

Development of Inclusive Competencies through Teacher Training

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Abstract

Inclusive teacher training should respond to different factors, such as educational policies and theoretical perspectives. As the importance of inclusion in education increases, it is expected that training programs in this perspective should increase at least in number, as recommended by existing studies in the last decade in Romania. Based on this finding, the present research aims to identify whether there was a change in the number, forms, and contents of inclusive training programs between 2017 and 2022 in Romania, by comparing the names, categories of training programs, and future training offers. This research examines how many training programs have been carried out in the teacher's training centers, synthesizes information about training topics and trainers, and identifies potential training programs for the 2022–2023 school year.

Keywords: inclusive training; teachers training; trainers.

JEL Classification: I290 Education: Other.

1. Introduction

Integrating inclusive practices into learning processes is a complex challenge involving actions at political, university, school, and community levels in Romania. One of the most important actions arises from the need of the education system to have teachers with inclusive competencies, trained in an inclusive pedagogy that allows them to integrate all children into classroom work.

Participating in inclusive education training programs and the subsequent impact on the teaching methodologies used by teachers in classrooms is the biggest challenge.

The issue of practice revolves around the observation that, despite the global trend for inclusive school environments, effective implementation of such frameworks often lags. This could be due to various factors, including teacher preparation, professional beliefs, and the repertoire of strategies teachers possess to address diversity (Ainscow et al., 2006). Research consistently indicates that teachers' attitudes significantly influence the success of inclusive education (Florian, 2008). Inclusive pedagogy is a concern for the development of educational inclusion and learning, both in academic and pre-university settings (Florian, 2021). Therefore, there is a need to understand how training in this area can translate into changes in classroom pedagogical practices. The literature has provided a wealth of studies exploring outcomes associated with professional development in inclusive education. The researchers argue that well-designed training can lead to improved teacher confidence and improved classroom practices that support learning for all students (Desimone, 2009). However, such professional development must be supportive, team-based, continuous, and reflective, focusing not only on theoretical knowledge but also on practical application (Guskey, 2002). However, knowledge gaps remain, especially in the specific aspects of training that most effectively influence teaching practices. In addition, the variation in the quality and content of training programs makes it difficult to draw general conclusions about their effectiveness (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The solution is creating a powerful actional theory platform that signifies a theoretical framework focused on action and the practical applicability of the theory. Training programs must be based on a strong platform of actional theory. John Dewey, who is well known for his contributions to pragmatism and the theory of action reflected in education, considered that there must be a close connection between theory and practice.

This research aims to provide an image of inclusive education training during the last five school years and to analyze program offers in the same paradigm for the 2022–2023 school year. The data collected in this way were contextualized and analyzed taking into account the status and evolution at the country level in terms of inclusive training (i.e. how teachers are trained to be able to work with children with special educational needs (SEN)), as well as in corroboration with quantitative and qualitative data that were requested from institutions. By using a complex methodology that included various research tools and by investigating multiple categories of actors, the research proposes a systematic analysis of the policy framework, of the implementation and reporting modalities of the continuous professional training in Romania. Our approach is particularly focused on the level of teacher training in the field of inclusive education.

2. Literature Review

In the international landscape, given the critical importance of these programs, a variety of training opportunities have emerged. For example, courses that incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles help teachers design materials and instructional activities that can accommodate a wide range of learners (Meyer et al., 2014). Academic institutions collaborate with experts in the field to ensure their programs are up-to-date and evidence-based.

Inclusive continuing professional development (CPD) programs also play a key role in promoting continuous competence development among teachers. CPD events, seminars, and workshops are

regularly organized by educational associations and professional bodies. These meetings often focus on the latest research, practical strategies, and policy updates relevant to inclusive education. For example, training on strategies to effectively manage classroom diversity or using technology to improve accessibility is a joint CPD offerings (Florian, 2021). Such programs often advocate for policy change and provide toolkits and resources for educators who want to implement inclusive strategies in their classrooms (Ainscow et al., 2006).

