

Being, Belonging, Becoming – a quality of life frame for building resilient inclusive schools for peri- and postpandemic period

Patrascoiu Loredana Adriana, PhD.

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences

Abstract

This article describes the concept of quality of life in the equation of quality of inclusive education starting from the Being-Belonging - Becoming approach, a model of quality of life validated by the University of Toronto. The aim of the study is to identify solutions for inclusive schools as a social actor (through educational and social practices) that has to be involved in improving the quality of life of beneficiaries for the peri- and post pandemic period. A semi structured interview (Voice of Beneficiaries) is the main method for a radiography of the quality of education addressed to children with special needs from urban and rural geographical areas during the pandemic period, by questioning 34 experts belonging to several interest groups (16 teachers with expertise, 5 school principals, 8 parents with expertise in the field and 5 representatives of NGOs) about their perception regarding socio-emotional development and well-being of stakeholders and how learning environments/learning and assessment strategies/teacher-student interactions have changed; their improvement proposals about. This process is not designed to be statistically significant, but rather to get ideas that can be important for further analysis. The identified solutions allow us to elaborate of a matrix of educational services listed in the Being-Belonging - Becoming pattern.

Keywords: quality of life, special needs, inclusive school

Introduction

The quality of life in education

Prepandemic, some states as Australia and Canada have understood that through the concept of quality of life, a holistic concept, educational goals can be measured. Quality of Life Research Department (University of Toronto) has set out since 1997 to identify the elements that contribute to the well-being of people with special long-term needs in order to build a matrix on their quality of life.

Optimizing the quality of life is a desideratum of many policies for people with special needs. In general, special attention was paid over the time to the measurement of the quality of life of adults. 'Quality of life' is a multidimensional construct, holistic, which can be seen both as a dynamic process (which can change over time) and as an evaluable result at any time in the development process. The studies identified three fundamental elements of quality of life: (a) the child, (b) the family or its growing environment, and (c) the extended environment (neighborhood, community, school, service providers, and other institutions, etc.). These three elements are in constant interaction and the relationship between them can change over time. So, the model born was Being-Belonging- Becoming.

The child develops his own needs, has personal resources, attitudes, and expectations -as a ,being'. To 'be' has strong connections with the theme of 'Belonging'. Children must first feel safe to interact with others and with their environment– to belong, because relationships define identities. The notion of 'being' is defined by the themes of social-emotional, relational, environmental and staffing (Robinson, C., 2017). Parents, or family, also generally have their own resources, but develop hopes and expectations for the child, having its own system of responsibilities. ,Becoming' looks at the opportunities offered to child development. The theme of becoming was found to connect with staff and educational services being focused on quality as constructed by the educators and the programs they implement. Belonging and being change children's identities, knowledge, understandings, capacities, skills, and relationships during childhood. When educators consider the individual needs of children and provide flexible opportunities for learning and development, they are allowing children to 'become'.

Consider this matrix – Being – Belonging- Becoming - as defining for the construction of one's own identity in the context of the family and the community, this approach on quality of life become a foundation for developing the conceptual framework for early educational services as Australia does.

Five principles:

- Relationships that offer security, respect and reciprocity;
- Partnership with the family;
- High expectations and fairness;
- Respect for diversity;
- Lifelong learning and reflective practices

regulates a set of good pedagogical practices characterized by: adopting holistic approaches in which the child is seen as a unit of body, mind and spirit; increasing receptivity and intentional teaching, game learning; valorization of learning environments; capitalizing on cultural diversity; ensuring continuity in learning; evaluation and learning monitoring.

Thus the learning outcomes will be focused on:

- the feeling of identity by the fact that the students feel safe, self-assured and supported to develop autonomy, self-identity and confidence, learns to interact with others with care, empathy and respect;
- connection and involvement in one's own reality by developing the feeling of belonging to groups and communities and understanding mutual rights, but also
- responsibilities for the community, by accepting diversity, promoting equity and respect for the social and natural environment;
- feeling of well-being by taking responsibility for social and emotional well-being, for their own health and physical well-being;
- transforming students into confident and involved students by developing availability for learning, curiosity, cooperation, trust, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, perseverance, imagination and critical thinking, through experimentation, research and investigation, the transfer of what is learned from one context to another;
- effective communication through verbal and non-verbal interaction, through the use of information and communication technologies to access information through expression of their ideas and thinking.

