Romanian Preschool Teachers' Professional Beliefs about Diversity

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Abstract: Contemporary educational systems become more and more pluralistic in terms of ethnicity, social classes or learning abilities of the students. In this context, teachers' attitudes, beliefs and expectancies could influence their professional behaviors. Preschool educators are the first which are confronted with the issue of diversity. Despite this fact, the kindergarten teachers' beliefs toward diversity are not often investigated. In this context, the purpose of this study is to cover this gap, investigating Romanian preschool professional beliefs about diversity. We used the Professional Beliefs about Diversity Scale (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001), translated and slightly adapted on Romanian culture. 107 Romanian kindergarten teachers' responses on their professional beliefs about diversity was associated with age and previous experience with culturally different children. The results show a general slight positive orientation of beliefs about diversity of the subjects. The particular dimensions of beliefs about diversity, reflected in educational approaches of race, social class and disabilities are more nuanced, varying depending on age and cultural experience with different ethnically children. The results show that the youngest preschool teachers (under 22 years old and between 23 and 35 years old) are, the more reluctant toward different ethnic/cultural children than the older teachers (49-61 years old). The implication of the results in educational and formative contexts are discussed.

Keywords: *teachers' beliefs about diversity; kindergarten teachers; preschool teachers; inclusive education.*

How to cite: Frumos, F.-V. (2018). Romanian Preschool Teachers' Professional Beliefs about Diversity. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 10(4), 105-117. <https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/76>

1. Introduction

In the last decades, traditional educational systems are increasingly confronted with various challenges raised by heterogeneity of the students in terms of learning needs, abilities or ethnicity. This phenomenon raises issues for the actors of educational systems, specifically for the teachers that are seen as key persons for the implementation of the inclusive education (Norwich, 1994). Because they have to deal with the growing need for inclusive education, their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are critical in this respect (De Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011).

Social participation of children ethnically different in regular school means early education starting from kindergarten for this children. Thus, the preschool educators are the first which are confronted with the issue of diversity and the purpose of social and academic inclusion of children with a wide range of disabilities including sensorial or motor impairments, behavioral disorders, but also disadvantages resulting from children's ethnicity or social class. In the last years, the term "special education needs" is used for ethnic minorities and social disadvantaged pupils (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011).

Teachers' philosophy toward inclusion, particularly their beliefs could be critical for effective inclusive education. Although the general conviction in the literature, schools, and teacher education programs is that 'teachers' beliefs matter', this psychological construct still remains insufficient studied (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Chiner, Cardona & Gómez, 2015). In this introductive part, it will be analyzed it in terms of content and structure.

There are many topics of teachers' beliefs: about development, diversity, knowledge (including subject area, pedagogy, and pedagogical content knowledge), self, schools, vested parties, and teacher preparation (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Bryan & Atwater (2002), referring to science education, affirm that quality learning must consider the beliefs that teachers hold about the same issues of diversity: culture, race, ethnicity, class, gender. As Richardson state, teachers' beliefs about students is based on their race/ethnicity, language, social class, gender, religion, ability/disability, and other attributes, and this differences lead teachers to different expectations and approach of their students (Richardson, 1996).

More important than the content of teachers' beliefs, for an effective inclusion we must pay attention to the structure of teachers' beliefs. This construct is multidimensional, as Fives and Buehl (2012) states. According

with the two authors, the most important elements of the structure of teachers' beliefs are: 1) are conscious (explicit) or unaware (implicit or tacit); 2) is situated on the continuum between stable and dynamic; 3) are activated by specific demands of a context; 4) are interwoven with the knowledge; 5) teachers' beliefs are integrated in system (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Moreover, the teachers' beliefs play multiple functions: a) filters, for interpretation of events and context; b) frames, for conceptualizing or defining problems; c) guide for action of teachers. (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

Teachers beliefs are considered *construct that describe the structure and content of a person's thinking, and that are presumed to drive his/her actions* (Bryan & Atwater, 2002: 3). Nespor (1987, as cited in Bryan & Atwater, 2002) state that beliefs reside in contents of episodic memory derived from personal experience or from cultural sources of knowledge transmission. Beliefs seems to be simple, individual, and also organized in systems. Individual beliefs are less trustworthy than a beliefs system and easier to change. Bryan and Atwaker (2002: 4), agreeing with Nespor's perspective (1987), conclude that *beliefs are far more influential than knowledge in discerning how individuals frame problems and organize tasks and are stronger predictors of behavior* (Bryan & Atwater 2002: 4).