Since 2020, in the context of the pandemic, online platforms and e-learning resources have also contributed significantly to the availability of inclusive education training. Open-access courses and webinars allow for a more flexible and widespread dissemination of knowledge. Teachers from remote regions or with insufficient resources can access high-quality training courses and join global communities of practice but this is not enough. These online forums and resources also create opportunities for peer learning and international collaboration (Hodkinson & Williams-Brown, 2023).

In Romania, the ICCS study conducted in 2022 highlights that 58% of responding teachers in research (n=2248) declared that they participated in training programs in the field of inclusive education and diversity (Schulz et al., 2022, p. 61). This concern is found in the multitude of professional development programs in an inclusive perspective in the training offers of each continuous training provider at the county, regional, or national level.

3. Methodology

The research focused on the detailed analysis of training offers and accompanying documents from all teaching staff houses in Romania. Data obtained from their official websites was used. Three samples were used to analyze the training carried out and proposed for deployment during 2017–2023. The first sample consisted of 21 CCDs, corresponding to the 21 questionnaires in which the training programs carried out are presented. Thus, 143 courses on inclusive education

and 55 proposed programs were collected and analyzed. The profile of trainers has been described only generally, the competencies of trainers derive from the specific conditions of the Regulation on the organization and functioning of the teaching staff house (ORDER No. 5554 of October 7, 2011, art. 34). For the second sample, covering the years 2022–2023, the websites of the CDCs were used to analyze training offers and institutional reports. The 41 available training offers were analyzed from the 41 websites of the CDCs, from which 117 training programs in the field of inclusive education proposed for 2022–2023 were collected for analysis.

Samples	Sources	Date	No. of courses	No. of trainers
1	41 of CCD (teachers' training centres)	21 of questionnaires	41 CCD (teachers training centres) 55 de training programs in the field of inclusive education proposed	160
2	41 offers 2022–2023 from sites	41 offers	117 programs	203

Table 1. Sample structure

Research questions

- Q.1. Is there any connection between the number of teachers in Romania and the number of training programs in the field of inclusive education (approved, accredited, or complementary) proposed and carried out through the houses of the teaching staff?*
- Q.2. Are there significant differences in access to inclusive education training between different categories of teachers (teachers, primary school teachers, pre-primary school teachers, etc.)?*
- Q.3. What are the main themes and modules addressed in the inclusive education training programs of the last 5 years?*
- Q.4. How does the content of training programs align with the current needs of teachers in the context of inclusive education and current trends in the field?*
- Q.5. What are the prospects for developing training in inclusive education in the coming years? What programs are the teachers' houses developing in this area in the next school year 2022–2023?*

Q.6. What has been the trend of access of secondary school teachers to inclusive education training programs in the last 5 school years?

Q.7. What are the main challenges encountered in organizing and implementing training programs in inclusive education within a clear strategic framework?

Q.8. What is the profile of trainers of training programs?

General hypothesis – Lifelong learning courses in inclusive education promote the values of a pedagogy based on learning which has developed communities of practice and collaborations between teachers.

Research methods

The investigative approach to continuous professional development included both quantitative research methods and qualitative research methods such as document analysis and questionnaire-based surveys. By analyzing the documents taken into account for this research, we pursued:

- Centralize accredited and approved courses organized in counties in the last five years (2017–2022) that explicitly had at least one module/theme on inclusive education. The list of courses may include courses organized both by the teaching staff house and by any other providers. For the mentioned courses, the competence sheets and modules/themes/disciplines, their division into hours, and the list of trainers' competencies were attached;
- What are the courses in the field of inclusive education in the offers of the teaching houses for the school year 2022–2023 (Name, no. of hours, content)?