In 2018 Klibthong, S., & Agbenyega, J. S. experimentally analyzed in a community of practice of support teachers the effectiveness and importance of extending this model to inclusive education.

The authors of this proposed survey developed an inductive approach to identify the vision of mainstream school stakeholders about good practices with impact on the quality of life of students, especially of those with special educational needs.

Method

Previous research developed by the author in 10 Romanian schools, special and inclusive, during doctoral research (between 2013 and 2015) demonstrated the defocusing of the school from the support needs of the beneficiary and its orientation towards collateral pedagogical issues. We considered as a cause root of this phenomenon the lack of an adequate methodology for diagnosing the internal and external environment, as well as the support needs of the beneficiaries, the formal involvement of parents and other stakeholders in the operational plan of school institutional development, the school community being requested only in social causes from time to time.

We also highlighted a synergistic path of placing the quality of education exclusively in the sphere of the educational-therapeutic act, monitoring the progress of students from the perspective of the curriculum, teacher training, managerial practices, concern for the socio-professional insertion of children, material endowment, budgetary constraints, and fundraising.

The same author observed that the impact of the pandemic on the school, special or inclusive, highlighted the importance of the quality of life of the beneficiaries (directly or indirectly) finally has. The concern was noticed at the level of the primary stakeholders of the school - teachers, parents, principals, but we could not identify it in any of the policies developed during this period by the Romanian authorities.

Thus, the objective of this research based on our survey through a semi-structured interview became:

- to identify solutions for inclusive schools as a social actor (through educational and social practices) that has to be involved in improving the quality of life of beneficiaries for the peri- and post pandemic period.

We applied semi structured interview (Voice of Beneficiaries) as the main method for a radiography of the quality of education addressed to children with special needs from the urban and rural geographical areas during pandemic period, by questioning 34 experts belonging to several interest groups (16 teachers with expertise, 5 school principals, 8 parents with expertise in the field and 5 representatives of NGOs) about:

- their perception regarding socio-emotional development and well-being of stakeholders and how learning environments/learning and assessment strategies/teacher-student interactions have changed

- their improvement proposals about.

This process is not designed to be statistically significant, but rather to get ideas that can be important for further analysis.

Results

Each interviewee listed a minimum of 5 problems of inclusive education during the pandemic, respectively solutions, which they ranked in order of importance. Thus, the most important problem / solution ranked 1 received 5 points, and progressively lower rankings reflected an incremental decrease in importance by 1 point. This exploratory stage has the role of identifying the main problems of the mainstream school, but also of anchoring the expert respondent in the challenges that the pandemic generated. Subsequently, the experts identify sets of at least 3

solutions that they propose to improve the quality of life of students through the school in terms of physical, emotional and socio-economic well-being.

We illustrate below the list of identified problems and the descriptive statistics related to each identified problem. In the analysis and interpretation of research results are used techniques such as: content analysis, frequency distribution and quasi-qualitative processing techniques for hierarchical data.

P1 - The periods of school online generated discontinuity in the teaching-learning process because the educational system was not adequately prepared for the online education of children with special educational needs, and difficult communication was generated by the online school.

P2 - Disruption of normal family relationships - overloading with tasks (including educational) of parents, insufficient preparation of parents to manage this crisis, the need for home educational assistance

P3 - A significant decrease in the quality of teaching for children with SEN - children with SEN benefited only from the physical presence during online schooling, teachers were not trained on digital technologies for children with SEN, some teachers do not know / will not work with students with SEN

P4 - Regression of the development of children with SEN, decreased ability to understand contexts, problems with attention and communication (difficulties in verbally expressing certain states, emotions, etc.), loss of motivation for learning

P5 - Accentuation of inappropriate behaviors, increasing fear of socialization, decreased ability to accommodate and adapt to new situations

P6 - Lack of teaching materials and digital tools adapted for children with SEN, few or difficult software to use by beneficiaries with mental difficulties, especially

P7 - Physical and emotional exhaustion due to prolonged exposure to screens, overwork, fatigue, frequent eye pain, headache

P8 - Contact with others, poor socialization during the pandemic

P9 - Alienation, depression, behavioral disorders among children, anxiety

P10 - Lack of a Resource Center to provide support to teachers, the need for communities of practice

P11- Some students did not benefit from the necessary technology, there was no adapted technology and, associated, the lack of digital skills

P12 - Lack of an overview of the authorities on how to manage the educational crisis generated by the pandemic

P13 - Addiction to electronic communication devices (but not for school duties), attention difficulties generated by the exaggerated use of electronic devices