Teachers' beliefs are also related with teachers' attitudes. In the ABC (Affect-Behavior-Cognition) model of attitudes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998) the authors state that the cognitive component of attitude is the individual knowledge or beliefs about a particular object. Other scholars state that attitudes represents a system of beliefs that could be used for predicting behavior (Bandura, 1982; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). It seems that attitudes and beliefs are each other closely related (Garmon, 2004). Thus, the teachers' attitudes and beliefs seem to have a tight relationship with teachers' knowledge and behavior, and this relationship could be identified in professional settings.

As is was argued above, teachers' beliefs are important for their professional behavior. As particular beliefs, teachers' beliefs about diversity, reflecting their attitudes about various characteristics of children are therefore important for predicting their pedagogical approach of this children. We could derivate two main implications of teachers' beliefs about diversity: one theoretical and a second practical. First, the kindergarten teachers' beliefs about diversity is not yet investigated in Romania using a quantitative demarche. We don't know, in Romania, what kind of diversity beliefs preschool teachers hold and how these beliefs are related with socio-demographic characteristics of teachers. Second, this kind of information is important because educational policies into a broad sense could (or should)

take into account the evidence offered by empirical research on this matter. If the observed teachers' kindergarten diversity beliefs are not optimal for effective inclusion of the children, we could make some proposition for their preparation in initial and/or continuous training.

In our study, we measured the preschool teachers' beliefs about diversity as general tendency, but also we focused on the cultural diversity of the children. The most studies on this subject are realized using a qualitative methodology: interviews (Lieber et al., 1998), life-history research (McMullen, et. al., 2006; Tampaki, 2017), with two notable exceptions: the study of Mitchell & Hedge (2007), which used a mixed-method approach, o quantitative instruments as Teacher Belief Scale and interviews with open-ended question, and Middleton' study which used a quantitative and qualitative methodology, a hermeneutical-phenomenological procedure (Middleton, 2002).

A similar study on teachers' beliefs about diversity was realized by Chiner, Cardona-Molto & Gomez Puerta (2015) reveal that previous studies in this topic was somewhat inconclusive: some authors report teachers hold positive beliefs about diversity (Cardona, 2005), and other studies do not reach a such clear conclusion, the teachers showing neutral or negative beliefs.

Because a direct evaluation of teachers' beliefs about inclusion could be affected by irrelevance due socially desirable responses, measuring beliefs about diversity may indirectly reflect teachers' preparedness for inclusion. Beliefs about diversity in school settings are not often studied in empirical research, and the conceptually closest construct – inclusive education – could provide an indirect insight on this question. In this respect, a literature survey of research on attitudes toward inclusion it was made.

Previous studies on teachers' beliefs or attitudes about inclusion in primary and secondary schools highlight some important aspects. Avramidis and Kayla in Greece (2007), used My Thinking about Inclusion questionnaire for testing teachers' beliefs. The scores of the subscale Core Perspective, which reflects the cognitive component of beliefs indicates that the teachers held undecided or neutral attitude on inclusive education. Kalyva, Gojkovic and Tsakiris (2007), using the same instrument for Serbian teachers obtained the similar mean (undecided or neutral) result (Kalyva, Gojkovic, & Tsakiris, 2007). Hammond and Lawrence (Hammond, & Ingalls, 2003), Kin, Park & Snell (2005), Opdal, Wormaes & Habayeb (2001, as cited in de Boer, Sip Jan Pijl & Alexander Minnaert, 2011) they all come to the same conclusion: teachers' beliefs (attitudes) about inclusion are neutral. This results show that teachers tend to hold neutral attitudes/beliefs

about inclusion and we could consider that they held similar neutral beliefs about diversity.

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward inclusive education was related with several variables: genre, years of teaching, previous experience in inclusive education, training and type of disability. In some studies, (Alghazo and Naggat Gaad, 2004) female are more supportive for inclusion than male, but others report no differences between male and female teachers (Opdal, Wormaes & Habayeb, 2001, as cited in de Boer, Sip Jan Pijl & Alexander Minnaert, 2011).

