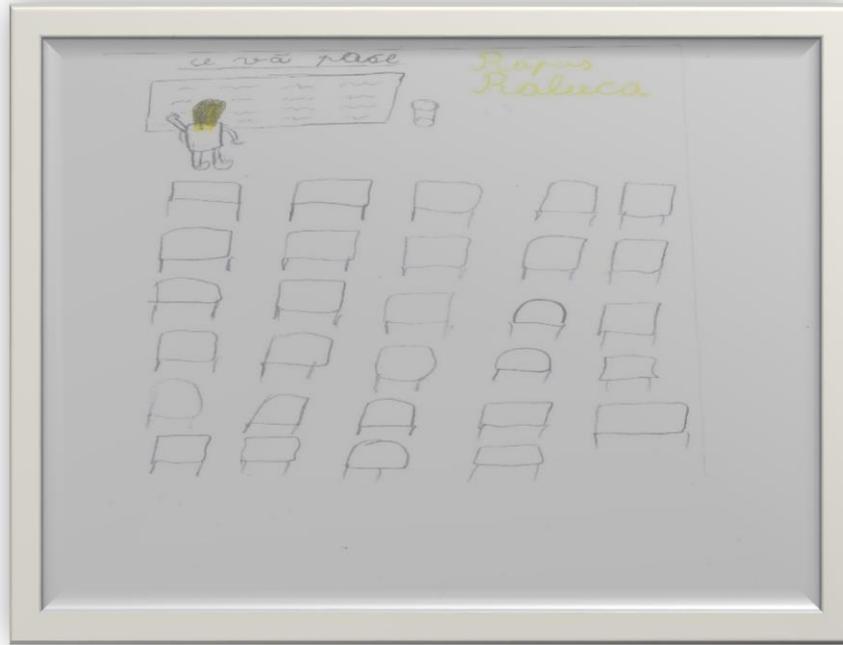
How much do you think your students can transcend their own existing limits? Do you think you can help them do this? How? Do you think that all of them can change? Under which condition do you believe your students can change?

Do you promote dialogues/talks/discussions to explore ideas with children?

In fact, these were the questions that most teachers gave hesitant answers or avoided the subject even.

Observing the classroom special arrangement/the layout: "normal" layout is boring and rigid – pupils sitting in twos, in three rows of desks. We have noticed there is much that can be done to change how the space within classrooms is used as compared to three traditional rows of desks facing the front. Classroom layout is decided at school year beginning, usually a boy, and a girl; sometimes they change desks during classes based on their friendships.

Spatial arrangement as 3rd grade pupils perceive



The interviews and focus groups show that there are some teachers who encourage classroom layout with circles, semicircles or in a U-shape form, which children like very much but most of the teachers speak about lack of time/ space or disruptions during classes. Of all the teachers, the Biology one constantly looks for alternative spaces for certain group work activities/ projects - in fact all the three grades place her on their top preferences of classroom layout, according to focus groups.

Most of the time, the primary school teachers/ teachers are sitting at the front, near their desk. They get around between the rows only when looking at the pupils' individual work/ task. The primary school teachers and the support teacher have more individual contacts with them, stay behind them to look at their work, listen to them/ provide support when pupils need to consolidate skills. One of the Mathematics teachers walks between the rows and encourages each pupil. The 7thC graders love her very much. Some exercises, especially during Mathematics and History classes, are solved by the pupils who go to the blackboard in turns. When a pupil does not sustain attention to the task, the teacher prompts the pupils to answer different questions to find out if they understand the lesson/ ask the pupil to go to the blackboard and perform the exercise/ task.

During break times, the pupils go out and play in the school yard, in groups. The younger ones are allowed to stay in the classroom if they want. We have not seen isolated or lonely children. In case of pushing or

punching, the pupils and teachers on duty with breaks supervision intervene immediately in order to protect pupils and provide a safe environment for them.

Primary school classrooms are tidy, clean, welcoming, and decorated with many drawings and useful informative/ illustrative materials on the walls, most of them made by children. In contrast, the walls of the 5 to 8th grades are almost empty, except for a watch, coat of arms of Cluj, and eventually an icon, which decorate the walls. In one of the classrooms, the children decorated the walls with some drawings and other materials, on the occasion of Halloween. The classroom learning environment is the class masters' responsibility not of the management team's.