P14 - Lack of desirable social models offered in face-to-face interaction, emotional relationship as the foundation of the therapeutic approach

P 15 - Lack of natural inter-institutional cooperation and normal social involvement and solidarity; loss of civic sense

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15
Mean	3,57	2	4	4,12	3	2,8	2,2	4,5	3	3	3	1,8	2,6	3	3
Frequency	14	10	10	16	8	12	8	12	10	4	6	10	6	6	6
Median	3	2	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	2	3	3	3

We notice the place occupied by the problems related to the quality of life of the beneficiaries, with 18 specialists being strongly concerned about these aspects (about 53%). Although aspects related to the quality of the educational act are most frequently evoked (P1 has the highest frequency), still P8 has the highest importance because the average and median show the importance that respondents have assigned to depriving students with SEN of social contacts - other issues identified nuances this aspect in the form P5, P9, P14 illustrating the effects of this problem on the quality of life (P5, P9), but also on the quality of the educational act (P14). A diagnostic picture of the quality of educational services shows that from the perspective of the interviewed stakeholders, online education is not accessible and is difficult for students with SEN; students with intellectual disabilities were excluded from the education system; digital infrastructure in schools is underdeveloped (limited resources); there were no support services for students with SEN from specialized staff; the curriculum was not adapted for online teaching. There is also a need for a vision that brings clarity in both policies and practices, but also the need for support for specialists through networking, resource centers, good practices.

It is also important to note that in rural areas the stakeholders highlighted the following aspects:

- The discrepancy between schools having a digital infrastructure, which adapted more easily to the new context and schools that were taken by surprise by the changes, from all points of view.
- Most of the children from rural areas don't have access to the internet and specific devices – their families don't own devices for each and every child, don't have a room for each child, and as such, students couldn't successfully attend the educational activities.
- In this online learning context, the SEN students' socio-emotional development suffered more than the 'typical' students.
- Students' preparation was deficitary, when they lacked the additional support, during this pandemic period.

Discussions

Many of the results obtained through special education such as 'equal opportunities', 'involvement', 'independent living', 'autonomy' correlate with the concept of 'quality of life of children with special needs, but these aspects are not measurable by tests and have difficulty of standardization. We believe that it is necessary to include the concept of quality of life in the equation of quality of special education in Romania even more now, in this peri pandemic period, in which the inclusion of students with special needs was devastatingly affected.

Serious concerns are about rising levels of child poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon will have consequences for the physical and mental health and well-being of children and young people. Romania ranks 2nd in the EU in terms of the risk of poverty / social exclusion. Children are even worse at risk than adults, with poverty being about 4% higher in children (35.8%) than in the general population (31.2%). This correlates with the reduced ability of the family to generate income, with the level of parental education, as well as with the family structure (the higher the number of children, the lower the chances that parents have steady jobs).

In hierarchical order, the most relevant problems identified by stakeholders experts were clustered, we can define major areas of intervention, and three have a connection with quality of life in mainstream schools:

- access to technology and digital skills;
- the school's sensitivity to social issues and the student's educational, social and emotional vulnerability;

- developing the school as a resource center in order to alleviate the students' educational, social and emotional vulnerability
- student wellbeing considered holistically: their quality of life in its physical, material, emotional and social

The identified solutions allow the elaboration of a matrix of educational services listed in the Being-Belonging - Becoming pattern. Building a resilient educational system means better communication and collaboration between all the social actors involved, a beneficiary-centered reflective dialogue beyond any formalism.

BEING

- Comprehensive evaluation according to the bio-psycho-social model proposed by the International Classification of Functioning, a model that brings to the attention of specialists the importance of autonomy and social participation as an expression of the conjugation of the health condition, environmental and personal factors.
- Facilitating access to support services even without certification of special educational needs, as many states demonstrated even in the pre-pandemic period this certificate brings stigma and discrimination.
- Elaboration of a feasible service plan focused on case management and the intervention of the multidisciplinary team in those areas of development that require intervention, even when intervention is needed in the motivational-affective sphere (as the respondents of this study ask) with an appropriate allocation of the number of hours necessary for therapy. Many other European countries have included in the sphere of special educational needs the emotional difficulties that students may have when they go through difficult periods (as the pandemic period is).
- Recording the progress in the dynamic assessment approach, starting with the premise of cognitive and behavior modifiability, concentrating educational and therapeutic approaches on the skills necessary for independent, autonomous life and socio-professional integration
- Resource centers, networks of specialists and communities of practice to support good practices and the exchange of experience between experts.

