Böddi Zsófia

Examining preschool integration
(focusing on factors increasing success and on developing preschool teacher training)

Theses of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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1. Introduction

1.1. Justification of topic selection

Recently it is a widely accepted principle at both international and Hungarian scope (e.g. Ferguson, 2008; Csányi, 2001; Papp, 2012; Perlusz 2013) that the institutional education of children with special educational needs should be implemented together with typically developing children. Integration retrospects on several decades in Hungary (e.g. Rózsáné, 2013; Perlusz, 2013). It has gone under considerable development from the initial experimental steps until today (Borbély et al., 1995) and has become general practice. Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education currently in force considers placing children with special educational needs into integrated settings fundamental. Although integration performs well regarding several aspects and it has become widespread, some questions remained unanswered. Certain fields worth further discussions. An important objective is that educational institutions should be more inclusive, thus shifting from integration towards inclusion (e.g. Csányi, 1995; Perlusz, 2013).

A narrower field of integration, i.e. integration at preschool level is discussed in this doctoral dissertation. Preschool integration and inclusion has special characteristics. In recent years great emphasis has been put on early childhood education (e.g. Török, 2015; Stephen, 2006) attracting the attention on the importance of the educational experiences provided to children and training of early childhood educators. Early childhood education institutions – including preschools – are the venues where both children and parents gain their first experience about institutional education and where the foundation of future school progress of children is set (Smith and Smith, 2000, cited in Aldrich, 2002; Golyán, 2016). Between the age of 3 and 6 children are eager to acquire knowledge about the surrounding world. Beside discovering their physical environment they are motivated to enhance their experience regarding peers. Preschool has key importance as the scene of integration; furthermore, it maintains close relation with early intervention (e.g. Rózsáné, 2015; Kereki, 2015; Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton, 2013). The fact that children have special educational needs is often realised and/or diagnosed during early childhood. In certain cases the difference is not so apparent compared to the typically developing children of this age (Odom, Vitztum, Wolery, Lieber, Sandall, Hanson, Beckman, Schwartz and Horn, 2004). Preschool differs from school in several aspects: e.g. the characteristics of educational planning are different and preschool is less performance-oriented (Odom et al., 2004; Venterm, 2006, cited in Bödö, 2010). Idea of child in preschool can be described by respecting individuality and uniqueness, reducing disadvantages as well as acceptance (cf. National Core Programme for Kindergartens, 2012). The above features are connected to preschool inclusion. Pre-primary education has always been intertwined with tolerance and the principle of individual treatment. For instance, there were precedents of children requiring special treatment attending preschool even before integration was initiated in Hungary (Papp, 1995).

It is a well-known fact that preschool integration provides numerous positive impacts on children with special educational needs and typically developing children (e.g. Wolery and Wilbers, 1995; Odom, 2000). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that these positive effects do not work automatically; great amount of awareness is required to achieve these outcomes (e.g. Wolery and Wilbers, 1995; Lundquist, Allodi and Siljehag, 2015).

1 In Hungary preschool (“óvoda”) is the first compulsory educational institution for children (ages 3 to 6 years) (Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education). It is well noticed that pre-primary education is provided in different forms by countries. However, within the scope of this paper I refer to the Hungarian “óvoda” by using the term preschool.

2 Government decree 363/2012 (XII. 17.) on the Core Programme for Kindergartens
While overviewing preschool integration and inclusion the factors determining its special characteristics six categories have been established: (1) external factors, (2) the child, (3) peers, (4) parents, (5) special teachers and other specialists and (6) preschool teachers. These factors interact each other and thus influence the success of integration and inclusion.

I have examined different aspects of preschool integration in my exploratory research using qualitative approach. I have researched and analysed factors determining directly and on a day-to-day basis the life of integrating preschool groups: social interactions and perceptions of children as well as attitudes of preschool teachers and parents raising children with special educational needs including cooperation with specialists. The research has been conducted in five integrating preschool groups. The other thread of the research examines the integration-related sense of preparedness and competence of graduating preschool teacher students attending Hungarian preschool education institutions.

Field researches have been implemented in preschool groups where integration is in practice for several years, therefore the education of children with special needs has become part of the routine. During the examination I observed how integration worked in a preschool group; how children with special educational needs settled in among their peers; what the determining factors of successful integration were according to parents of children with special educational needs and preschool teachers.

The peculiarity of my research is that, beside special education and pedagogical aspects, I involved the psychological approach when examining and assessing preschool integration. On the one hand, methods applied in field researches have been based on the methodology of developmental psychology; on the other hand, the interpretation of results included this aspect. As well as experience and emotions when exploring the attitudes of preschool teacher candidates have been highlighted. The relations of these experience and emotions in connection with the attitudes of students and their perception of preparedness and competence have also been assessed.

2. Aims of the research

The aim of my research is to find, by assessing the characteristics of preschool integration, factors which enhance integration. The efficiency of preschool integration can be increased by them. I analyse these factors from the aspect of preschool teacher training since my goal is to improve integration-related aspects of preschool teacher training. They all emerge from the interactions and perceptions of children, from the opinions and attitudes of parents and teachers and from the emotions described by future preschool teachers. By collecting these conclusions they can be “recycled” into the training of preschool teachers and thus supporting the education on integration.

