

**EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND
PSYCHOLOGY
PHD SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

HEAD OF THE PHD SCHOOL: DR. GÁBOR HALÁSZ

PHD DISSERTATION SUMMARY

ESZTER MARTON

**THE ROLE OF THE PARENT-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP IN ACHIEVING
SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION**

SUPERVISOR:

DR. GABRIELLA PAPP

2019

1.The theoretical framework of the reseach

In international pedagogical practice the need for integrated education has gradually appeared in recent decades. It initially meant the inclusion of pupils with more support and individual help into mainstream education institutions. This system can open up to everyone regardless of their abilities and disabilities. Later on, the successful result of the realization of inclusive education can best ensure smooth integration into society (Beck, 1994; OECD, 1999; Csányi & Perlusz 2001; Speck, 2008; Könczei, 2009, Biewer, 2001; Biewer & Schütz, 2016).

The practice of inclusive education shows a very diverse picture at international level despite of the fact that international organizations dealing with the situation of people with disabilities (OECD, UNESCO, EADSNE) are constantly striving for researching, disseminating this diverse practice and trying to make suggestions for the practice of inclusive education. However, the culture, the traditions and the human and disability image of a particular country must be taken into account since they strongly influence the mentality and the viewpoint of the education of the society, therefore it can be a mover or a stumbling block to an established practice (Halász, 2001; Nahalka, 2003; Feuser, 2002,2013).

Each of the international documents sets values for inclusion, which includes, among other things, the preservation of human dignity, the aspiration of equality, solidarity, and the exercise of human rights. According to Ainscow and Booth (2002, 2011) the essence of inclusion is to increase the participation of every child, student and adult in school life. So the task of the schools is to respond more flexibly to the diversity of families and to strive for co-operation in every area. The appearance and practicality of the inclusive values they have collected can have a strong impact on the integration processes in the schools. Booth – Ainscow's idea was based on the concept that *equality, rights, participation, community, respect for diversity, sustainability, non-violence, trust, compassion, honesty, courage, joy, love, hope and beauty*, and *wisdom* are such values that have a strong influence on the degree of inclusion of a school.(Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

In Hungary, the law of public education LXXIX of 1993 which was later amended several times opened the way for the integration of disabled and non-disabled students. Initially the integration started in practice with the sensory handicapped children with supportive parenting background since creating special conditions (mainly subjective) and having an

educator with an accepting attitude can bring the success of integration in every case (Csányi 1983; Csabay, 1989; Gadó & Erthné Bakos, 1990; Papp & Mesterházi, 1998).

The idea of the profession met the needs of the parents relatively soon, since they protested against the segregated education of their children in special schools. Despite the favorable legal possibilities, at first relatively few schools used the opportunity. From this point Hungary could be called moderately an integration party. In itself the creation of a legislative environment would not have been sufficient for the implementation of the practice of integration. At the end of the 1990s, in addition to educational policy efforts, the demographic changes in society helped that the issue of integration came to the fore (Bánfalvy 2008; Csépe 2008; Marton 2011).

The demand for integration in mainstream schools motivated both the mainstream teachers and the special education profession to rethink tasks, organizational development and cooperation. Taking on new responsibilities for integration was an alternative way for special educational institutions. The establishment of the adapted physical and conductive methodological institutions (APEMI) along with basic education functions, specialist and professional services have appeared to help integration directly (Czachesz & Radó, 2003; Kópatakiné, 2004, 2006; Faragóné Bircsák & Papp, 2011; Papp & Mile, 2012; Simon, 2014; Mile, 2016).

The role of parents in the success of their own children in school is not at all negligible. Numerous national and international research has confirmed the importance of the family's social, economic, cultural characteristics and the role of home-based parenting in children's progress in schools. In the past decades, gradually the focus of the attention has been on those research that deal with parents' involvement in their own child's school life and the impact of this on the progress of children in schools. Based on relevant international research, it can be stated that parents with a supportive attitude towards learning, school, and the parents involvement in school life has a positive impact on the children's learning performance (Textor, 2000; Sacker, Schoon & Bartley, 2002; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein, 2011; Stange et al., 2012; Imre, 2015; Balázsi et al., 2013, 2017).