Another important variable is years of teaching experience which is closely related with attitude toward inclusion. Alghazo and Naggat Gaad (2004), and Glaubman & Lifshitz (2001) found teachers with less years of teaching experience (1-5 years) are more positive regarding inclusion than the more experienced teachers.

Previous experience in inclusive education are related with more positive than attitude toward inclusive education (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Kalyva, Gojkovic & Tsakiris, 2007). In addition to previous experience in inclusive education, prior contact with disabled people relate with more positive attitude than teachers without such contact (Parasuram, 2006, as cited in de Boer, Sip Jan Pijl & Alexander Minnaert, 2011).

Teachers' previous long term or short term training are associated with more favorable attitude toward inclusion (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). Alghazo and Naggat Gaad (2004) found that teachers are more positive toward children with physical or visual disabilities and learning difficulties, and less favorable toward children with mental disabilities, behavioural difficulties and hearing impairments.

Also, teachers' experience with inclusive education seems to be important for success, teachers with experience in inclusive education holding a more positive attitude toward inclusion. (Moberg, 2003).

In a more recent study on teachers' beliefs about diversity, based on the same instrument (PBAD), Chiner, Cardona-Molto, & Gomez Puerta (2015) reported highly positive beliefs about diversity in all dimension measured, and this results are more evident for personal beliefs, compared with the professional ones. Also, the authors reported significant relationship between years of didactic experience and more positive beliefs in several aspects as cultural, linguistic, social differences, ability and genre (Chiner, Cardona-Molto, & Gomez Puerta, 2015: 18).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the positivity of professional beliefs about diversity among Romanian preschool teachers, as a preliminary survey of this professional grade in our national educational

system. Also, we proposed to explore the relationship between age/years of teaching experience and previous experience with special education need children and the positive, neutral or negative beliefs of kindergarten teachers. Correspondingly, the research questions were: 1) How positive are the preschool teachers' beliefs about diversity? and 2) What and in which manner socio-demographic data are related with teachers' beliefs about diversity?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Participants was 107 kindergarten in-service female teachers from several counties of north-east of Romania. Their ages ranged in four intervals: $n=10$ under 22 years, $n=31$ between 22 and 35 years; $n=34$ between 35 and 48 years and $n=32$ over 49 (the oldest subject is 61 years old).

2.2. Instrument

The study consists in a quantitative non-experimental survey based on PBAD Scale. For measuring on a convenience sample of preschool teachers' beliefs about diversity it is used the Professional Beliefs about Diversity Scale (PBAD) (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001), translated and slightly adapted for Romanian culture. The PBAD Scale (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001) used consists of 25 items with scores that range from 25 to 125. The low scores reflect a weak tolerance towards diversity, while higher scores indicate a higher acceptance. Midrange scores can show a general tolerance towards diversity but also indifference or uncertainty for others. (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001; Chiner, Cardona-Molto, & Gomez Puerta 2015: 19). The dimensions of diversity measured with PBAD scale were: (a) race, (b) ethnicity and culture, (c) social class, (d) gender, (e) sexual orientation, (f) exceptionality or issues about persons with disabilities, (g) language diversity, and (h) religion, within the context of schooling (Pohan, Aguilar, 2001). We obtained 0.756 Cronbach' alpha reliability coefficient for the whole scale. We collected also additional information about socio-demographic data: gender, age, and previous experience with culturally different children.

2.3. Procedure

107 Romanian kindergarten teachers' responses on their professional beliefs about diversity was collected by means of university colleagues from two universities from the region. The respondents enrolled in university

courses (continuous trainings) voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Confidentiality was guaranteed and the respondents were encouraged to sincerely respond.

2.4. Data analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics version 21 was used for data analysis. For the first research question, it was calculated statistics as mean, SD for total score and one sample t tests for determining the general orientation positive, neutral or negative of teachers' beliefs. In order to respond to the second research question, we used independent sample t test for analyzing if previous educational experience with ethnically different children influence the positivity of diversity beliefs as total score and in two particular types of beliefs: beliefs about ethnicity/culture and beliefs about social class. For the same second research question it was used Anova One-Way tests in order to analyze the relationship between subjects' age ranges (four levels) and the same two mentioned above: ethnicity/culture and social class. Further post hoc Tukey tests were performed in order to find out between which of the four age groups there are significant differences.