In my thesis I focus on the examination and analysis of integration implemented in preschool. By implementing the research I pursued to identify the specific characteristics of integration, thus I examined the integrated preschool education in a clearly distinguishable group of integrated children. It means that I included in my research preschool groups integrating children requiring special treatment due to their disabilities and/or, by expert opinion, qualified as having special educational needs according to Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education. In all of these cases the demand of special treatment was clearly recognised by teachers.
2.1. Research aims

A. Detailed examination of preschool integration characteristics

1. *Examination of social integration and social preferences* in integrating groups. Identifying the interactions of children with special educational needs towards peers and adults; determining the social level of their activities. Analysing the role of adults in interactions.

2. Exploring the perceptions of children attending these integrating groups about “special educational needs” and “integration”. Determining possible sensitisation events related to integration and inclusion.

3. Exploring attitudes and experience of parents and preschool teachers of children with special educational needs attending the groups participating in the research in order to acquire more information on the integrating groups and to identify questions and issues connected to integration from the aspects of parents and preschool teachers.

4. Studying the integration-related attitudes of graduating preschool teacher candidates focusing on their self-perception regarding preparedness. The aim is to learn what kind of experience – in- and outside of teacher training – contributes to the sense of preparedness and competence and which fields are assessed as challenging.

B. Identifying factors improving the success of preschool integration and analysing them from the aspect of preschool teacher training

2.2. Research questions and premises

- **Examining social integration and social preference in integrating groups:** How do interactions of children with special educational needs occur in the participating integrating preschool groups? In what proportion do children with special educational needs interact with children and/or adults? In what proportion of these interactions are dyadic? Which social levels can be attributed to their activities? In what extent does the scaffolding of adults required in peer interactions?

- **Perceptions of children related to “special educational needs” and “integration”:** Can the perceptions of preschool-aged children about special educational needs be revealed? How the perceptions of children are manifested in “situations involving a mate with special educational needs”? In which ways can helping, supporting, sensitivity and empathy be observed in the perceptions of children?

Premises (cf. Sántha, 2006):

- Method based on play and story completion is suitable for examining the perceptions of children in connection with special educational needs and integration.

- Empathy and intention to help emerge from the attitudes of children. Although the development of empathy and pro-social behaviour is not finished in preschool-age (see Buda, 2012), it reaches an advanced level. Preschool age is a significant period regarding the development of emotional competence (e.g. Cole and Cole, 2003; Zsolnai, Lesznyák and Kasik, 2007). Older children presumably reveal more signs of empathy.

- Based on the main characteristics of empathy development (e.g. Sandberg and Meyer-Bahlburg, 1994, cited in Zsolnai, Lesznyák and Kasik, 2007; Rapp, 2007, cited in Zsolnai, Lesznyák and Kasik, 2007; Buda, 2012) girls express more empathy than boys.
One or more events can be distinguished in play and story completion which can be connected to integration-related sensitisation.

- **Attitudes of parents raising children with special educational needs attending the integrating groups involved in the research:**
  What do they consider as key factors of successful integrated education? How do their expectations meet the real situation? In their opinion what are and what could be the elements of successful integration? What are the important factors for them relating the preschool education of their children? How do they cooperate with teachers? What state do they think the institution representing compared to the ideal situation of integration/inclusion?

- **Attitudes and methods of preschool teachers in the integrating groups involved in the research:**
  How can integration-related attitudes of teachers be described in the examined groups? What can be highlighted from among their “inventory”? In their opinion what are and what could be the elements of integrated or inclusive education? How do they perceive their own competence? What kind of factors facilitate their work and which make it more difficult? Which state of integration has been reached in their institution according to them?

- **Integration-related attitudes of preschool teacher candidates:**
  What is the opinion of graduating students about their own theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the field of integrated and inclusive education? What kind of experience (in- and outside of teacher training) has they gained in connection with integration? What are their expectations and possible fears? What kind of preparation would they request beyond the one they have received during their education? In what extent do they consider themselves ready to integration and its challenges?

**Premises:**
- Based on literature data experience gained in the education of children special educational need and inclusion are connected to more positive integration-related attitudes (cf. Avramidis and Norwich, 2002), therefore I presume that
  - experience gained in- and outside of teacher training in connection with children with special educational needs correlates with more positive attitude towards integration as well as extended perception of competence and preparedness.
  - characteristics of the preschools where students completed their practical trainings (i.e. whether the groups were integrating or not; whether they gained practical experience in the field of integration) are related to the perception of preparedness.
  - positive experience in integration leads to extended perception of competence and preparedness.
  - since experience (such as work, family, characteristics of practical training) of students attending full-time or correspondence education are different, it is predicted that differences appear in their perceptions of preparedness.
- Students identify insufficiencies regarding their preparation for integration.
3. Methods

Participants

Field research conducted in preschools

- Five integrating groups of three preschools in Budapest; One same-age group consisted of children at the age of 4 to 5 years while children aged between 3 and 7 attended to the other four mixed-age groups. Altogether nine children with special educational needs (3 girls and 6 boys) attended the groups. Beyond them there was a newcomer boy in one of the groups whose diagnosing was under progress. In another group a girl with special educational need spent only a few hours a day in preschool, therefore I did not meet her.
- Observed children in the research observing social interactions: six children with special educational needs (non-autistic) (3 girls and 3 boys between the age of 5 and 7, mean age: 6.17 ys).
- Teachers of the integrating preschool groups: 10 teachers (women between the age of 24 and 58, mean age: 45.2 ys).
- Seven people out of the parents of the children with special educational needs (each of the studied groups was represented). Only in four cases data has been provided about the parents: three questionnaires were completed by mothers while in one case parents filled it in together. Mean age of mothers is 37.75 ys (between 33 and 41), that of fathers is 41.00 ys (between 39 and 45).

