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Personality characteristics of the facilitator involved in the school inclusion of children with special educational needs

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Abstract

Starting from the observation of the context of achieving school inclusion for students with special educational needs, this article presents some personality traits of the facilitator. International and national legislative frameworks and examples of addressing the issue of inclusion in other countries are presented first. Given the specificity of the work and the demands to which the facilitator is subjected, certain personality traits are necessary. Through the research presented, some of these features are highlighted: empathy, the level of hostility, and the ability to regulate negative states, but the need to clarify the framework for carrying out this occupation is also supported.

Keywords: inclusive education, special educational needs, facilitator/shadow, personality, empathy, hostility, self-regulation capacity, occupations

Introduction

In the efforts to achieve the school inclusion of students with special educational needs, the presence of the facilitator or the shadow is increasingly requested, the number of requests far exceeding the number of people who want to engage. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) introduces the concepts of adapted environment and reasonable accommodation, and in Article 24 of the Convention, reference is made to inclusive education, respecting the rights of persons with disabilities to participate, without discrimination, respecting the principle of equality of opportunities, to an inclusive educational system, at all levels, with the aim of fully developing human potential, personality development and effective social participation. Regarding teacher training, the Salamanca Declaration (1994) recommended that all curricula include theoretical and practical courses that promote positive attitudes towards CES to build capacities to design curricular adaptations and provide instruction to students with special education needs to work in collaboration with parents and specialists.

At the international level, the approaches are different: Rix, Sheehy, Fletcher-Campbell, Crisp and Harper (2013) identified, following a study carried out in 10 countries, an obvious lack of international coherence in the development of support services for students with disabilities. Stangvik (2014) noted several overlapping responsibilities or ambiguities in the provision of New Zealand support services for students with disabilities. In Italy, making the necessary educational adaptations is the responsibility of the general teacher, the support teacher and the school staff, the support teachers follow specific or additional courses. Continuous training is mandatory, according to Law 128/2013, all teachers, staff and directors receive training to work with students with SEN. In Germany, pupils with special educational needs attend general schools only if their

educational needs can be guaranteed, special education teachers and itinerant teachers provide support and work in collaboration with general education teachers (Powell, 2006). Finland uses a three-step support model in its major attempt at inclusive education: in the first phase, support is provided by the classroom teacher. If the student fails to meet the requirements, a personalized intervention plan is applied, and if this plan has also not brought improvement, a special education teacher will intervene and co-teaching may also be used. If even the support provided has not yielded results, special support is offered which can be given in the classroom or in a room within the school, following the personalized intervention plan (Takala & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). In Scotland, for teachers and teacher educators inclusion has become a matter of support, provision and pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). As schools' approaches began to focus on what pupils could (rather than what they could not) do in class, local authorities began to employ a range of paraprofessionals such as learning support assistants, behavior support assistants and classroom assistants to support teachers and students. Usually, during class hours, co-teaching is chosen. Co-teaching is an effective way to deal with the diversity of students, learning, and problems in classrooms (Kane, Head, & Cogan, 2004). Co-teaching is used in many ways, in many countries: Sweden, Denmark, etc. In Finland, for example, most often a general education teacher and a special education teacher work in the classroom, sometimes the configuration may include two general education teachers and a special education teacher, depending on the needs of students with special educational needs (Saloviita & Takala, 2010).

In Romanian legislation, references to equal rights of access to education, without any form of discrimination, appear in Law 1/2011, art 2, but also in Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights and Law 448/2006 on the protection and promotion the rights of people with disabilities. For the first time, the facilitator is provided for in the Joint Order of the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health no. 1985/2016. According to the Order, the facilitator can be one of the parents, the personal assistant, or a person chosen by the parents, a recommended specialist. The Minister's Order specifies the facilitator's duties (art. 64, p. 8): Supervision and care of the child both during class hours and during breaks or during extracurricular activities, facilitating the relationship between the child and colleagues, both during class hours and during breaks, facilitating the relationship between the child and the teaching staff during class hours, supporting the performance of the exercises taught during class hours, collaborating with the teaching staff in the classroom with the itinerant and support teacher but also with other teaching staff or professionals in the school, facilitating the relationship with colleagues and teachers during extracurricular activities, but also collaborating with the child's parents or legal representatives. Also in Order 1985/2016, art. 64, it is stipulated that "a facilitator can take care of several children with disabilities or SEN in the same class", that parents can appoint the facilitator coming from non-governmental organizations, universities, other institutions, with which the school unit concludes agreements in this regard". The facilitator is part of a team, his activity being in relation with the child's coordinator and therapists, along with the teaching staff and his parents. It is preferable that the facilitator is well versed in: applied behavior analysis when accompanying children with autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or conduct disorders; sign language or Braille, if the accompanied child has sensory deficiencies; the fundamental principles of psychotherapy as most children with special educational needs face emotional problems; child psychology and general psychology. Therefore, the facilitator must possess multiple specialist knowledge, skills and competencies, regardless of the type of impairment they are working with. In addition, he is a relatively new actor in a