3. Results

For the first research question, a one-sample t-test was run to determine whether preschool teachers hold favorable beliefs toward diversity. The theoretical mean for the whole scale score is 75 (minimum score to the 25 items is 25, and maximum is 125). We compared the mean total score on the PBAD (Mean=81,69; SD=7,46; N=107) with the 75 value and obtained $t(67)=7.397$, $p<0.001$. This result indicates a general positive orientation of beliefs about diversity of the subjects. Anyway, the mean value of this sample is smaller than the mean values reported by instrument authors (mean between 91.41 and 105.65 for both the personal and professional beliefs scales, Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). This results will be analyzed into the Discussion section.

The more specific dimensions of beliefs about diversity, reflected in beliefs about ethnicity, social classes and general score on beliefs about diversity are more nuanced, and varies depending on two socio-demographic factor: previous educational experience with different ethnically children and subjects' age ranges. Thus, for the second question of the study, we performed independent sample t test in order to find out if the kindergarten teachers with and without previous educational experience with different

ethnic children have different beliefs regarding: a) sociocultural status of children b) ethnicity of children; c) total score of openness to diversity.

Table 1. Results of t-test and Descriptive Statistics for Social class, Ethnicity and PBAD total score by previous educational experience with different ethnic children

	previous educational experience with different ethnic children						95% CI for Mean Difference	t	df
	Yes			No					
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n			
Social class	15,60	4,33	40	14,38	3,66	54	-.413, 2.853	1,464	92
Ethnicity	25,57	3,99	40	23,70	3,54	52	.296, 3.442	2,361*	89
PBAD total score	83,87	8,51	31	79,86	5,97	37	.487, 7.525	2,273*	66

* $p < .05$.

The result shows teachers with and without previous experience with different ethnic children do not statistically differ in their beliefs about children from divers social class (poor, medium or rich). However, teachers with previous experience with different ethnic children hold significantly more favorable beliefs about diversity than their colleagues without this kind of educational and cultural experience.

Anova One-Way tests were performed in order to analyze the relationship between subjects' age ranges (four levels) and: a) sociocultural status of children; b) ethnicity of children; c) total score of openness to diversity. Participants are divided in four age groups, as follow: under 22 years (ten subjects), 22 to 35 years (31 subjects); 35 to 48 years (34 subjects) and 32 participants is over 49 years old.

We found no difference between age groups regarding sociocultural status of the children, namely openness to social disadvantaged (lower) classes: $[F(3, 90)=0,288, p=.834]$. Age groups do not influence beliefs about children' social class.

We performed between groups analyze of variance comparison in order to analyze relationship of age groups and beliefs about ethnicity. The results shows that there are statistically significant differences depending on the variable age ranges regarding the openness to ethnicity $[(F(3, 87)=4.827, p=0,004)]$. To find out which of the four age groups shows significant differences in this respect we applied post hoc Tukey t test.

Post hoc comparison using the 'Tukey' HSD test indicated that the mean score for 22 years' subjects and younger condition ($M=21.37$, $SD=2.06$) was significantly different than the mean score for the 49-61 years' condition ($M=26.11$, $SD=3.73$). The youngest preschool teachers are significantly negative toward diversity as ethnicity than their older colleagues. Another significant difference is between the subjects 23-35 years old ($M=23.39$, $SD=3.92$) and the 59-61 years old subjects ($M=26.11$, $SD=3.73$). Again, the relatively young kindergarten teachers are less positive toward different ethnic children. The result shows greater openness toward ethnicity to the subjects of 49-61 years old.

We performed Anova One-Way between groups comparison to test the relationship between age groups and total score on scale. The result shows that there are not statistically significant differences depending on the variable age ranges regarding the PBAD total: $F(3, 90)=1.573$; $p=0.204$.

