The SMILE Project - A Systemic Approach to Creating an Inclusive Educational Environment

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Abstract

The article is based on the SMILE project, under the Erasmus+ Programme, which is being implemented in four European countries: Greece, Romania, Portugal and Bulgaria, the last country also being the project coordinator. The project aims to transfer and scale up a Model for a systemic approach to inclusive education which was initiallytested out and applied in Bulgaria. The Model and its self-assessment instrument enable teachers to create an inclusive school environment relying on four educational areas: shared and visionary leadership, inclusive pedagogy, child safeguarding and partnership with parents. The article outlines the objectives and methodology of the project and focuses on the main findings that have emerged from the teacher training course on inclusive education delivered in Romania. The training sessions are designed as workshops that encourage active participation (expressing opinions and sharing experience) with a view to actively implementing the ideas generatedby each participant school during the training. This strategy allows for schools to adjust and apply to their context what has been acquired, and also later discuss with the other participants, share experiences and fine tune them.

Keywords: *inclusive education, school, teachers, model, training*

1. Introduction

The European Commission encourages its Member States to look more closely at particular areas of their education and training policy. Romania is aiming at modernising its education system but this process is advancing slowly. Investments in education are low, especially in pre-school and school education, which affects the quality of the education system. Thus, early school leaving, the rural-urban gap and the inclusion of Roma and Special Educational Needs (SEN) children remain challenges [1].

The main objective of the Smile project is to transfer and scale up an educational Model aiming at creating an inclusive school environment. The project enables teachers and leaders of educational institutions to address their learners' diverse needs by ensuring provision of methodological and organizational support. The project meets a common need to establish a European shared vision and a road map about inclusive education in all countries [2].

2. The implementation of the project

2.1 The recruitment of schools

The implementation of the project started with the recruitment of the schools interested in inclusive education, which was followed by the training of the interested teachers. From the very beginning the participants were open to the project's ideas and thought that the project's activities could be easily integrated in the general action plan of their institutions. All of them agreed that the SMILE Model and its self-assessment instrument promotes a framework for school organization and suggests a detailed prioritization of problems and needs, which may lead to a successful planning of the activities meant to improve work in all school departments.

Considering the context (the school year makes it difficult to have common trainings with all 30 participants) two training sessions were planned in each school and a final common one during the winter holiday. Training sessions were supposed to be organized as workshops encouraging active participation (expressing opinions and sharing experience) and accompanied by the implementation of the ideas presented in the training session by each school. This strategy enabled schools to

immediately apply to their context what they had been trained and then to discuss this with the other participants at the next sessions with a view to sharing their experience and improving it.

2.2 The Smile training

The participants were asked to complete a baseline questionnaire, which aimed at identifying participants' attitude towards inclusive education an dtheir experience in this field. All teachers support inclusive education; as for the beneficiaries of inclusive education their answers vary: pupils with special needs (impairments), children and teachers, pupils from disadvantaged areas, Roma pupils, all pupils, staff and parents. Some respondents considered that teachers and counselors were responsible for the inclusive education in their school, most of them considered it is the teachers, staff and managers' joint responsibility.

The graph below shows that most of the respondents had a long experience (5+) supporting schools to work on diversity (average rate: 3.9), inclusive education (4.1) and organizational change for inclusive education (4.6). The average rates for their confidence to support schools to work on diversity and inclusion are also high ranging from 3.9 to 4.1 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The participants gave several definitions of diversity. Most teachers agreed that diversity may be defined as follows: 'Most of the answers defined diversity as flexibility and tolerance towards children's differences related to gender, religion, social environment, health, etc; it should include all children regardless of the existing differences'. Generally, in their opinion, it means being different. They agreed that diversity refers to a heterogeneous society from cultural, social, political, economic, etc. perspectives. Therefore, the definition may have several versions. For instance, cultural diversity refers to languages, traditions while religious diversity stems from people's beliefs. Another teacher stated that cultural diversity encompasses a dynamic process of exchanges, dialogues, negotiation among groups of people, identification of a common language and space. 'Diversity in a school resembles diversity in a community. We usually consider diversity in terms of SEN children. This is supported by the fact that Romanian society used to be homogeneous for a long time [3]. However, its coordinates have changed dramatically in the last decades. It would be dangerous not to explore the concept in terms of its cultural, religious or gender connotations.'As for teachers' attitudes towards students with disabilities and how far they agree with the idea that these students should be in the mainstream the lowest scores got: the students with academic achievement behind their class (3.2), students whose speech is difficult to understand (3.3), students using sign language or communication tables (3.2), students unable to hear (3.4).