framework that supports inclusive education, which represents a challenge in terms of changing the attitude, mentality and practice of exclusion and segregation, with the aim of learning to accept physical, mental, social, cultural and economic. In inclusive schools, the following attitudes and behaviors are combated: labeling, prejudices, stereotypes, discrimination, marginalization and segregation, these schools having the role of ensuring to the greatest extent the satisfaction of the needs, aspirations and capitalization of the potential of all children. The facilitator represents a factor of major importance in the integration process of a child with special educational requirements, being primarily the person the child trusts and who has the ability to create a bridge between the child and the teaching staff and between the child and the collective. The main goal of the facilitator is the independence of the child, and for this to happen the facilitator intervenes in various situations. He takes the skills taught in the therapy room and brings them into the classroom where the child is, where he really needs them: in society.

The profession of facilitator appears in the Classification of Occupations in Romania as "Community development facilitator - code 341204", it is part of Major Group 3 - Technicians and other specialists in the technical field, Major Subgroup 34 - Other specialists in the legal, social and cultural field, the group basic 3412 - Specialists in social assistance and assimilated. It states that these professionals administer and implement social welfare programs and community services and assist clients in solving personal and social problems. From studying the description of the general activities, the work context, the required skills, we do not understand that it is about that facilitator mentioned in the Order 1985/2016. Therefore, the occupation of educational facilitator is not included in the Classification of occupations in Romania and its remuneration is offered by the parents of the child with special educational requirements, aspects that generate the absence of stability for both parties involved, the regulation of minimum quality standards in terms of the services offered or the creation of databases both in terms of the number of people active in the field and the psychological profile of these people.

"Personality is the more or less durable organization of a person's character, temperament, intelligence, and physique, this organization determining his unique adaptation to the environment." (Eysenck, 1953, cited in Zlate, 2008). The personality dimensions include: Temperament, as a dynamic-energetic side; Aptitude, as an instrumental side; Character as a relational-value side and self-regulation; Intelligence as a resolute-productive side; Creativity, as a transformative-constructive side.

A 2016 study by Korn, MA, Woodard, CR, & Tucker, C. A., investigating personality traits of staff working with people with special needs found that there were 5 traits with the highest scores: kindness, honesty, humor, fairness and love. Subsequent interviews illustrated how these traits are used in working with SEN students and their families. Responses indicated that they use these positive traits to motivate others, promote other positive traits, maximize student progress, avoid negative outcomes, promote adjustment, build strong relationships, and meet individual student needs. This study is important in providing insight into how character strengths are used by staff working in schools for students with SEN. Factors such as the passage of time, teacher burnout, and increasing/decreasing budget increases and community support may be related to the expression of such character traits.

Method

30 adult subjects were identified, whose occupation is currently a facilitator for children with SEN, aged between 20 and 41 years, experience in the field between 8 months and 9 years, 13% men, 87% women.

The identification of personality characteristics and the analysis of the collected data were aimed at, in relation to the role of the facilitator in the inclusion of children with SEN.

It started from the hypotheses: 1. Facilitators show a high level of empathy; 2. Facilitators have low hostility behaviors/reactions/attitudes; 3. Facilitators have effective regulatory capacities for stressful situations and negative moods.

Description of investigation tools: 1. Questionnaire measuring emotional empathy - created by Albert Mehrabian and Norman Epstein. The purpose of the questionnaire is to determine the level of empathic tendencies and the capacity for empathy as a personality trait. 2. Hostility Questionnaire "O" - Created by Arnold H. Buss and Ann Durkee. Following the dichotomous A-true/F-false responses to the 66 statement-items, a total score of general hostility (ST) is calculated by summing the responses that agree with those in the key. Apart from this total score, the values of the seven subscales of general hostility can also be calculated and broken down: negativism (NE), resentment (RE), indirect hostility (OI), physical violence (AT), suspicion (SU), irritability (IR) and verbal hostility (OV). 3. The scale of general expectations regarding the regulation of negative mood - created in 1990 by Cantanzaro and Mearns, includes 30 items. High scores indicate people who adapt quickly and can easily overcome difficult situations and moments. The difference between high scorers and low scorers appears to be a strong belief in influencing their own mood, with low scorers feeling helpless in situations laden with negative emotions.