4. Results and Discussions

For the 21 counties from which we received the situations, centralizing the total number of accredited and approved programs in the field of inclusive education and the total number of

participants, the following resulted:

No of the participants approved programs					No of participants approved programs	No of participants accredited programs	No approved participants & accredited
School year							
2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022			
1644	1922	1115	1004	1419	7104	7603	14707

Table 2. Training situation 21 CCDs

The centralization of the following courses takes place starting with the school year 2017–2018 until the school year 2021–2022, collecting the situation from 20 county CCDs and Bucharest municipality. There were inventoried 143 professional training courses, carried out during the mentioned period.

Their analysis followed the theme of the training course, the total number of hours of training in total and the total number of hours of training on inclusive education, the number of course participants, as well as the number of participants at each level of education (preschool, primary, secondary, high school).

The courses were classified according to five categories: *Inclusive education (49,64%), Adapted curriculum and SEN (17,99%), Learning deficiencies and difficulties (15,11%), Dropout prevention and school reintegration (10,07%), Other (7,19%)*. In the category "Other", courses such as "School-family-community Partnership", "Curriculum at school decision", "Practical Toolkit in positive classroom discipline", "International humanitarian law", "The Role of quality education in socio-economic development and Interculturality" were included.

We analyzed how the total number of participants evolved each school year to identify general trends: 2017–2018 ($n=1644$), 2018–2019 ($n=1922$), 2019–2020 ($n=1115$), 2020–2021 ($n=1004$) to 2021–2022 ($n=1419$). Variations in the number of participants are observed from one year to the next, reflecting possible changes in interest in accredited programs, as well as the impact of **Romanian International Conference for Education and Research** 13th edition, 05 June 2024, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

We analyzed the competence sheets and the proposed modules/themes/disciplines from the list of 54 training courses offered by CCD for the school year 2022-2023.

To synthesize and analyze these topics of training courses from the perspective of inclusive education, we can group and classify modules and topics into several main categories that reflect the objectives and methods of the inclusive approach in education: *Fundamentals of inclusive education, Specifics of groups with special needs, Teaching strategies and school projects, Integration and inclusion in educational context, international approaches and practices*. Using VOSviewer (2023) to analyze the topics of education training courses, we obtained a picture of the relationships and relative importance of different topics and concepts within the field. We have generated a concept map linking educational themes relevant to inclusive and intercultural education, see the figure below:



Figure 1. Thematic programs and training

Analysis *of course competency sheets*, considering the three dimensions of the Inclusion Index proposed by Booth and Ainscow (2015), allows us to identify how these *competencies of the proposed training programs* contribute to creating an inclusive educational environment.

Community strengthening: Many of the competencies listed emphasize the importance of creating an educational community that values diversity and promotes inclusion where the functions of the manager and the role of the leader are clearly defined.

School development for all: Competences involving the understanding and application of theoretical and methodological concepts specific to the management of an inclusive school point in a direction towards developing policies that facilitate equal access and participation of all students

Directing learning: Competences related to adapting learning strategies to encourage active participation and engagement of all learners reflect a commitment to inclusive learning practices.

Discussions on trainers. Among the trainers there are both classroom teachers and methodists, responsible for the development and implementation of innovative teaching methods, as well as specialists in pedagogical training, thus highlighting the complexity and multifunctionality of the roles assumed in the current educational context. In the analysis carried out, we did not have the necessary data to identify the training of trainers in teaching-learning in the field of inclusive education, nor their experience in this thematic field. It is worth emphasizing the idea that training in inclusive education has its specificity, today even a pedagogy of inclusion is developing, with its dimensions and particularities, and we ask ourselves how many of those who are trainers have gone through this type of training themselves. Correlating with studies conducted in this field, it results that adherence to the values of inclusion, positive, open attitudes, and practical practice are necessary dimensions for trainers in this field.

5. Conclusions

This analysis highlighted important aspects regarding the current status and evolution of inclusive education training programs in Romania, with a specific focus on the last five years. The results of the study reflect significant progress in offers, but also persistent challenges in the field of inclusive education.