Each of the summaries produced by international organizations mentions the role of parents in the concept of a host school since a positive parenting attitude promotes the realization of the host school and the host society. According to those research that focus on the experience of integration

- parents should be considered as active partners,
- they should be encouraged to support their child's school and home learning process,
- parents should be involved in the various decision-making processes,
- parents should be treated as participants in school education,
- professional organizations and service providers beside school can help the coordination, between schools and parents, the cooperation is essential,
- the creation and operation of parental organizations and associations should be supported; financial resources must be provided (OECD, 1999; Salamancai nyilatkozat, 1994; EADSNE, 2003, 2009, 2016; Watkins, 2007).

Accordingly, in the past decades, research on the relationship between parents and schools as well as the concept of integration, the concept of participation and involvement has been growing a broader interpretation (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Epstein, 2001, 2011). Epstein (1986, 2001, 2011), who deals with parental involvement, in his family-school-communities interacting model the pupil is in the center. In the education process of a child the spheres of interest of the family, the school and the community overlap to varying degrees. The extent of overlap can be influenced by: time, family and school experiences, views, and values. According to Epstein, at the theoretical level, a complete overlap between the family and the school can be realized. In this case, the two parties work together as partners and have a regular clear communication based on cooperation with each other, as well as the school provides a number of comprehensive programs involving parents.

During his decades of work, Epstein defines six areas where he sees opportunities for parents to be involved in the life of the school and be an active part of it, thereby supporting their own child's school performance. (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering; (4) learning at home (5) involving parents in school decision-making processes; (6) collaborating with communities (Epstein, 1986, 2001, 2011).

It is a question of how schools in Hungary today and in the past decades have been able to embrace the criteria of integration, what are the factors, aspects, which appear in the everyday pedagogical practice of schools and what form of parental involvement is realized.

2. The subject and the aims of the research

My research focuses on mapping the relationship between school and parents, especially having regard to the realization of successful integration. The purpose of my research is to use qualitative tools in order to reveal the practice of integration, the parental contact habit in education institutions and the forms of parental involvement in school life (Epstein, 2011); to examine inclusive values (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) in the thought of parents and teachers.

My research questions:

1. What characterizes the parent-school relationship and the practice of integration in the examined area?

Based on the ideas of parents, teachers of inclusion what are the factors that determine the parent-school relationship and through this the practice of integration in the examined schools. How do these factors affect work in school?

2. How and in what way do the signs of the parental involvement appear in the thinking of parents, teachers and professionals of integration professionals?

What types of Epstein involvement appears in the stories of the participants of integration. What is the pattern for inclusive forms?

3. How do Booth-Ainscow's inclusive values appear in the minds of parents, educators, and professionals of integration professionals?

What pattern does the thinking of the different participants show?

3. Research methodology

Applying the qualitative research methodology gave me the opportunity to get more accurate information of the participants on what they really think about integration, and parent - school relationship. The method of grounded theory (GT) helped me to examine a specific phenomenon (parent-school relationship; integration) from the viewpoint of different but interrelated participants (parent, educator, co-educator) (Szokolszky, 2004; Sántha, 2009, 2013; Horváth & Mitev, 2015). During my research I used questionnaire surveys, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

The target group of the research was parents, educators and integration professionals. The questionnaire interview was carried out in six settlements with about 245 parents and 97 teachers (82 school teachers, 15 outreach special teachers). The study was conducted in schools and institutions supporting integration (APEMI, pedagogical service) of 4 villages and 3 towns.

The first part of the questionnaire interview ($N_{\text{pedagogue}} = 97$; $N_{\text{parent}} = 245$) contained closed questions in which the participants were asked about their personal data, in the second part of the questionnaire which was the main aspect for the research two questions were asked from the participants: As a parent / teacher What did I bring to school ... ? And what would I take from the school? The questions were broadly interpretable, they did not contain any restrictions, all the answers were accepted.

I made focus group discussions with Parents ($N=16$), with Teachers ($N=22$), and with co-education professionals ($N=6$), all of the participants of the focus group discussion took part in the questionnaire interview. The suggested topics were the experiences of the participants in the parent - school cooperation, childhood school experiences, suggestions for solutions, opportunities to improve parent-school relationships.

During my research with the heads of institutions ($N=8$), with the help of integration professionals ($N=9$) I made semi-structured interviews on topics such as co-education, parent-school-community relationship.