4. Discussions and conclusions

In this study, we proposed to investigate the preschool professional beliefs about diversity in Romanian education system. Specifically, we investigated the general orientation of subjects' beliefs toward diversity, as potential predictor of their readiness for inclusive education. As we reported in previous section, the subjects hold generally positive beliefs toward diversity, but the reported global result, although in line with others research, is below the results from similar studies (Chiner, Cardona-Molto & Gomez Puerta 2015; Middleton, 2002; Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). Others scholars presents moderate levels of acceptance of diversity (Sanders & Downer, 2012). The mild diversity acceptance could be explained by some characteristics of research sample: Romanian kindergarten teachers. The professional beliefs of the subjects could be lower due some psychological and cultural characteristics of respondents, as prejudices about different children in terms of ethnicity or particular educational needs. Actually, one of the most commonly held beliefs of teachers is the belief that students from culturally different backgrounds are less capable than the others students (Bryan & Atwater, 2002: 827). Alternative explanation could be the low perceived support for accommodation in their classes of this different children and predicted issues in accommodating children's' diversity.

A second, more specific purpose of my study was to more deeply explore how specific dimensions of diversity are influenced by several socio-demographic characteristics as age and previous experience with culturally-ethnic different children. The results show that the youngest preschool

teachers (under 22 years old and between 23 and 35 years old) are, surprisingly, the more reluctant toward different ethnic/cultural children than the older teachers (49-61 years old). This results contradicts the findings of Alghazo and Naggar Gaad (2004), and Glaubman & Lifshitz (2001), who reported that the younger teachers are more open to diversity (not specific to cultural/ethnic diversity, however) than the older. This results indicate that the professional beliefs of younger and less experienced kindergarten teachers are somewhat under (re)construction and the younger preschool teachers are not so far prepared for easy accept different culturally children in their classrooms, compared with the older/more experienced colleagues. We think this results could be partially explained by Richardson' theory (1996) that states the (personal) belief system is developed through experience and that by the moment of entering college it is already formed. On the other hand, the teachers' professional beliefs system, including beliefs about diversity, develop and specific experiences needs to be lived in order to gradually reconstruct the present beliefs. Others particular factors as genre (all the respondents are female, most of them are mothers of young children), and the lack of specific experiences with ethnically different children could explain this results. In fact, the results indicate that previous educational experience with ethnic differently children help preschool teachers to be more positive toward different ethnic children, compared with the younger and less experienced colleagues. More than that, the total score of this subjects on the beliefs about diversity are higher than the score of the subjects without such experiences. We could conclude that the specific experience with culturally different children is necessary for a more positive orientation of professional beliefs about diversity of the preschool teachers.

The results may be used to guide the elaboration of a revised curriculum aiming to develop a broader concept on the diversity among kindergarten and even primary school teachers. The implication of present study for preschool teachers' initial and continuous training programs could have two dimensions: cognitive and experiential.

About the cognitive dimensions of beliefs about diversity, we already know that these beliefs have a core informational-cognitive dimension, according with ABC attitudes' model (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). Thus, the cognitive dimension of beliefs toward diversity may be enhanced by theoretical trainings in initial formation of the preschool teachers, as a main way to shape these professional beliefs. In this respects, teachers' preparation programs should systematically comprise multicultural and intercultural content subjects. A special focus of this initial training should be payed to explicitly confronts (for example by means of play role and

debates strategies) of the own participant's beliefs about diversity, in order to refinement and transformation of both beliefs and practices (Bryan & Atwaker, 2002).

For the experiential dimension of beliefs, the specific diversity beliefs of the preschool teachers could (and should) be modelled under 'real life' pedagogical settings. In this respect, initial training who comprises practical application in multicultural classes with cultural-ethnically diverse children may reshape the existent diversity beliefs of the pre-service kindergarten teachers. Of course, this experiences without necessary debriefings in round tables, debates and seminars are not sufficient for consistent and stable beliefs change.

The basic cultural model of teaching and professional engagement need to be interrogated and improved. In this end, the both preservice teachers and teachers' educators (university teachers) must gain experience from teaching and learning themselves in multicultural settings (Thomson, Wilder, & Atwater, 2001).

The endeavor of changing diversity beliefs is difficult, particularly in multicultural settings. Challenging and questioning the inner cultural beliefs of the kindergarten teachers need time and opportunities for think critically, assessing different cultural identities and finally accept a greater professional commitment (Middleton, 2002).

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