Graduating preschool teacher students:

- 360 people attending Hungarian preschool teacher training institutions
- 355 women and 3 men; between the age of 20 and 50; mean age: 26.09 ys. 224 and 134 full-time and correspondent students, respectively (2 of them have not provided data).

Elements of the research (data collection procedure, results and conclusions) are presented as follows.

4. Examining social integration and social preference in integrating groups

4.1. Data collection

Observation of social interactions was the method used for exploring social integration occurring in the preschool groups. One of the most important aspects in research planning was to implement natural observation, thus video cameras were installed in several places within the classrooms. The cameras recorded 90 minutes undisturbedly. Recordings were executed in mornings during free-play time or teacher-initiated activities. Generally three recordings were completed in each preschool group.

4.2. Data procession

I based the elaboration of observation categories on the literature about similar researches (e.g. File, 1994; Harper and McCluskey, 2002, 2003) and I adjusted and complemented them in order to suit the behaviours observed in my recordings. I intended to cover all activities as well as their social level appearing in preschool classrooms. Eight independent observers (seven women and one man; mean age: 21.88 ys) coded the test recordings using this system of categories. I divided the recordings into ten-second-long segments; observers made decisions on the occurrence of the categories (316 pcs of 10-second-long segments, altogether 52.67 minutes). As for testing inter-rater reliability Krippendorff Alpha (KALPHA) was used (Hayes
and Krippendorff, 2007; De Swert, 2012). Following inter-rater reliability testing I established the final categories:

1. Activity:
   - Eating and drinking
   - Creative arts
   - Playing

   - Solitary activity
   - Interaction, interactive activity
     - Sub-category: type of interaction
       - dyadic interaction with a child
       - dyadic interaction with an adult
       - physical contact with the adult
       - only children are involved in the interaction
       - adult is present in the interaction

Using the final category system I coded the behaviour of six observed children; I created 15-minute-long units from the three recordings. I coded the first five minutes of each unit (altogether 1,784 pcs of 10-second-long segments; 4.95 hours). In order to justify the reliability of the results an independent observer coded the whole recording; reliability has been tested (Cohen-kappa).

I counted frequencies during data analysis; both the observed categories and the socially remarkable linked categories derived from them were analysed.

4.3. Results

Analysis of frequencies provided the answer for the research questions related to occurrence of interactions, social levels of activities and the role of adult in interactions. The observed children with special educational needs occupied themselves with play in the majority during the time of observation (1,151 cases; 64.52%). Creative arts and eating and/or drinking were represented in smaller proportions (257 cases; 14.41% and 101 cases; 5.66%, respectively).

In the aspect of social level activities were carried out in interaction exceeding half of the total cases (1,086 cases; 62.13%), while solitary activities were less frequent (548 cases; 30.72%).

Dyadic interactions were identified in 464 cases (26.01%). Out of them the observed children interacted with an adult (mainly preschool teachers) in 151 cases (8.46%). They interacted with a peer in more than twice as many occasions (313 cases; 17.54%). As regards of situations with an adult participating in the dyadic interaction physical contact was observed in only 58 cases (3.25%). Similar proportion was measured regarding those interactions of the observed children in which only children participated (without adult presence) (559 cases; 31.33%) and those where adults were also involved (625 cases; 35.03%).

The analysis of playing, as the most frequent activity of preschool-aged children, provides important information on social interactions. Therefore, I introduce the social aspects of playing
among the linked categories derived from the observed categories. Playing in interaction with peers (720 cases; 40.36%) was more common than solitary play (393 cases; 22.03%). By subdividing all cases of play occurring in interactions it has been revealed that the most frequent type involved only peers (438 cases; 24.55%). More than half of them (244 cases; 13.68%) were dyadic interactions. Interactions with adult participant represented a smaller proportion (357 cases; 20.01%). A minor amount of these latter interactions was dyadic (47 cases; 2.63%).

4.4. Discussion of the results and conclusions

The observed children with special educational needs generally pursued interactions with peers and adults in a balanced proportion, although the presence of adults was slightly more frequent in the interactions. However, it is important to note that teacher-initiated activities were included in the recorded periods. By further analysis of these activities a more nuanced picture emerged. The observed children predominantly played during the recorded periods; examining only this activity it can be concluded that play with other children was more frequent than that of involving adults. Solitary play occurred in similar share than play with peers. The proportion of the former was not remarkably high, thus no such conclusion was made that these children were isolated within their groups (cf. e.g. Lyon and Canning, 1995, cited in Lloyd and Howe, 2003; Rubin et al., 1976, cited in Lloyd and Howe, 2003; Rubin et al., 1978, cited in Lloyd and Howe, 2003; Mérei, 1989). Playing with children and, within this category, dyadic play between children is one of the most important indicators of social integration and preference. Based on the analysis of these situations it can be stated that the observed children with special educational needs were chosen as playmates. They were not refused by peers and left alone in their groups (cf. Mérei, 1989). The observed children were not in peripheral position, since in this case I would have experienced that they were mainly solitary or interacted with adults instead of children. Indeed, they participated as part of the group and as playmates; they did not play exclusively on their own or with the support of adults. They did not require constant – dyadic – involvement of adults during playing. As a summary I concluded that the observed children with special educational needs were functioning as integral parts of their preschool groups.