4. The research results

1. What characterizes the parent-school relationship and the practice of integration in the examined area?

As a result of the research data, it became apparent that in the examined district the parent-school relationship and, through this, the practice of integration is defined by (1) *family and institutional background*, (2) the personality, motivation, attitude, expertise, skills, *abilities of the people defining the background* (child, parent, teacher, co-education professional) (3) the nature of *communication* between the participants. These factors have an impact on (4) *work in school*, and these determine primarily that in what form and in what way the integration is implemented within a school.

(1) Parents believe that they provide a supportive *family background* for their children and have a responsible parenting attitude towards their education. So they let their children to school „disciplined” teaching them the „basic behavioral standards”, from a „calm”, „loving” atmosphere, and similarly to this they expect a tolerant, friendly, loving, stress-free and non-violent school atmosphere. In the focus groups and interviews are formulated the presence of a non-supportive family background in schools, which is a major concern everywhere.

Besides the family background, the peculiarities of the *institutional background* also have a significant impact on the pupils at school (Vári, 2003; Réti, 2011; Szemerszki, 2015). Based on the stories of the participants, this background is defined by the settlement, the maintainer of the institution, the school's staff, its management, its operating system, the school's „network”. All in all, It can be said that at present, neither the host schools, nor the institutions supporting integration have the possibility to change this background. The material (equipment) and personal conditions (teachers with the appropriate expertise, recruitment of pedagogical staff, organization of training courses, prevention of burnout, reduction of overload) of the institute can be influenced to a limited extent at school level.

(2) The factor of family and institutional background is closely related to the representatives of the institutions involved in the analysis (family, school, co-operative education systems), and to the children, parents and educators who are also involved/sufferers and consciously or even unconsciously, are also shapers of this environment. They can influence its quality, can

exert an affect with their behavior and attitude to their environment at home and at school as well.

The positive and negative experiences of parents related to schools are a decisive factor, what kind of feelings the parents have about the school (fear, anger, feeling of exclusion), what kind of skills and abilities they have (acceptance, empathy); what their personality is like (friendly, unselfish, tolerant, open etc.) how they manifest towards school (indifferent, abstaining, interested, biased, violent/aggressive parent) and what their own relationship is like with their child (consistent, responsible, competent). About the work of teachers burnout appears (overload, insecurity, unsteadiness), parents also perceive this.

(3) The factor determining the relationship between the parent and the school is the nature of communication between the different participants. The existence of cooperation, the discussion of the problems, the mutuality and the union is very important for each party. The nature of communication is determined by sincerity and respect for each other. Concerning different forms of contact (open day, parental meeting, reception hours, telephone, written, or personal), they are typical of the area, I could not find any new practice. In connection with institutions that support integration is important to note that in their case, keeping contact is almost always happens via school (child, former teacher), assisting professionals play an intermediary role. The outreach teachers keep contact with the parents of integrated children randomly. There is no unified practice or elaborated protocol for the ways of contact.

Parents, educators and professional assistants also attach similar importance to information flow. Parents expect the school to inform, to give feedback on the child's performance, however, educators also expect the parent (the child's main expert) to inform the school about the child's condition.

(4) The quality of school work is related to *the quality of the school everyday pedagogical practice, professional skills* of educators, and the way of *realizing integration at school level*.

Teachers consider effective education, talent management, transferring knowledge, and skills and ability development an important part during their educational work. In addition, those activities appear which are directed against the drop-out rate of the students underperforming for various reasons (tutoring, catching up, development).

In parents' thinking integration appears through aspects of quality education. Parents expect the school to support their children in learning, to develop them, to get practice within the classroom, and to take the children's characteristics into consideration.

In the examined area related to the integration and the care system for students with special educational needs (SEN) and/or for students with behaviour challenges and learning difficulties both the supply system and the schools are striving for a comply with legality conditions. The schools solve the provision with their own special teachers (can deal with both target group) or using outreach teachers operated by APEMI (provision of SEN pupils) and developer teachers (provision of students with behaviour challenges and learning difficulties).

2. How and in what way, do the signs of the parental involvement appear in the thinking of parents, teachers and integration professionals?

(1) Considering the presence of Epstein's parental involvement and participation forms in Hungary, it can be said that parenting in Epstein sense is not yet present in the researched area, but the ideas on which this form could be built or certify its professionalism are present in the participants' responses. At this moment, neither the Hungarian society nor the Hungarian schools would be open to such kind of initiative.