The general assumption that lifelong learning programs in inclusive education promote the values of a learning-based pedagogy and develop communities of practice and collaborations between

teachers has **not** been fully confirmed. The analysis showed a decrease in the number of training programs that took place through teachers' homes in 2017–2022, a diversification of the topics addressed, and the participation of teachers from different levels of education, but also an increase in the number of training programs in the offers for the school year 2022–2023, but not enough elements of inclusion pedagogy and valorizing approach to diversity are yet proposed, with a focus on individualized/customized tools and working methods.

Q1. The number of approved, accredited, or complementary training programs in the field of inclusive education carried out and proposed through the houses of the teaching staff is directly proportional to the number of teachers in Romania. Therefore, the offer is consistent in the field.

Q2. In-service training needs to be adapted to meet the diverse needs of teachers at different stages of their educational careers, must be relevant and practical, combining theory with practice and focusing on developing the skills needed to meet today's educational challenges, including inclusive education and working with students with special needs, as demonstrated in other studies conducted by Carroll, Forlin și Jobling (2003), Round și Barley (2008), Mei, Li și Mei (2003). This information indicates that participation in in-service training courses is influenced by several complex factors, including both individual and contextual aspects, and that there is significant variation among teachers in terms of enthusiasm and commitment to these trainings.

The analyzed in-service training courses address a wide range of topics and modules relevant to inclusive education, as the nodes in **Figure 1** are connected by a line, suggesting that there is a link between them in the context of the analyzed data, the thickness of the lines indicates the frequency of the relationship between terms, and their position indicates the connections or association in the literature of the analyzed dataset.

Q4. We cannot verify the use of a variety of methods and active pedagogical approaches in continuing education courses. Although such active and interactive pedagogical methods and approaches are presented in the course sheets (80 of the 117 courses analyzed), we cannot verify

whether they have been put into practice throughout the courses. The importance of interactivity during training programs is highlighted in the literature (Reynaga-Peña et al., 2018).

Q5. The justification for the 117 training programs analyzed from the 2022–2023 offer presents the correlation of the programs with the needs analysis built on the needs of teachers (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001).

Q6. No training contains in its description elements relating to providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate and build communities of practice.

Q7. 30% of secondary school teachers have completed training programs in the field of inclusive education. Secondary school teachers show an increased interest in participating in continuous professional development programs from an inclusive perspective. In international studies, researchers analyze the training of secondary school teachers emphasizing the importance of their professional development, emphasizing their role in improving teaching practices, and addressing the demands of all students (Royster et al., 2014; Sears et al., 2014; Villa et al., 2005)

Q8. Following the verification of educational policy documents at the national level specific to requirements for inclusive education and legislation governing teacher training to identify specific provisions related to in-service training in the field of inclusive education, no elements were found. Ten training programs were found out of the 117 proposed for organizations in 2022–2023 that include in their justification elements leading to European inclusive education policies. Two of them are designed and will be carried out within Grant EEA partnerships and projects. The analysis of the course files allowed us to identify that the competencies stated are found in the three dimensions of the Inclusion Index proposed by Booth and Ainscow (2015).

Q9. Based on the information analyzed on trainers' profiles, most have relevant studies and certifications that allow them to effectively support training, but it is not clear whether they have initial training in inclusive education. Other studies also provide insights into the necessary qualifications and competencies trainers should possess to contribute effectively to inclusive

education (Machado și alții, 2023).

The study highlighted a positive increase in the number and diversity of training programs in inclusive education, with increased involvement of teachers from all education cycles. This suggests a growing recognition of the importance of studying the dimensions of inclusive education within the Romanian education system. Access to training appears to be generally equitable, but the study did not identify some significant differences in access to training between different categories of teachers and between urban and rural settings. This indicates the need for continuous efforts to ensure equal opportunities in access to continuing vocational training.

Despite quantitative growth, the quality and impact of training remain variables difficult to measure, with significant differences in the approach and implementation of inclusive pedagogy. There is a need for better alignment of training curricula with the needs of teachers and pupils, real/concrete needs highlighted from daily practice, as well as more rigorous follow-up evaluation and monitoring of training effectiveness.

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