5. Examining the perception of children attending integrating preschool groups as regards of “special educational needs” and “integration”

5.1. Data collection

In order to reveal the perceptions of children I elaborated a method built on common play and story completion for which the basic idea has been provided by the testing procedure called “A day of the bear cub” of Kürti Istvánné and Szilágyi Lilla (1970). In this examination I modelled a schematic situation outlining some aspects of “special educational needs” and “integration” which fit the cognitive and emotional developmental characteristics of preschool-aged children. A bear cub has its leg injured in the story, but it stays in preschool during both indoor and outdoor play-time. The fundamental dilemma of the story is that all other bear cubs want to climb a tree and sip honey up among the branches while one of their peers is unable to follow them.

The research involved a handmade schematic scale model of a preschool classroom and yard with bear cubs and a “bear teacher” children could play with. Part of the game was implemented following the free associations of the children while at some points I intervened and directed
the play according to my research aims. A registrar recorded both the actions and verbal expressions of children in a pre-assembled template.

78 children took part in the examination; altogether 57 completely assessable records were completed (26 boys and 31 girls between the age of 4 and 7; mean age: 5.32 ys). The children participated one by one in the examination. I was the investigator in each case and a registrar was also always present.

5.2. Data procession

During the assessment of the records I performed content analysis with the assistance of an independent observer, established categories and determined variables. I examined prevalence as well as correlation among the variables (Pearson correlation coefficient, chi-squared test). The following variables were set:

- Age
- Sex
- What to do with it? (spontaneous/guided)
- Integrates\textsuperscript{3}_CLASSROOM (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Empathic and helping attitude\textsuperscript{4}_CLASSROOM (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Passivity\_CLASSROOM (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Takes the cub out to the yard spontaneously (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Takes the cub out to the yard by guiding (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Receives honey (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Reaches up to the tree (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Integrates\_YARD (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Empathic and helping attitude\_YARD (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Passivity\_YARD (dichotomous with values 0/1)
- Levels of integration (based on the main motive of the story, i.e. whether the bear cub with the bandaged leg reaches the yard and participates in honey eating and tree climbing; with scores between 0 and 3)

5.3. Results

Examining the prevalence of categories provides answers for research questions and manifestation of empathy and helping intentions while the analysis of correlations reveals the answers for the premises.

More than half of the examined children put the bandaged bear into Passive role both in the classroom (64.9%) and in the yard (59.6%).

Empathic and helping attitude showed relatively rare occurrence in the classroom (28.0%) while its frequency was 2.5 times higher in the yard (73.7%). Children facing the problematic situation appearing in the yard (the injured cub cannot/with difficulties go out to the yard, reach up to the tree and receive honey) provided physical and/or social support more frequently to the

\textsuperscript{3} A working definition of integration has been applied in this category name; finding the most informative title has been aimed. This name was used in a sense that indicated that the child included the bear in group activities and maintaining interactions with peers (thus not excluding and isolating it from the group).

\textsuperscript{4} A working definition has been applied (similarly to that of Integrates) aiming to use the most informative name describing this category. Perceiving the situation of the cub, sensing and understanding its situation, showing behavioural elements expressing solidarity and support have been covered by this category.
bear with bandaged leg. They included it \textit{(Integrates)} spontaneously in approximately the same proportion to activities of the classroom (35.1\%) and of the yard (33.3\%).

The injured bear was given honey in almost every case (89.5\%) by the children \textit{(Receives honey)} while the share of those solving the issue of climbing the tree \textit{(Reaches up to the tree)} was considerably lower (42.1\%).

As for the \textit{Levels of integration} I found that most children (36.8\%) integrated the bear in the third – highest – level and similar proportion (33.3\%) was observed regarding second-level integration. The problem was solved in smaller number (17.5\%) at the first level and in the smallest proportion (0.05\%) at zero level.

During the examination of correlations I performed my analyses based on calculations proved to be significant out of which I hereby highlight the most important ones.

I determined that older children (r(55)=.44; p=.001) and boys (r(57)=.31; p=.02) got involved more easily in the game \textit{(What to do with him?)}. \textit{Empathic and helping attitude} slightly correlated with age in both locations (classroom: r(54)=.31; p=.02; yard: r(52)=.41; p=.003), thus my premise has been confirmed; however, the extent of correlation shall be taken into account. Examining the correlation between \textit{Sex} and \textit{Empathic and helping attitude} has not led to significant result (p>0.2), therefore my sex-related premise has not been confirmed. I found slight correlation (r(53)= .34; p=.01) between the two locations in case of \textit{Empathic and helping attitude} while in connection with \textit{Passivity} and \textit{Integration} no such correlations were observed. It means that the two locations are clearly distinguished in the play of children. Furthermore, \textit{Empathic and helping attitude} and \textit{Integration} showed no correlation, either.

\textit{Passivity} strongly and negatively correlated with \textit{Integration} (classroom: r(55)= -.60; p=.00; yard: r(45)=-.73; p=.00), that is, those children involved the cub more likely who assigned less passive role to it.

I detected strong relation between the fact that the injured cub was taken out to the yard spontaneously \textit{(Takes him out to the yard spontaneously)} and the \textit{Levels of integration} (r(52)=.56; p=.00). Weaker correlation (r(53)=.39; p=.004) was observed between \textit{Integration} in classroom and spontaneous taking-out to the yard. It means that those children who take the bear spontaneously out to the yard were more likely to include it in the activities. An outstandingly strong correlation was found between guidance \textit{(Takes him out to the yard by guiding)} – meaning that the investigator entered into the play and asked about the bear with the bandaged leg in case the examined child had not taken it out to the yard spontaneously – and the \textit{Levels of integrity} (r(22)= .89; p=.00). Strong correlation was observed between guidance and \textit{Integration} in the yard (r(19)=.72; p=.001). I consider it as a sensitisation point since the intervention of the investigator influenced the expressions manifested in the playing connected to the inclusion of the bear into the group. Therefore, my premise regarding the sensitisation point has been confirmed.