(2) Communicating as a form of parental involvement is present in schools, its effectiveness and the versions of customary needs of today would be worth exploring and applying. The forms of inquiry and information are the same as it was nearly 15 years ago (student's mark book, reception hours, parental meeting,) (Ligeti and Márton, 2002), maybe this list has expanded with the e-diary which is launched not by the schools but by the maintainer.

Among the professionals involved in integration for the outreach teachers a telephone provided by the workplace would be vital since they currently use their own mobile devices for communication. I assume that more efficient communication could be increased with the parents participating in integration by providing proper communication devices (telephone, mobile internet).

Schools should look for further opportunities besides the existing ones to develop personal contact with parents. You have to look for suitable places in the school and time frames that encourage parents to contact with the school.

(3) Considering volunteering, parents are very active in schools, however, it is not certain that schools are aware of this intention, so it is not sure they can benefit of it. By improving

communication, with the involvement of specialized persons (volunteers) it can be made more transparent and would be compatible with the intentions and needs of the parties.

(4) Supporting learning at home is spontaneously present from the parent's side. Parenting support and information for the parents in the sense of Epstein is not yet reflected in school practice.

(5) Parental involvement in decision-making processes is present in minimal, in the institutions at the level of compliance with the law, in fact we cannot talk about real interest-bearing ability and intention. The scopes of activities of parental communities at school level have not changed compared to the last decades (Ligeti & Márton, 2002). The intention of parents' participation in decision-making processes on the part of the maintainer might be to create an institutional council which legal background (Art.73) already exists, but we have little information about its real activities.

(6) The conscious use of local community resources (collaborating with community) and letting them into the school life are also far from the mentality of Hungarian schools and society. The schools have a distant relationship with local communities and population. For schools, it is not evident to see the connection between the involvement of community and parents and student performance. At the moment, uniting and motivating communities within the school seems to be a great task for schools.

Epstein highlights two concepts that characterize all six forms and necessitate their existence in order for these forms of engagement to work effectively: trust and respect (Epstein, 2010a). These concepts are also strong in the target groups of the examined institutions.

3. How do Booth-Ainscow's inclusive values appear in the minds of parents, educators and professionals of integration?

An essential element of integration and inclusion is that the participation and learning process of all concerned (children, adults) should be helped during the process of education. Ainscow and Booth (2011) inclusive values can strongly define this process.

Due to the complexity and size limitation of my dissertation, I have no chance at all to analyze all the inclusive values. In this thesis, I emphasize the stronger inclusive values of the target groups examined.

(1) The *rights* are strongly present in many aspects in the examined qualitative data: (a) student, parental rights and duties, (b) right to quality education, (c) right to (SEN, students with behaviour challenges and learning difficulties) provision

(a) Child and parental rights are closely associated with duties, so the kind of unconditional thinking of parents and teachers which Booth mentions is not present in Hungary.

(b) Another aspect of the rights is the access to high quality education. The idea of quality education means the conceptual triad of efficiency, equity and effectiveness in practice, in which paying attention to the individual educational needs of a person, educational inequalities can be reduced (Lannert, 2004; Keller & Mártonfi, 2006; ENSZ Egyezmény, 2006; Arató, Pintér & Varga, 2008).

Parents define the qualities of the 'quality' school, and have specific ideas and expectations of tasks to be performed or provided by the school.

They think it is the task of the school to pass on the right knowledge to the children, to make remedial courses, the development, the talent management and the provision of various programs. In the background of the concept of quality education, thoughts on reducing the chances of equal opportunities (attention to individual characteristics, differentiated education, importance of diverse methodology, leaving the predominance of frontal education) mostly appear only in the interviews with the heads of institutions consciously.

(c) In the thinking of assisting professionals and heads of institutions the rights in relation to integration are strongly linked to the legal environment. Often, only the number of hours provided by the expert opinion is realized, which completely ignores the quality. What the best would be for the child and their family, is overwritten by the rule-keeping behavior of the institutions.

(2) The concept of involvement appears in several aspects in the participants' responses: (a) participation in school programs; (b) I do not want to participate in school life; (c) participation in home learning processes; (d) participatory cooperation, contact and communication between the parties.

(3) The *community* as an inclusive value similarly to Epstein's (2011) theory also occupies a central position in Booth – Ainscow (2011). Compared to Epstein's form of involvement in this inclusive value, the sense of responsibility for each other, the feeling of mutual

interdependence also appears. In the examined area, teachers, parents, pupils and communities of the settlement work well or not so well, relatively isolated from each other, but the sense of responsibility towards others in the community defined by Booth – Ainscow as the emergence of active and responsible citizenship does not appear in a striking force in the research data.