Findings and discussion

In life but also at work, the ability to be empathetic strengthens relationships, influences the atmosphere and environment, increases confidence in oneself as well as in others and supports efficiency. If being empathetic in an environment populated by adults could bring so many benefits, imagine in the case of a child what our footprint would be. When we talk about a child we have the ability to lay the foundations in terms of emotional intelligence, so when we adopt the most empathetic behaviors we reinforce the same attitudes and behaviors to the child.

Educators are or should be people with a high level of empathy, who actively listen to the child, analyze the data before drawing conclusions, pay attention to the child's micro-gestures and objectively analyze his behavior, ask for details and help the child find a single solution to various problems. In the research carried out by us, the results showed us that 18 respondents are good empathes, 6 are highly empathic, 2 are very highly empathic and only 4 of them are weakly empathic. More precisely, as we can see in the graph below, 60% of the facilitators who completed the questionnaire are good empathes, 20% are highly empathetic, 13% are weakly empathetic and 7% are very highly empathetic.

The questionnaire measuring emotional empathy was used to verify the first hypothesis formulated in our research: "We assume that facilitators of children with CES show a high level of empathy." The results obtained indicated that 60% of the facilitators who participated in our research have a good level of empathy, 20% are highly empathetic and 7% are very highly empathetic, thus validating our first hypothesis.

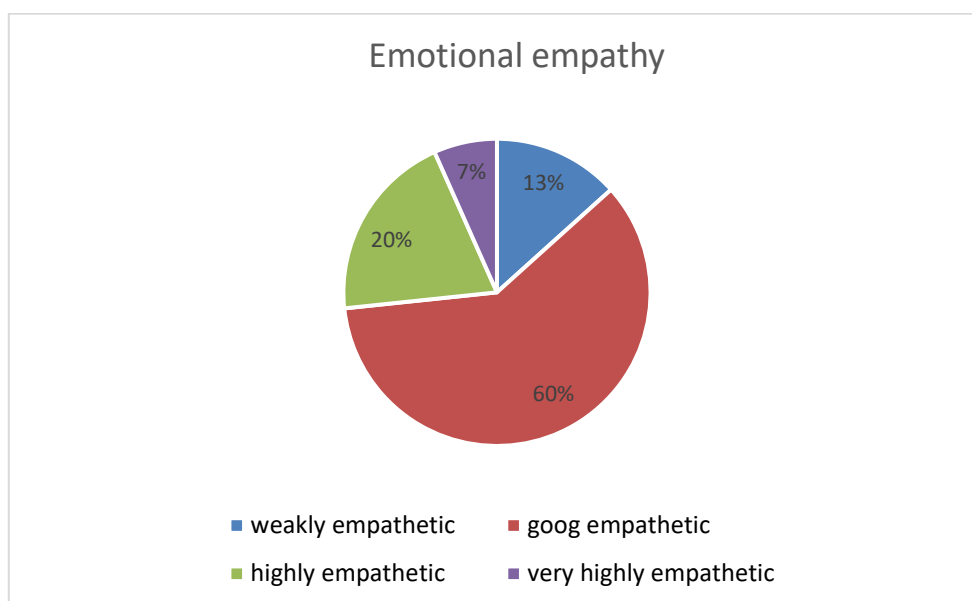


Figure 1. Results obtained on the Emotional Empathy Measurement Questionnaire

All people, at least once in their lives, have reacted hostilely towards someone or in a certain situation, but nevertheless not all people frequently display hostile behaviors. When we imagine a teacher/therapist or psychologist we think of people with a high level of acceptance and empathy who forgive easily and end up hating someone very hard. People generally expect people who work with children or people in distress to have a low level of general hostility.

In the research carried out by us, the results showed us that 25 respondents have a normal general hostility level, 3 have a low general hostility level and 2 of them have an increased general hostility level. So, in our research out of a total of 30 subjects (100%): 83% have a normal level of general hostility, 10% have a low level of general hostility and 7% have a high level of hostility.

To verify the second hypothesis formulated by us: "We assume that people active in the field of special education have low hostility behaviors/attitudes/reactions" we used the "Hostility Questionnaire O" where 83% of our respondents have a level of normal hostility and 10% of them have a low level of hostility. Although 83% of the respondents cannot be characterized as hostile people, the scores obtained by them place them at a normal level and for our hypothesis to be valid they should have recorded a low level.