Based on my experience this method – by considering the above-described restrictions – proved to be suitable for revealing the perceptions of children. A category system has been elaborated on the basis of the analysed records which made objective assessment available.
5.4. Conclusions

I draw my conclusions by taking into account that this method allowed to model a simplified situation. As such, it can be considered as a first step toward researching these perceptions of preschool-aged children.

Under the conditions of the examination children expressed, in great proportions, signs of empathy, help and supportive behaviour; this correlated with the age emphasising the importance of preschool age from the aspect of pro-social behaviour. Sex and Empathic and helping attitude have shown no correlation that may be explained by the small size of the sample and by the fact that during the examination I could observe manifested forms of empathy and support rather than the inner representation of children putting themselves into the situation of the injured cub. Integration and Empathic and helping attitude showed no correlation, either; it is remarkable from the aspect of sensitisation points: supportive behaviour of children was not automatically connected to the involvement of the bear. Therefore, the role of an adult participating or joining the play can be important by making the children realise the situation. Great proportion of the children assigned, as a kind of automation, passive role to the injured bear. It suggests they understand that the physical injury is connected to the alteration of those skills requiring movement (cf. e.g. Diamond, Hong and Tu, 2008). At the same time the “automatically” passive role of the cub calls the attention to the importance of adult interpretations: it can “shift” children towards assigning some less passive role to the bandaged bear (e.g. one that does not require large movements). The negative correlation between Integration and Passivity justifies this conclusion.

Whether the injured bear was taken spontaneously out to the yard proved to be an important factor from the aspect of inclusion. Those children who, from the beginning, considered it as part of the group also got it involved – in some ways – in the activities. A correlating chain of events was revealed among inclusion occurring in the classroom, taking the cub spontaneously to the yard and its increased inclusion as regards of outside activities. The strong correlation between the intervention of the investigator (Takes him out to the yard by guiding) and Levels of integration was remarkable in connection with the sensitisation point. Those children who, although not spontaneously but by reacting to the guidance provided by the investigator, included the bear into the group activities, later initiated the higher levels of inclusion. I consider it important, because it demonstrates that the intentional intervention of an adult e.g. in a guided game can influence the attitudes of children.

6. Attitudes of parents raising children with special educational needs attending the integrating groups involved in the research and of preschool teachers working in these groups

6.1. Attitudes of parents raising children with special educational needs attending the integrating groups involved in the research

6.1.1. Data collection

For obtaining the opinions of parents I chose the method of questionnaire that they filled in online (Qualtrics Survey Software).

Covered topics were as follows:

1. Choosing preschool
2. Expectations and positive experience
3. Life of the child in preschool
4. Characteristics of teachers facilitating integration
5. Relations of the child in preschool
6. Parent-teacher, parent-specialist and parent-parent relations
7. Opinion about the preschool from the aspect of integration
8. Questions connected to the child and his/her special educational needs
9. Questions identifying the sample

6.1.2. Results

Content of the questionnaire can be assessed via the adjustment of children to preschool, the features of participants of integration as well as their relations and integration-related characteristics of preschool. Parents had generally smaller impact on the educational situation. They had the opportunity to choose preschool in several cases while teachers were chosen only in one case. Numerous factors emerged in connection with expectations and their realisation: equal treatment for their children, caretaking, development, attention, supporting adjustment, communicating with parents and the willingness of children attending preschool. Expectations of some parents were partially or not met while others were fulfilled. Three parents indicated the teachers exceeded their expectations; each of these remarks was connected to the characteristics and attitudes of teachers. According to the majority of parents their children felt themselves good in preschool. Parents mainly indicated teacher-child relations positively and they found integration-related characteristics in teachers.

The answers of fully and less satisfied parents were clearly distinct in describing parent-teacher relations. Similar distinctions were found in the opinions regarding the adjustment of children and the behaviour of teachers scaffolding the acceptance of children with special educational needs. Parent-teacher relations can be described as cooperative (e.g. providing information and asking for advice), although possibilities of thorough discussions seemed rare. As for the opinions about specialists answers were also well-distinguished between satisfied and non-satisfied parents.

In connection with the integration-related characteristics of preschools was experienced that most parents had positive opinion about them. In two cases features directly linked to integration were mentioned: equipment, presence of special education needs assistants, logopedists and other special teachers as well as having inclusive attitude. Four parents would recommend the preschool of their children to other parents (although they mentioned that they know only the group rather than the entire preschool). Beside the general positive opinion about the preschools fields to be developed also emerged.

6.1.3. Conclusions

By analysing the answers of the questionnaire it was noted that standpoints of parents regarding preschool, in particular teachers and groups were clearly distinguished according to their level of satisfaction. Answering the research questions it can be stated that parents obviously saw the success of integration in the positive attitudes and characteristics of teachers. In many cases teachers applied “the principle of individual treatment” also at the level of parents, thus they aligned to the expectations of parents. Although they did not write it down exactly it has been revealed by the answers of parents that they consider good teacher-parent communication an important factor. Expectations of parents mainly met the real situation; it was also connected to the attitudes of teachers. Based on the answers of parents positive attitude toward integration, pedagogical approach (particularly in the acceptance of children) and competence can be mentioned as elements of successful integration. It is accompanied by proper cooperation with specialists and experiencing that it can enhance the development of children. Furthermore good parent-teacher cooperation and communication can be mentioned here. Out of the forms of
communication longer personal discussions emerged, contrary to expectations, less frequently, especially in connection with problems.