BELONGING

- School as an inclusive environment - security, safety, accessibility, attractiveness.
- The school provides an environment necessary for the development of multiple relationships, social learning, and conflict resolution. Even in virtual space the school must not omit this important function, looking for solutions for socialization, valuing facilities that the online environment can offer.
- The family as an educational partner. Family counseling is becoming more and more imperative a service that the family implicitly and explicitly requests from the school. Many schools have volunteered during this period in counseling parents towards reducing / managing their fear or ignorance related to the consequences of the pandemic, and how to manage their related fears, in order not to transmit their anxieties to their children.
- The school as a facilitator of support networks both in the school environment and in communities, invested with more and more social functions related to the development of the beneficiary children.
- Community - inclusion, diversity, and social participation

Inclusion means correlating 3 aspects - improving school participation and learning, eliminating all forms of exclusion in order to value everyone equally and putting these values into action at the level of education and society. This last aspect activates the other two approaches. Values of

inclusion such as equality in rights, participation, respect for diversity, trust, sustainability, compassion, honesty, and courage must be found in the community and in learning. The community is the vast space of belonging, it is the real space of confrontation with life. Therefore, educational outcomes must have a direct impact on how the child copes with community demands.

BECOMING

- Reveals the transformational aspects that education can have on the child's development objectified in abilities and skills of independent living, the increase of social participation, and, implicitly, of the quality of life. The solution adopted by special education to achieve these goals is personalized learning. More and more studies highlight the effects of positive aspects of personalized learning, so there are proposals for its application for all children.
- Early intervention is perceived as an important condition in recovery. Often started in the first months of life, brings major benefits for the further development of the child. It is also addressed to families as they play a major role in compensation, represented, by in fact, educational partners. That is why an early intervention is performed both at home and in specialized spaces. Unfortunately, the Romanian public system does not have early intervention for the educational system.
- Starting from the principle of modifiability through learning (principle of continuous development), we consider that the most effective learning experiences can be developed in the child's environment.
- The construct of Universal Design for Learning seems to be a solution for children in special schools, but also for those in inclusive schools. Universal design for learning is the appropriate framework for the reduction of barriers to learning since the adaptation made by the teacher is produced for all students, not only for those with disabilities; enabling each individual to acquire knowledge, skills and enthusiasm for learning.
- Modern educational technology and, implicitly, assistive technology. Often accessibility is understood only from the narrow perspective of physical access at school. As the previous study reveals, assistive technology is needed to ensure accessibility of education as it involves equipment that can improve the functional capacity of the person with special needs. Unfortunately, it is a barrier that the education system faces in an insufficiently conscious way as assistive technology and its benefits are almost unknown to many parents and teachers. Significant funds were spent during the pandemic to give children with special needs unnecessary technology, while assistive technology still seems completely unknown to our educational system. Another form of accessibility is the accessibility of the curriculum.
- Positive approach. When the positive approach becomes both political and practice in the school, as studies show us, it generates participation, involvement, and school success, and a balanced school ethos is developed.

Conclusion

Specialists from developed countries, with healthy policies and important results on social and educational inclusion highlight the effects of the pandemic on education. Beyond 'digital poverty', 'digital exclusion', disruption, reconfiguration, and rethinking, there is more and more talk in the literature about anxiety (of pupils / students, parents / care staff, teachers), disconnection, and social distancing. These specialists also talk about a 'New Normal' as another way to view the outcomes of the lockdowns. An important aspect of the 'new normal' is the 'altered concept of normality'. They include in this concept trans curricular aspects as new knowledge that can emerge

through engagement in activities or with materials and contexts during which we can assimilate the nuanced experiences and perspectives of others in a new way. As a result, a new perspective on themselves as learners. (Some will have enjoyed working alone, whilst others might have benefited from engagement with siblings and parents.)

The conclusions lead us to include the concept of quality of life in the equation of quality of inclusive education in Romania. Starting from the Being-Belonging - Becoming approach, a model of quality of life validated by University of Toronto researchers, we propose a conceptual framework of quality of life as a multidimensional, holistic construct in the dynamic of educational and therapeutic process. The quality of education requires the assumption of the complex and debatable nature of cultural, economic, political, and even historical implications that (co) exercises on school reality especially because according to national legislation any school in Romania is implicitly an inclusive school.

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