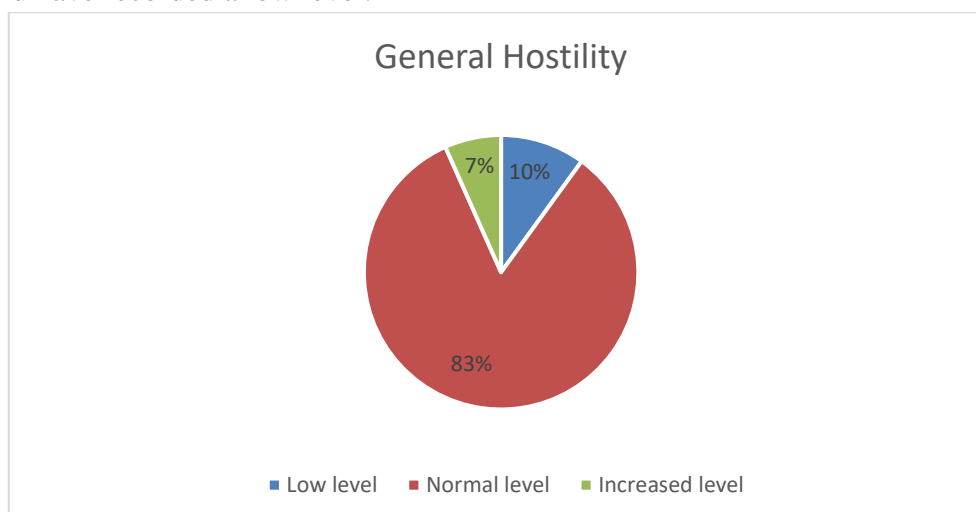


Figure 2. Results obtained on the "O" hostility questionnaire

The world we live in is changing rapidly, interpersonal relationships are also affected by these changes, and the dynamics of an individual's life throughout life are changing intensely. When we work with typical children, we need a high capacity to regulate our own emotions because the little ones go through different stages in their growth, but when we relate to children with special educational needs they go through even more difficult stages both for them and for the people who interact with them. In general, children with SEN can show certain sensitivities and everyday situations can generate more stress for them than typical children, something that can influence their behavior generating situations that are more difficult to control. The specialist who works with children must often show self-control, be able to manage situations objectively and accompany the child in difficulty in managing different emotions. This can be overwhelming for many people and handling situations incorrectly leads to burnout. In their daily work therapists and facilitators must learn to develop mechanisms that are optimal for them to help them regulate all their emotions - both those in their personal lives and those that arise in the work they do.

In our research where 30 subjects participated, 23 of them (77%) have a high level in regulating their negative mood, 6 (20%) have an average level in regulating their negative mood and 1 (3%) respondent has a low level in negative mood regulation.

In order to verify our last hypothesis formulated in our research: "We assume that the companions of children with SEN have effective regulation capacities for stressful situations and negative moods" we used the "General Expectations Scale for Negative Mood Regulation" where 77% of the facilitators who completed the scale scored that indicated they were high in regulating their negative mood, 20% had an average level and only 3% had a low level in managing their negative mood. So, our third hypothesis was validated.

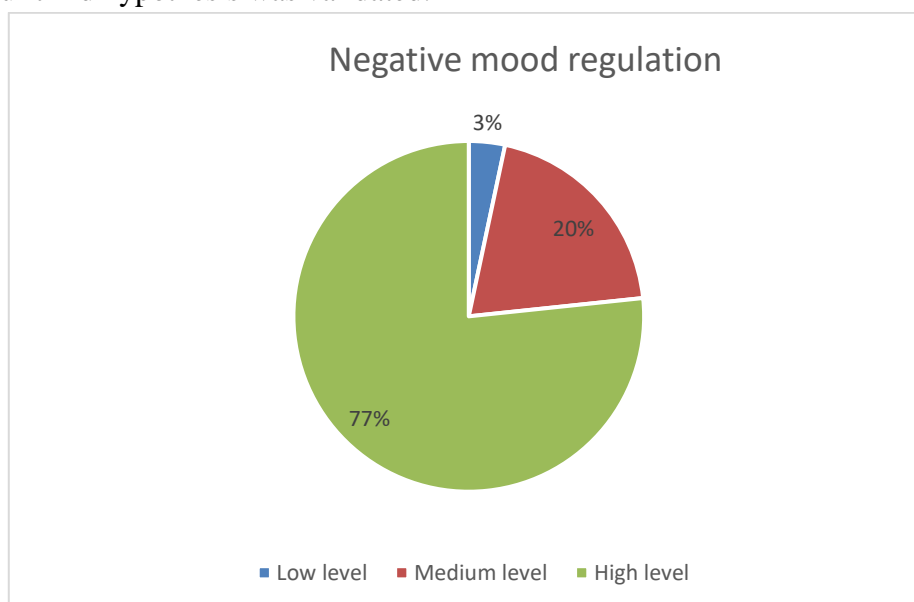


Figure 3. Results obtained on the scale of general expectations regarding the regulation of negative mood