6.2. Attitudes and methods of preschool teachers working in the integrating group included in the research

6.2.1. Data collection

A thematic qualitative, semi-structured interview has been completed with the teachers (Szokolszky, 2004; Nádasi, 2004). These interviews were conducted one by one, taking notes was the method for recording data.

The questions of the interview can be arranged around five topics which are as follows:

1. The teacher: success, competence, characteristics
2. The teacher: to be developed, challenge, failure
3. The group: preparations, children, parents
4. The preschool as an institution: employees, specialists; what does the preschool do for successful integration; at which level does it currently stay; what are the areas to be developed
5. Key factors of successful integration

Primarily the manifest content has been highlighted, since the aim of making the interviews was to obtain objective information. (Although latent content, attitudes and emotions were discussed where they emerged).

6.2.2. Results

As for successes forming of good teacher-child relations, delight felt over the advance in the development and adaptation of children with special educational needs as well as the adjustment into the group and experiencing self-competence. Among the integration-related characteristics of teachers empathy, social sensitivity, tolerance, patience, understanding, helpfulness, encouragement, failure tolerance (to teach the child to it), retrying in case of failure, acceptance, adaptation, flexibility, finding the “key” to each child, cooperating with colleagues and self-development. Knowledge in special needs education – two interviewees would deepen their knowledge in the field of autism – in differentiating and in related methods were mentioned among the areas to be developed. High headcounts, too many children requiring special attention, differentiating and planning as well as emotional burdens (i.e. frustration, anxiety, failure, dilemmas) were indicated as challenges. Failures formed three groups: when teachers were unable to have impact on a child (e.g. behaving in an extreme way or not developing), difficulties of communication with parents and accumulated challenges of teaching as a beginner or re-entered preschool teacher in an integration environment.

In case children with special educational needs arrive with expert opinion, teachers can prepare for receiving them; in the opposite case they have to adjust to the situation. In every case parents represent important source of information.

Teachers experience acceptance on behalf of children attending the groups; in case any problems emerging they discuss them with the children. They promote acceptance, e.g. praising children with special educational needs in the presence of mates. Teachers generally experience acceptance and neutral attitude in some cases on behalf of parents of children attending the group.
Proper cooperation is of key importance regarding the work of preschool employees and specialists cooperating in maintaining integration. Preschool employees commonly accept integration. They also aware of the fields to be developed, e.g. decreasing workload, vocational trainings and exchanging experience among each other. Teachers described preschools as institutions where integration is implemented at a high level, however the inclusion has not been yet realised. They identified the most important factors of integration as follows: acceptance, empathy, presence of adequate development and specialists, professional support, personal assistance, group size, exact guidelines, methodological knowledge, proper professional preparations, cooperation with children, quality of the relation toward parents, likewise thinking in accepting integration, cooperation with colleagues, methodological freedom, routines and calm atmosphere.

6.2.3. Conclusions

Such factors were mentioned by teachers as regards of their successes that can also be considered success factors in educating typically developing children (e.g. good relation between children and teachers), although stronger efforts and more attempts are required in case of children with special educational needs. This experience strengthened their perception of self-competence. Such general characteristics of teachers emerged which facilitate integration. Teachers mentioned several generic, somewhat expectable (but relevant) answers among their positive characteristics required for a successfully implemented integration. Specific features and competences also emerged e.g. flexibility, constant attempts for finding the most suitable method. The importance of perseverance was a latent content of the interviews. As a conclusion it can be said that the inclusive attitude of teachers is a key factor of integration.

Several teachers would willingly increase their knowledge in the fields of integration out of which autism was emphasised since it requires special pedagogical approach (cf. Bakonyi, 2015). Sharing experience was also indicated. In case of negative emotions connected to integration (e.g. frustration, failure and anxiety), challenges or difficulties in parent-teacher communication it is important to consider whether it is provided for teachers to share and deal with their emotions.

Generally positive attitude toward integration was revealed on behalf of teachers. They found preschool integration properly or really well functioning (although overloaded in some instances). At the same time they, in most cases, saw the possibility and need of development. Numerous factors were identified in connection with preschool as an institution (e.g. organising development tasks) that can influence the success of integration.

Acceptance, proper cooperation among the participants of integration and inclusion (teachers, other preschool employees, specialists, parents and children) as well as methodological preparedness combined with flexibility were highlighted as elements of adequately working integrated and inclusive education.

7. Examining the integration-related attitudes of preschool teacher candidates focusing on their perceptions of self-preparedness

7.1. Data collection

Experience and attitudes of graduating preschool teacher students about integration as well as their perception of self-preparedness were examined by a survey filled in online or in paper format.
Topics of the survey:

1. *Questions determining the sample (age, sex, form of education (full-time/correspondent) institution, etc.)*

2. *Experience originating from sources different from teacher training related to children with special educational needs:*
   - place of gaining experience: e.g. informally, at workplace
   - frequency
   - kinds of special educational needs
   - work connected to children
   - type of it (e.g. institution)
   - field of work
   - working experience with not typically developing children

3. *Training experience – Theoretical training*
   - contribution of certain subjects and group of subjects to general knowledge of children, children with special educational needs and integration (Likert scale)
   - elective courses of the field
   - intentional search for courses involving the subject of integration

4. *Training experience – Practical training*
   - integrating status of teacher training preschools
   - integrating status of preschool group
   - kinds of special educational needs
   - tasks of the student connected to integrated education
   - positive and negative, integration-related experience gained in practical trainings

5. *Perception of preparedness and emotions regarding integration (Likert scale)*

7.2. *Data procession*

Descriptive statistics were calculated and tests were completed (chi-squared test, t-test) in data processing.