Since the inclusive policy of the *Horea School* is very actively and constantly promoted and supervised by the headmaster and deputy, teachers do their best not to label pupils with learning difficulties, disabilities or special educational needs. In some cases, at the beginning of the school year, special educators are asking for the pupils' classmates attention and support with pupils who might have learning or behavioural difficulties, a strategy that works quite well. Unfortunately, this principle does not work without flaws. Focus groups with children revealed that some children still felt excluded based on their ethnicity or disabilities. Some of the children also complained about being labelled as "stupid", or "Roma" or even threatened with physical injuries.

Observations conducted during classes proved that almost all the teachers had tried to include all children in class activities. Also, they try not to divide them into ability groups/ according to their academic ability. For instance, during all the three observed Chemistry classes, the teacher asked children questions and everyone had a chance to be involved in the process of learning. They were allowed to form work groups and freely discuss for 5 minutes.

Teaching practices with intellectual purposes

A specific feature of the Romanian educational system, inherited from communism, is to define the teaching-learning process as an instructive-educational one. Instruction meant teaching/communicating new knowledge, and education was simply understood as a socialist/communist/patriotic education/ pattern. The technical language preserved this double terminology, yet its educational part remained an empty shell: although everyone deplores the lack of education of "today's children", one considers that it is the family's duty to ensure the "good family upbringing during early childhood". Teachers really believe that it is the class master's duty to educate children during class master's classes – in fact to discipline them; completion of pupils' education could then be done during Civic Education or Religion classes. Due to the overloaded curriculum, no one else "has the necessary time" to tackle education.

Teaching/ transmitting new knowledge is generally perceived as a serious work, conscientiously supported by all the teachers who were observed during classes. They are striving to do their best and explain clearly and concisely, conduct classroom demonstrations even under difficult conditions (no Chemistry or Physics labs), prepare topic-specific tests and worksheets for the entire class, including special ones for children with learning challenges. Most of the teachers take into account what pupils already know and rely on their prior knowledge. Some of them use new methods (video-projector, grouping children and working on projects, or on nodal questions). But as a matter of

fact, very few of them are really flexible, and interactive work with children seems to be the exception rather than the routine.

Best teachers use also peer education: in grade 3rdA and in Math and Chemistry classes, they encourage pupils with better academic results to explain some problems to their colleagues, leading thus to a better understanding on both sides.

The feedback is provided mostly orally, rarely in written or individual form; it is used more often in primary school classes. There are also exceptions; Math teachers often give written feedback to their pupils.

It is important to notice that each teacher is doing reasonable efforts to provide the necessary support for the children when transmitting new knowledge. During the interviews, they mentioned that pupils learned what they were asked to learn because they were interested in a good grade or a passing grade as well as because their parents forced them to learn for good grades or otherwise avoid being punished with bad grades.

Different teachers use different strategies for helping pupils motivate themselves to learn or to pay attention in class. The most appreciated teachers are those who care about the pupils' feelings or well-being (whether they are tired, upset or under stress), ask them about their condition and adapt the lessons to the real situation.

During class observations, we have noticed that pupils are very active, yet disciplined and courteous with those teachers who get their respect and are capable to establish good relationships, with teachers who design dynamic and interesting lessons, even if they are often more exigent and sometimes discipline them for not paying attention in lessons or not doing homework.

During focus groups, pupils particularly appreciated the fairly assessing and their favourite teachers' humour.

Children as active actors of their own learning

One of the essential elements of inclusive education lies in the fact that children are active subjects of their own learning. What is missing it is the pupils' involvement in establishing the learning content, in choosing methods or teaching locations.

Teachers unanimously stated during the interviews that it was quite difficult to get pupils involved and interested in the common goal/task. Teachers told us that children rarely came up, during a lesson, with their own ideas for an activity. This was observed during each of the 14 lessons we had attended. It is also true that when asking about the reasons for this passive attitude, most of the teachers recognised that they did not even think about it or they did not even notice that children

did not ask questions; or worse, some of the teachers probably ignored the children's questions or even directly discouraged them.

Even when children come up with a certain proposal, it is always the teacher's decision whether to proceed with the idea or not. The approaches to break this impasse might consist in adjusting a certain amount of time during the lesson in order to teach and encourage children to come up with their own ideas.

Conclusions

1. The key person in inclusion at classroom-level is the teacher: her/his background/experience, etc.
2. Inclusive pedagogy practice varies from teacher to teacher and from class to class for the same teacher.
3. Interaction among teacher and pupils is quite dynamic, between pupils is at a minimal level.
4. Various space arrangements, grouping pupils and multidisciplinary-project working are still rare procedures in the observed school.
5. The presence, influence and positive impact of the support teachers is largely accepted, recognised and cherished both by teaching staff and parents.