(4) At present, the interpretation of *sustainability* may seem idealistic for the Hungarian schools. In terms of inclusive values, the goal of sustainability is educating students „for the future”, to be able to ensure their economic, environmental and social well-being, long-term thinking, addressing the sustainability of the natural environment, and the processes of globalization (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

In the responses of teachers, on the one hand sustainability appears in relation to school education: for the teachers it is important to motivate children, to increase their self-confidence, to teach them learning methods, to prepare them for further education and to teach them disciplined behaviour and accuracy. Exercise and discipline are also considered important.

At the moment, in the researched area, short -term thinking is more typical of schools than long-term thinking in a variety of perspectives. In several areas they use survival strategies. Some of the studied schools have been struggling to survive for years. It is a continuous question whether they are able to start another class or when the current government orders a new regulation that can make the operation of small schools impossible.

Overall, inclusive values defined by Booth – Ainscow (2011) are related to Epstein's parental involvement forms. Epstein (2011) focuses strongly on the parents and does not focus on the topic of integration. The later reinterpreted and widened definitions (every student, every member of the community, multi-faceted communication) brings the two theories close together.

The great strength of both concepts is that, apart from its theoretical system, in practice, any part of it can influence the parents-school relationship and the practice of integration. So if a school uses any of the Epstein's parent involvement forms or works with any inclusive value can do a lot to strengthen the parent-school relationship, to eliminate existing problems and to improve an integration supporting inclusive environment on a practical level.

Currently, schools in Hungary are busy increasing the participation of children, so it is not sure that this theory is clear and acceptable for them that parents participation in school life is the way that leads to increasing children's success at schools.

By looking at inclusive values, the strongest demand in schools is quality education. It was an important achievement in the research that although the values of Ainsow appear in the thoughts of the participants, but often the lack of the given value, or just the strong demand for a particular value. The examined two theories are strongly connected both the role of involvement and community as a prominent role of participation form or inclusive value; and it can be linked to communication as a form of participation inclusive values, trust, honesty and non-violence.

The concepts can be made attractive to schools for their practical application; since any part is chosen, a school can make a significant effect on its parent school relationship and the practice of integration.

5. Utilization of the research

(1) In the research area, it would be worthwhile to consider among the institutions that support integration, the current operation and the way of performing tasks of the outreach teachers maintained by the APEMI. Based on the results of the research, due to the double task outreach teachers cannot pay enough attention during their work to the institutions involved in integration; and are less able to maintain a meaningful relationship with teachers and parents (Papp & Perlusz, 2012).

(2) In addition to rethinking the tasks, it would be necessary to create a network of contact consciously in which parents have a greater role to play. Opportunities, occasions (case talk, mailing list, telephone connection, etc.) should be provided where the parent is able to talk to the child support specialist or even in a team meeting with their child's teacher.

(3) Inclusion index school development program based on inclusive values (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) is currently not being used by APEMI due to the absence of professional services. They do not have the capacity to support such school development programs even though life of schools would be more inclusive with a long-term, professionally driven help.(Schiffer, 2011; Horváthné Storcz, 2012).

(4) At a higher decision-making level, it would be worthwhile to reconsider that the earlier restructuring professional services that are closely related to integration should be brought back to AMEPI at the legislative level. Reviewing the Hungarian education system, the

competence of integration is only available in these methodological institutions at the moment.

(5) Based on the research I consider Epstein (2011) family-school-community collaboration model and the related practice suitable for testing and some types of involvement should be adapted. Its applicability lies on the fact that it does not expect the conceptual development of all involvement forms at the same time, but it gives schools possibilities to think through any types and make a slow-moving, gradual change. One way of accessing families with a non-supportive family background is to reconsider the types of involvement and adjust them to local conditions and needs.

(6) Maintenance and legislative intentions from a higher level are also needed that providing the proper personal (using coordinator, psychologists, trainers for leading parental groups) and material conditions (parental room) we can really make a difference in the relationship between parents and school. In itself at present school is scarce.

(7) At the moment, as an element of the teacher progress system, I can imagine that one of the Epstein involvement forms is selected by a teacher within the master program and in a few years, it will be a consciously implemented practice in a particular school. Along the results of this they can develop the parent-school relationship through the years and can become an expert in the field.

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