7.3. *Results*

Based on the answers given in the survey it can be determined that large proportion of teacher candidates have met children outside the framework of education whose development altered from the typical. Patterns from the answers of full-time and correspondent students differ in both the scope ($\chi^2=9.16; p<0.05$) and frequency ($\chi^2=72.19; p<0.01$) of experience. Less than half of those completing the survey deal with children aged 0 to 7 years outside the framework of their studies (39.85% and 60.15% for full-time and correspondent students, respectively) mainly in institutions (41.04%) or as baby-sitters (32.95%). Correspondent student usually involved in the former type of engagement while full-time students choose baby-sitting more frequently. Among institutions preschools were indicated the most often; less than half of those working in institutions (45.16%) have already gained experience on children whose development altered from typical.

Teacher candidates consider that subjects related to psychology and pedagogy contributed the most to their theoretical knowledge connected to integration. 28.44% of the survey participants completed integration-related courses beyond their compulsory studies; the proportion of those indicating that they intentionally looked for topics of this field in their studies is similar (32.92%).
Great majority of the students completed their practical trainings in integrating preschools and integrating groups (94.12% and 85.67%, respectively). They usually had experience on children with special educational needs as regards of behaviour, adjustment and speech; moreover, they had often met children with other psychological development disorders and autism. Students answered most often (152 people) that they fulfilled all tasks of preschool teachers related to children with special educational needs. However, not all of them gave this answer, there were differences regarding certain pedagogical tasks.

As for the experience gained on children with special educational needs during practical training teacher candidates declared considerably more positive than negative experience (227 and 138 people, respectively). Altogether 949 answers were given indicating the source of positive experience: gladness felt for the inclusion of children (176 cases) and creating teacher-children relation (170 cases) took the first two places. Contrary to the great number of sources of gladness experiencing the perception of competence was rare (5.69%). Sources of negative experience were mainly linked to emotions (e.g. frustration, emotionally demanding situations). Only four people answered that dealing with these children had been, on the whole, a negative experience.

Self-reflections about preparedness and competence of students (a kind of “well-being for integration”) has been assessed by a Likert scale question set. The mean values of the statements were analysed.

Based on their answers teacher candidates perceive that the attitude of acceptance toward the development of children has been established during their studies. They are aware of the fundamental knowledge connected to children with special educational needs and integration, although they consider practical preparation for integration as not so well-articulated within their studies.

In case of integration students generally provided positive opinion in the field of exact tasks and challenges around preschool teacher competences; they consider themselves relatively well-prepared. Discussing the problems and special development needs of children with their parents is the task they feel themselves the least prepared for.

It seems graduating students would likely be involved in the education of children with special educational needs (mean: 2.76); at the same time feel themselves prepared for this work in a slightly lower extent (2.61).

I examined the answers related to “well-being for integration” alongside certain questions of the survey revealing experience on integration. Results were determined by significant t-tests and are summarised in the followings. Experience on children with special educational needs and integration gained outside the framework of university education has impacts on how prepared students perceive themselves. As a generalisation it can be said that those having experience on children with special educational needs, dealing with children aged 0 to 7 years and gaining integration-related working experience perceive themselves more prepared and competent regarding some aspects of integration.

An interesting result that teacher candidates who do not have experience on children with special educational needs beyond their studies declared in greater extent that they were aware of the possibility of differentiation.

It turned out that students intentionally selecting courses connected to special educational needs and integration consider themselves both generally and in different exact fields of integrated education.
Teacher candidates who have completed their practical trainings in integrating groups perceive more so that their studies provided practical knowledge about integration, they are less inexperienced, know the possibilities of differentiation, struggle less about the feeling of frustration. Their attitudes are more positive: they would more likely work in integrating groups and perceive themselves altogether more prepared in the topic of integration.

My premises indicating that experience on children with special educational needs gained in an outside of university studies lead to more positive attitudes and better perception of preparedness and competence were, therefore, justified.

Experience acquired during practical trainings proved to be decisive. Positive experience were accompanied by better perception of preparedness and competence. My premise stating that positive experience results positive relation to integration has been justified.

Differences were identified between the answers of full-time and correspondent students. The former rather expressed their fears about discussions with parents, while correspondent students generally feel themselves better prepared in the field of integration. Thus my premise regarding differences based on the status of the students has been justified.

I presumed that teacher candidates were going to express dissatisfaction and identify deficiencies in connection with the specific characteristics of integration in preschool teacher education. It has been corroborated by the fact that only 1.36% and 1.02% of the participants found their preparation proper and sufficient.

7.4. Conclusions

It can be stated that out-of-university experience of correspondent students on children with special educational needs is more intensive and more strongly connected to work implemented on institutions. Similar experience of full-time students is sparser and usually gained within less formal frameworks. It cannot be left unnoticed that some correspondent students acquire no experience beyond their compulsory education. Both starting their careers and integration can represent great challenges for them.

A remarkable result emerged indicating that students having, beyond their university studies, no experience on children with special educational needs rather consider that they are aware of differentiation. The explanation of this can be that those meeting more children with special educational needs and getting familiar with the situation have experienced the need for flexibility on behalf of teachers. Thus, they perceive themselves less prepared while those who know differentiation from a rather theoretical aspect consider themselves more prepared.