As for their preparation to support the implementation of inclusive educational practices in their school, the teachers gave quite high scores (the lowest being given to applying multisensory and interactive methods - 3.9 and to identifying the learning difficulties of their students in a timely way - 4.3). (Figure 2 & 3)
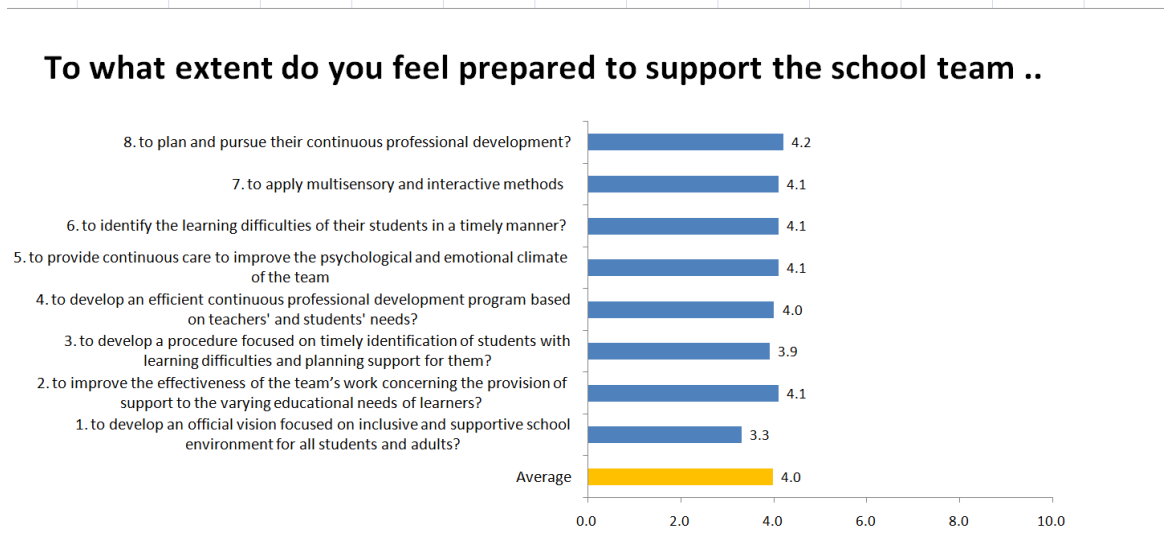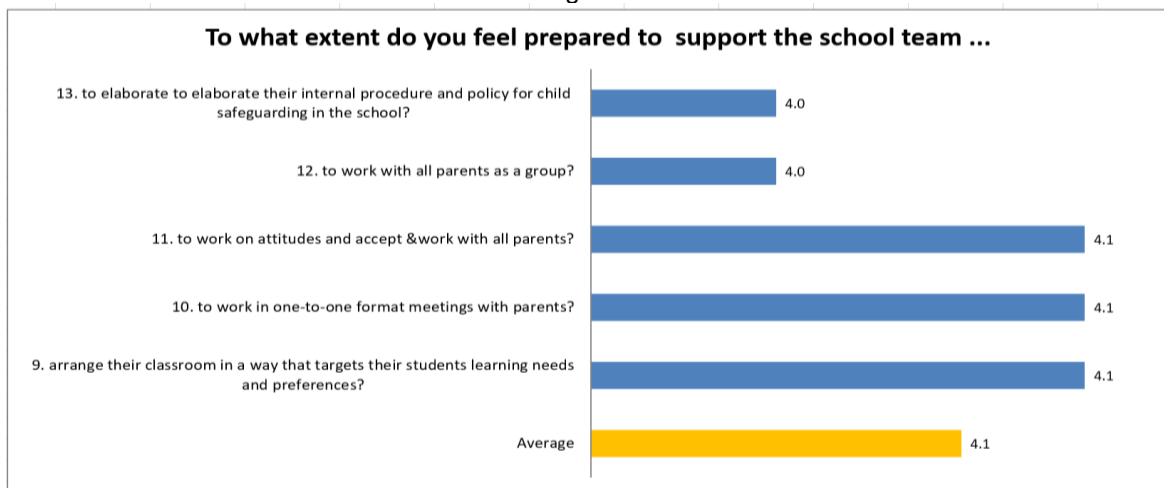
Figure 2

To what extent do you feel prepared to support the school team ..

