

PERCEPTIONS OF FUTURE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS TOWARDS THEIR UPCOMING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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Abstract: The special education teacher profession is in a continuous development and self-defining in Romania. The shift of the educational approach of students with special education needs (SEN) from the last 20 years from segregation to integration and inclusion has determined a change in special education teachers' roles and responsibilities. The main role remains the same, to educate the SEN students, but the responsibilities diversified and became more complex. They include the processes of assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring, teachers' and parents' counseling and facilitating the social inclusion. All the above are implemented on diverse disabilities, difficulties and special conditions. The correct perception of these responsibilities by the beneficiaries (students, parents, teachers, decisional factors) is extremely important. The special education teachers have the duty to truly understand their responsibilities and to make them known to the beneficiaries. This research aims to analyze the future special education teachers' perceptions on their upcoming responsibilities and the perceived barriers in the profession.

Keywords: special education teacher, roles and responsibilities, students' perceptions

1. Introduction

Special education teacher is a very complex profession because it requires an integrated approach, psychological and pedagogical, of the children with special educational needs (SEN). A special education teacher can work in a variety of educational settings (special education schools, inclusive schools, in home schooling or specialized centers), interact with multiple

specialists (doctors, teachers, psychologists, therapists, social workers), with parents and can work with students within all the disabilities spectrum. Mastropieri (2001) affirms that special education teachers must demonstrate “competence at teaching everything.” This profession is in a continuous development, related to the changes happened in the last 25 years in the Romanian educational system. Before 1990 SEN students were educated in a segregated manner, in special schools or hospitalized in special educational centers. The roles of the special educators were limited to this context and consisted of teaching and implementation of rehabilitation therapies. After the 90thies, the responsibilities of special education teachers diversified and became more complex, (as shown in Table 1):

Table 1: Changes and effects in responsibilities of special education teachers

Causes	Effects on special education teacher responsibilities
The shift from the medical to the social model of disability	Attitudinal change towards diversity and social equity – must demonstrate competence in disability culture
The adoption of the case management model	Must participate in case management, and have management abilities, must plan, implement and monitor the activities conducted with SEN students
The inclusion of SEN students	Must counsel the primary and secondary teachers, perform the co-teaching, plan, implement and monitor the activities in the inclusive setting, must design an accessible educational setting
The increasing of parents` involvement in therapy	Must counsel the parents and involve them in the therapeutic process
The advancement in community implication	Must act as a liaison with the community and make known the disability issue

“Special education services (...) have moved from predominantly separate classes in the early years of special education to the more inclusive programming options selected for a majority of

students today. Regardless of which service delivery model is deemed most appropriate or favored, the need for specialized skill sets for special educators has remained. Baker and Zigmond (1995) suggested that special educator preparation programs should focus on both the skills needed for inclusive programming as well as “diagnostic and remedial strategies, monitoring progress, and adjusting instruction for individuals and small groups” (p. 178).” (Palenchar, 2012, p. 63-64)

The responsibilities of special education teachers are stipulated in the National Educational Law nr.1 / 2011 and in the Minister Order nr. 5555/2011, and include:

- To assess the children from the psycho-pedagogical perspective, aiming to determine the developmental levels, the learning individualized characteristics, the adaptive and socio-emotional particularities and their special educational needs.
- To plan the educational and therapeutic intervention, designing the intervention frame, setting goals, establishing specific therapies,
- To communicate with the other members of the case management team, share information about the assessment results, the goals set, the student` progress.
- To implement the intervention in the specific educational or therapeutic domain in which he works.
- To monitor the student progress.
- To coordinate the case management team meetings and actions.
- To counsel the parents and the student teachers.

Special education teachers must have a bachelor degree in Special Education or related fields (Pedagogy or Psychology). The professional competencies stipulated in Romanian National Register of Qualifications in Higher Education (RNCIS) (<http://www.anc.edu.ro/>) for special education teachers are:

- Complex assessment (psycho-socio-pedagogical) of children, young and adults with special educational needs
- Specific pedagogical intervention (compensation - recovery - therapy) for people with SEN
- Designing educational programs adapted for different levels and target groups

- Counseling, guidance and psycho-pedagogical assistance to various categories of people or educational groups (children/students, families, teachers, employees)
- Self-evaluation and continuous improvement of professional practices and career development
- Facilitate school, social and professional inclusion of people with SEN

The students in the Special Education Bachelor Program should be empowered at the end of the training process to demonstrate all these competencies. A special topic is the level of their understanding of the upcoming roles and responsibilities that they must perform as future professionals in the special education field. Being a relatively new profession in the inclusive schools, their responsibilities are not well defined or understood by other members of the school community, teachers, parents, decisional school factors. Often, they are demanded to perform activities that are not their responsibility and denied others that they must perform. Therefore, special education teachers must make known their role and practical demonstrate their professional areas of competence. Issues with special education teachers` role and responsibilities were found by many researchers (Wasburne-Moses, 2005) which can turn into burnout and attrition. Wiesniewski and Gargiulio (1997, apud Wasburne-Moses, 2005) categorized this issues as “role conflict” and “role ambiguity”. “Role conflict occurs when formal roles and responsibilities clash with the reality of a teachers` work life” (Wasburne-Moses, 2005, p.151). “Role ambiguity occurs when teachers find that they are unable to fulfill their responsibilities because of insufficient information” (Wasburne-Moses, 2005, p.152). To avoid those problems first, they must know and understand their roles and responsibilities.