Correlations: To validate the previously formulated data and hypotheses, we analyzed the scores obtained in the SPSS statistical program through the coefficient of correlations between the results obtained with the investigation tools. Positive correlation results were recorded between the following variables:

- The correlation between "level of empathy" and "regulation of negative mood" was positive, but very weak;

Table 1. Correlation between Empathy Level and Negative Mood Regulation

		Correlations	
		Empathy Level	Negative Mood Regulation
Level	Pearson Correlation	1	.139
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.463
	N	30	30
Negative Mood Regulation	Pearson Correlation .139	1	Sig
	. (2-tailed)	.463	
	N	30	30

The result of the correlation between the two variables - the level of empathy and the regulation of negative mood is +139 indicating a very weak positive correlation, i.e. there is a concordance between the two tested variables and even if our result was a low one we can say that in the research carried out by us there is little connection between the facilitator's empathy and how he manages to regulate his negative mood.

- The correlation between the "age" of the respondent and the "level of hostility" had the best result, being a very strong correlation.

Table 2. Correlation between Respondent's Age and Hostility Level

		Correlations	
		Age of Respondent	Level of Hostility
Respondent Age	Pearson Correlation	1	.097
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.609
	N	30	30
Level of hostility	Pearson Correlation	.097	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.609	
	N	30	30

The result of the correlation between the variables "Age of the respondent" and "Level of hostility" is +0.97 indicating a very strong positive correlation which means that the level of hostility and the age of the subject are interconnected so when we analyze the result of a person in terms of his level of hostility we can imply and its age in our analysis.

- Another correlation with a weak to moderate result was that between "gender of the respondent" and "level of empathy";

Table 3 - Correlation between Respondent's Gender and Empathy Level

		Correlations	
		Gender of respondent	Level of empathy
Respondent gender	Pearson Correlation	1	.367*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.046
	N	30	30
Level of empathy	Pearson Correlation	.367*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.046	
	N	30	30

The result of the correlation between the variables "Gender of the respondent" and "Level of empathy" had the result of +.367 being a weak positive correlation, almost moderate indicating that there are still differences in our research regarding the level of empathy according to the gender of the respondent, more precisely empathy occurs to different extents in women and men. Two more positive but weak correlations were also recorded between the variables "experience in the field and the level of hostility" and between "experience in the field and the level of empathy". In conclusion, the correlations that had significant results for our research showed us that the level of empathy has different results depending on the gender of the respondent, but also that empathy and negative mood regulation could influence each other.

Conclusion

Through this paper we try to offer a perspective on the facilitator of children with special educational requirements, both from the point of view of information and theoretical topics, as well as through the results obtained in the research. The facilitator of the child with special educational requirements fulfills several roles in the child's life and can have a strong impact on social and school integration but also on the daily life of the children they interact with.

Our research included 30 facilitators who completed the three survey instruments we used to test our three hypotheses.

Following the interpretation of the collected results, two hypotheses out of the three initially formulated were validated. Regarding the characteristics of the facilitator, we said that "empathic listening" is fundamental in the relationship between the facilitator and the child as they can

develop through empathy a relationship based on trust, understanding and emotional support that we already know that all children need. Most of our respondents proved to be "good and highly empathic" thus validating the first hypothesis issued in this paper: "We assume that facilitators of children with CES show a high level of empathy".

Regarding our second hypothesis: "We assume that people working in the field of special education have low hostility behaviors/attitudes/reactions" the results obtained did not demonstrate that the facilitators who filled out our form have a low level of hostility (only 10 % had low scores) thus invalidating our hypothesis. However, most respondents (83%) have a normal level of hostility, so we cannot describe them as hostile people.

Our third and last hypothesis: "We assume that the companions of children with CES have effective regulation capacities for stressful situations and negative moods" proved to be a valid one as 77% of the respondents have a high level of a- and regulate negative states/moods, 20% have an average level in regulating their negative mood and only one respondent (3%) has difficulties in regulating negative mood.

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