8. to plan and pursue their continuous professional development?	4.2
7. to apply multisensory and interactive methods	4.1
6. to identify the learning difficulties of their students in a timely manner?	4.1
5. to provide continuous care to improve the psychological and emotional climate of the team	4.1
4. to develop an efficient continuous professional development program based on teachers' and students' needs?	4.0
3. to develop a procedure focused on timely identification of students with learning difficulties and planning support for them?	3.9
2. to improve the effectiveness of the team's work concerning the provision of support to the varying educational needs of learners?	4.1
1. to develop an official vision focused on inclusive and supportive school environment for all students and adults?	3.3
Average	4.0

Figure 3

To what extent do you feel prepared to support the school team ...

13. to elaborate to elaborate their internal procedure and policy for child safeguarding in the school?	4.0
12. to work with all parents as a group?	4.0
11. to work on attitudes and accept &work with all parents?	4.1
10. to work in one-to-one format meetings with parents?	4.1
9. arrange their classroom in a way that targets their students learning needs and preferences?	4.1
Average	4.1

The training also focused on the Model, its domains and descriptors: *school leadership, Inclusive teaching practices, child Safeguarding, and Partnership with parents.* The participants were familiarized with the self-assessment instrument, the introduction of which would enable them to build a shared vision, direction and objectives for the development of their school inclusive environment.

After the first training session, the Instrument form was completed individually by all participants at home. Everybody agreed that the instrument was an innovative tool helping them to assess and analyze their school inclusive environment. Moreover, the instrument will help them to develop an inclusive culture and implement inclusive practices in their school. In order for the teachers to see the progress the self-assessment instrument can be used at the beginning and at the end of the academic year.

At the next stage each indicator in all four domains of school development was discussed and the scores given by all team members were negotiated until a shared assessment score was decided upon. After the general score had been decided upon, the team negotiated which indicators they would choose to work on during this school year. They analyzed the indicators that had a low score (level 2) and used the questions suggested for Level 2:

•What could improve the efficient application of the policy/practice in school?

•Who in the school can make this happen?

•What do they need to make it happen (time, finances, support from co-workers, knowledge, skills, external support)?

•Why is it important that we do this? What will be the benefits for the school, students, teachers, school management, and parents?

•Could this be ignored and not improved – now or in general? What are the risks?

They agreed on the following indicators: 1.3 and 3.2. The teachers decided on two teams to work on the two indicators; they devised the action plans and decided that each team meets every month to achieve the objectives of the action plan.

The participants stated that while working with the instrument to identify the sensitive issues in their school inclusive environment they realized how useful the instrument is for their school. Not only will it help them to evaluate and improve the inclusive educational environment in their school but it will also simplify their work by structuring it and giving it focus. The instrument helped them prioritize their activities and channel their forces to bridge the existing gaps.

2.3 Discussions

Everybody agreed that the Smile Model and its instrument (when adequately applied) will certainly enable teachers to support diversity and inclusion in their. Thus the project helps teachers to implement inclusive practices, which address negative cultural attitudes and misconceptions.

The feedback administrated at the end of the training course (October 2019/ January 2020) was positive. Participants' feedback assessed their perception and feelings about the training experience. A scale 1 – 4 (1 – I totally disagree; 2- I rather disagree; 3- I neither disagree nor agree 4-I agree; 5- I completely agree) was used.

All participants' opinion was that the goals of the training sessions were clearly stated and achieved. All of them considered that the topics were relevant to their context and developed in a very well-organized way. They said that the discussions had been interesting and useful and highly encouraged them to share their own professional experience and knowledge.

The participants appreciated the materials as being useful and in tune with the new trends in education. They thought that the training course provided useful information, which can be easily applied to their work**.** The part of the training which they liked most was the self-assessment instrument which allowed them to assess their school inclusive environment and devise an action plan to enhance the quality of their work in their school. This will enable them to improve the existing situation and implement inclusive principles in their own context.

3. Conclusions

The Smile project promotes a systemic approach which helps schools to create an inclusive environment in four educational areas: shared and visionary leadership, inclusive pedagogy, child safeguarding and partnership with parents. The Model highlights the role that the school's partnership with parents plays in implementing inclusive education [4]. The Model not only raises awareness about the role that inclusive education can play in a community but also provides reliable self-assessment instruments for evaluating schools' inclusive environment and offers support for the development of a school culture on diversity. The Model and its instrument (when adequately applied) will certainly enable teachers to support diversity and inclusion in their schools and create an environment where those with additional needs are no longer perceived as 'other' but are part of the same community. Thus the project helps teachers to implement inclusive practices, which address negative cultural attitudes and misconceptions.

Acknowledgements

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