Specific aims

This research aims to determine the degree of understanding of the role and responsibilities of special education teachers by the upcoming specialists.

. We address this specific aims:

- Assess the perceived importance of competence components` of the special education teaching profession.
- Assess the perceived importance of the responsibilities of the special education teacher.
- Determine the perceived degree of difficulty of the responsibilities of the special education teacher.

- Evaluate the confidence level of performing their upcoming responsibilities by the future special educators.

2. Research hypothesis

We presume that:

1. The future special education teachers consider that personality traits are the most important component of the special education teaching competency.
2. The level of experience in special education training influences the importance given to job responsibilities.
3. The level of experience in special education training influences the perceived difficulty of the future responsibilities.
4. The level of experience in special education training influences the degree of confidence in performing the responsibilities by the future teachers.
5. The perceived degree of difficulty influences the confidence level in performing the upcoming responsibilities.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

In the research group are included 30 students from West University Timisoara specialized in Special Education, aged between 19 and 30 years old, with a mean age of 21.67. Lot gender distribution reveals that all the participants were females. The participants are students in the first (15 students) and third (15 students) year of studies.

3.2 Instruments

To test the null hypothesis, an on-line questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions, of which three identification questions, one question with multiple answers, three open questions and four scale questions.

4. Results

To test null hypothesis 1, that states that “The future special education teachers do not consider that personality traits are the most important component of the special education teaching competency” we calculated the frequencies of the importance of the competency` components.

Table 2: The frequencies of the importance of competency` components

Competency components	Very much (%)	Much (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)	Very low (%)
Patience	93.3	6.7	-	-	-
Emotional control	93.3	3.3	3.3	-	-
Communicational abilities	80	16.7	-	3.3	-
Self-confidence	70	26.7	3.3	-	-
Knowledge	66.7	26.7	6.7	-	-
Experience	50	36.7	6.7	6.7	-
Empathy	46.7	26.7	10	-	16.7
Management abilities	20	36.7	23.3	6.7	13.3

In -Table 2 are presented the frequencies of the special education teacher competency components as perceived by the future professionals. The results highlight that 6 of the 8 components of the competency are perceived as being very important (with a frequency above 50%), the most important components are perceived to be the personal traits - patience, emotional control, and communicational abilities. The least important are the management skills knowledge and experience are also not in front of the list.

To test null hypothesis 2, that states that “the level of experience in special education training do not influence the importance given to job responsibilities” we calculated the independent sample t-test between the importance given to job responsibilities by the first and third year student in Special Education.

Table 3: Independent t-test importance given to job responsibilities

Importance given to job responsibilities First – third-year students	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	.822	.372	1.674	28	.105
Equal variances not assumed			1.674	25.183	.107

The results (Table 3) substantiate that there are no significant differences between the importance of the job responsibilities given by the first and third-year students. The first-year students give a greater importance to job responsibilities (not a significant one).

The level of importance of the future responsibilities is significantly above average (Table 4).

Table 4: One sample t test perceived level of importance of job responsibilities

	Test Value = 20					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Level of importance	13.269	29	.000	11.16667	9.4455	12.8879

Between the special education teacher responsibilities (Table 5), the most important perceived by the students are to conduct specific therapies (73.3%), followed by intervention (70%) and parent counseling (53.3%). The least important is the counseling of the teachers (23.35%). We must observe that all the responsibilities are perceived in majority as very important or important.

Table 5: Frequencies of the perceived importance of job responsibilities

Importance of	Very much (%)	Much (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)	Very low (%)
Specific therapies	73.3	16.7	10	-	-
Intervention	70	30	-	-	-
Parent counseling	53.5	30	16.7	-	-
Monitoring	50	40	10	-	-
Planning	43.3	43.3	13	-	-
Assessment	30	56.7	13.3	-	-
Social inclusion	26.7	60	13.3	-	-
Teacher counseling	23.3	40	36.7	-	-

To test null hypothesis 3, that states that “the level of experience in special education training do not influences the perceived difficulty of the future responsibilities” we calculated the independent sample t-test between the perceived difficulty of responsibilities by the first and third-year student in Special Education.

The results (Table 6) substantiate that there are no significant differences between the perceived difficulty of the job responsibilities given by the first and third-year students. The third-year students perceived a greater difficulty (but not a significant one).

Table 6: Independent t-test perceived difficulty of job responsibilities

Importance given to job responsibilities First – third-year students	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	.671	.420	1.413	28	.169
Equal variances not assumed			1.413	27.641	.169

The level of difficulty is significantly below average (Table 7). The students consider that the responsibilities will be not so hard to fulfill.