Motivation connected to integration-related education proved to be important as well: more information and education are accompanied by more positive attitude (cf. Avramidis and Norwich, 2002) and higher level perception of preparedness and competence. At the same time it is important to note that only around 30% of the survey participants looked intentionally for integration-related content of subjects. Their motivation was obviously already stronger.

It seems great proportion of students gained experience in integrating groups where most of them were required to fulfil every task teachers perform. However, attention shall be paid to the fact that, although differentiation is a method pedagogically connected to integration, it appeared rarely in the answers. In some cases the task of the student was to occupy the child (aiming rather “exclusion” than differentiation).

Importance of the experience and feelings acquired in connection with integration can also be outlined based on the results. Positive experience provides basis for more positive integration-
related perceptions of teacher candidates (cf. “contact hypothesis” – Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). Education has a key task in facilitating the interpretation, awareness-raising and reframing of positive and negative experience gained during practical trainings. Both university teachers and mentoring preschool teachers play emphasised role in these steps.

Reflections about the education revealed that teacher candidate require, beyond theoretical knowledge, practical ways of gaining experience since these can decrease their uncertainty.

8. Summary

Research implemented in integrating groups provided valuable experience as regards of preschool integration. As an important context of interpretation it emerged that integration cannot be observed in a totally objective way. Its participants are people and key factors of it can be found in the interactions among these people. By examining the interactions of children with special educational needs involved in the examination it turned out that they are really parts of the groups. Observation is offered as a method suitable for the observer (e.g. researcher, teacher or teacher candidate) to learn about and be aware of interactions. It reveals information on both social relations and adult-child interactions that remain hidden when applying other methods. Adapting the method of observation shall be included among the skills of teachers in order to learn about children and events occurring in their group. Analysing video recordings can provide possibilities in teacher training and vocational training (e.g. in case-analysing groups).

Preschool groups and attending children are obviously important elements of integration. By applying the method of play it has become apparent that children between the age of 5 and 7 years had perceptions about what it means if somebody can differently or not at all participate in group activities due to some – perceivable – hurdle. Children showed empathy and support for it. The occurrence of a sensitisation point was an important result; by entering into the play of children I could, as an investigator, guide it toward inclusion into the group activities. It is of key importance to find sensitisation methods adjusted to the age of children attending preschool.

Preschool teachers are also among the key participants of integration. Results of my research stress the fact that the way a preschool teacher relates to children with special educational needs and integration is one of the most important factor in the implementation of integration. It considerably determines the context of integration whether teachers are able to accept the given situation and circumstances and fully adjust themselves to the child. The latter is a step toward inclusion. By reflecting it back to preschool teacher education the conclusion can be drawn that preparation for integration as well as increasing its efficiency start at that point when the idea of a child is formed during the education of preschool teachers.

Experience on children with special educational needs gained in- and outside of university education proved to be a particularly important factor in shaping the integration-related attitude and confidence of teachers at the beginning of their career. It is necessary to facilitate the procession and interpretation of the experience while, based on their expectations, providing practical methodological knowledge and more possibilities for gaining experience directly.

Interviews conducted with preschool teachers revealed that the amount of their integration-related experience increased their level of confidence. However, they have uncertainties that would be important to deal with. As a conclusion it can be said that the success of integration would be, in large extent, increased if a platform was provided for teachers suitable for sharing their experience, help solving their dilemmas and processing their failures. Cooperating with specialists and the quality of this cooperation was identified as another impact influencing the
success of integration. It helps the case of integration if specialists and teachers can work together as a real team, although parents shall also form part of this team. Teacher-parent communication is also a key factor of integration.

As a next step following my research it would be useful to refine the system of observation categories, in particular for characteristics of solitary social level and directions of interactions. Roles of teachers in interactions and ways of play support can also be described more in details. I consider the questionnaires with mainly open-ended questions examining the experience and opinion of parents as well as the semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers as good basis for a questionnaire research involving closed-end questions applied in a larger sample. As for the survey made for graduating students examining their experience on integration and their perceptions about preparedness and competence, this research would be worth continuing in other researches. It could be refined by using other methods (e.g. focus group discussions) and by conducting follow-up studies (cf. Aldrich, 2002).

Involving the aspect of psychology in the examination and analysis of integration in preschool was an innovative element in my research. As a conclusion it can be said that this approach provided valuable information in studying social integration, functioning of groups and learning about the attitudes of teacher candidates so as to focus on the factors participating in the successful implementation of integration. Observing interactions called the attention to the importance of social integration and “micro”-events occurring in groups determining the success of integration. By observing play, as the main activity of preschool-aged children, from social aspect I could obtain a picture about the social interactions of children with special educational needs attending preschool groups involved in the research.

When examining the attitudes and perceptions of preparedness and competence of teacher candidates I stressed the effects of emotions and experience. This aspect, although with not so much emphasis put on it, was present in examining the experience of active teachers. The results of the research showed that, beside preparation connected to the exact theoretical and practical knowledge, feelings, positive impacts of positive experience and procession of negative ones play important roles in perceiving integration-related competence.

Several factors were focused on during my research as elements of the successful integration. In case of both the field researches implemented in preschools and the survey for graduating preschool teacher students I identified factors which can be incorporated in the education of preschool teachers in order to better prepare them for integration. The efficiency of integration can be increased if teachers begin their career more confidently and with less uncertainty and anxiety in connection with integration. Although my research primarily aimed to find factors enhancing the efficiency of integration, I consider that the conclusions are worth deliberating not only for teachers working in integrating groups but also for all teachers dealing with and educating preschool-aged children.

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