Table 7: One sample t-test perceived level of difficulty of job responsibilities

	Test Value = 20					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Level of importance	3.923	29	.000	3.20000	1.5318	4.8682

Between the special education teacher responsibilities (Table 8), the most difficult responsibilities are to implement the intervention (40%), followed by parent counseling (30%) and monitoring (23.3%). The least difficult are social inclusion (20%) and assessment (13.3%). We must observe that all the responsibilities are perceived in majority with a moderate difficulty.

Table 8: Frequencies of the perceived difficulty of job responsibilities

Importance of	Very difficult (%)	Difficult (%)	Moderate (%)	Easy (%)	Very easy (%)
Intervention	-	40	43.3	13.3	3.3
Parent counseling	6.7	30	50	13.3	-
Monitoring	6.7	23.3	40	20	10
Teacher counseling	13.3	20	46.7	13.3	6.7
Specific therapies	6.7	20	60	13.3	-
Planning	13.3	13.3	40	33.3	-
Social inclusion	3.3	20	60	13.3	3.3
Assessment	-	13.3	53.3	23.3	-

To test null hypothesis 4, that states that “the level of experience in special education training do not influences the degree of confidence in performing the responsibilities by the future teachers” we calculated the independent sample t-test between the degree of confidence in performing the job responsibilities by the first and third-year student in Special Education.

Table 9: Independent t-test degree of confidence in performing the job responsibilities

Degree of confidence in performing job responsibilities First – third-year students	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	.822	.372	1.674	28	.105
Equal variances not assumed			1.674	25.183	.107

The results (Table 9) substantiate that there are no significant differences between the degree of confidence in performing the job responsibilities by the first and third-year students. The first-year students have a greater confidence in their future ability to perform job responsibilities (not a significant one).

The level of confidence in performing the job responsibilities is significantly above average (Table 10).

Table 10: One sample t-test level of confidence in performing job responsibilities

	Test Value = 20					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Level of confidence	13.269	29	.000	11.16667	9.4455	12.8879

Between the special education teacher responsibilities (Table 11), the most confident in performing by the students are to implement the intervention (43.3%), followed by monitoring (36.7%) and conduct specific therapies (33.3%). The least confidence is attributed to counseling of the teachers (3.33%). We must observe that for all responsibilities the confidence is perceived above average.

Table 11: Frequencies of degree of confidence in performing the job responsibilities

Importance of	Very much (%)	Much (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)	Very low (%)
Intervention	43.3	26.7	26.7	3.3	-
Monitoring	36.7	40	20	3.3	-
Specific therapies	33.3	40	26.7	-	-
Assessment	30	36.7	33.3	-	-
Planning	26.7	53.3	13.3	3.3	3.3
Social inclusion	20	16.7	63.3	-	-
Parent counseling	13.3	50	36.7	-	-
Teacher counseling	33.3	40	26.7	-	-

To test the null hypothesis 5 that states that “the perceived degree of difficulty do not influences the confidence level in performing the upcoming responsibilities” we calculated the correlation between the perceived degree of difficulty and the level of confidence in performing the job responsibilities (Table 11).

Table 11: Correlations between level of difficulty and level of confidence

		Difficulty	Confidence
difficulty	Pearson	1	.388*
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.034
	N	30	30
confidence	Pearson	.388*	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.034	
	N	30	30

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results show that there is a significant correlation, but not very powerful, between the variables: the higher the difficulty the greater the confidence that responsibility will be carried through.

Conclusions

This research focused on investigating the future special education teachers` perception of their upcoming responsibilities. We aimed to determine the students` perception on the importance, difficulty and level of confidence in performing the special education teacher responsibilities.

The results substantiate that the majority of competency` components are perceived as being very important (with a frequency above 50%), the most important components are perceived to be the personal traits - patience, emotional control and communicational abilities. The least important are the management skills. The specific knowledge and experience are also not in front of the list.

There are no significant differences between the perceived importance, difficulty and level of confidence in performing the job responsibilities by the first and third-year students. The first-

year students give a greater importance, a low difficulty and a greater confidence that the third-year students (but not a significant one).

The level of importance, low difficulty and confidence in performing the future responsibilities is significantly above average.

Between the special education teacher responsibilities, the most important perceived by the students are to conduct specific therapies, followed by intervention and parent counseling. The least important is the counseling of the teachers. All the responsibilities are perceived in majority as very important or important.

Between the special education teacher responsibilities the most difficult responsibilities are to implement the intervention, followed by parent counseling and monitoring. The least difficult are social inclusion and assessment. All the responsibilities are perceived in majority with a moderate difficulty.

Between the special education teacher responsibilities, the most confident in performing by the students are to implement the intervention, followed by monitoring and conduct specific therapies. The least confidence is attributed to counseling of the teachers. For all responsibilities the confidence is perceived above average.

There is a significant correlation, but not very powerful, between the variables: the higher the difficulty the greater the confidence that responsibility will be carried through.

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