EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS WHO INTERACT WITH DISABLED CHILDREN'S FAMILIES

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Abstract: *The interaction between teachers and family members of children with disabilities may be marked by confusion, dissatisfaction, disappointment, anger, etc. Often these feelings are not recognized and expressed in the professional relationship, which creates multiple difficulties which can be overcome by improving human relations in a supportive psychotherapeutic intervention. This research aims to identify the needs and emotional states experienced by teachers. The obtained results support the need to implement support-groups for these teachers, groups that focus on the most effective strategies for maintaining constructive working relations.*

Key words: *emotional support, emotional intelligence, emotional labour, support group*

1. Introduction

Often, the interaction between parents and teachers of children with disabilities is marked by confusion, dissatisfaction, disappointment and anger (Dembo 1984; Muir-Hutchinson, 1987; Seligman & Darling, 1989), emotions which can be overcome by improving the relationships between them (Wisniewski, 1994). In this respect, Seligman & Seligman (1980) argue that in order to establish and maintain positive working relations with parents, teachers are forced to understand: the impact of the child's special needs on parents, how the child with disabilities influences over the time the family he belongs to and what impact has the presence of a disabled child and his family on the teacher.

In Hardman, Drew & Egan's vision (1996), the disabled children's parents can be in a deadlock, and how they react varies from one person to another in each of the following stages:

(1) *The shock* is the phase where parents may experience feelings of pain, detachment, confusion, sadness, anxiety, guilt, numbness, confusion, helplessness, anger, disbelief, denial, and despair. If supported, parents turn from being victims into survivors (Affeck & Tennen, 1993).

(2) *Emotional disorganization* – when parents experience distrust in their own forces, blame themselves, blame fate / the others, and then they reassess their meaning of life

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and the reasons for the current challenges (Blacher, 1984).

(3) *Realization* is characterized by several types of parenting behaviours: anxiety related to their ability to cope, irritability or anger, self-pity or self-accusation, non-acceptance by denying specialty information, and eventually understanding the needs and constraints that arise when raising a child with disabilities.

(4) *Defensive retreat* - parents are reluctant to deal with anxiety: some try to solve the problem by searching institutions and clinics, while others withdraw for a period into a safer and less demanding environment.

(5) Acknowledgement - parents mobilize themselves to create a suitable environment for the disabled child. They are actively involved in the intervention, becoming receptive to information coming from specialists.

The attitude adopted by parents in each stage can depend on: the degree of the deficiency, the affective, social and cultural factors of the entourage that affect the way the family lives this reality, the level of family aspiration, and the extent to which the child with special needs meets the family's expectations of intellectual and social achievement (Năstasă, 2011).

Other challenges faced by the families of children with disabilities are caused by negative social responses and social arrangements that do not take into account the needs, interests and circumstances in which they find themselves (Green, 2007; Olsson, 2008; Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Resch, Benz & Elliott, 2012), such as:

● Many parents and brothers feel ashamed because of the disability suffered by their child/ brother (Green, 2007; Farrugia, 2009; Gill & Liamputtong, 2011; Francis, 2012).

● Other parents struggle to keep a job where they feel comfortable and which enables them to offer special care for the child with disabilities (Gordon, Rosenman & Cuskelly, 2007).

● Most are overwhelmed by the challenges posed by accessing the services systems, which are fragmented, inflexible and have few resources (Reichman, Corman & Noonan, 2008; McManus et al., 2011; Browne et al., 2013).

The presence of a disabled child also strongly influences how family members relate to each other. In most cases, the mother is the one that focuses on the child's special needs, neglecting the others, and adapting to the new routine can be difficult because it requires major changes in one's personal life. Recent studies confirm that mothers of children with disabilities are two or even three times more likely to experience depression, anxiety or stress (Singer & Floyd, 2006; Bailey et al., 2007; Montes & Halterman, 2007; Emerson et al., 2010; Totsika et al., 2011). However, there is research showing that this risk is not so high, as most of them seem to adapt (Glidden & Jobe, 2006; Blacher & Baker, 2007; Green, 2007; Olsson, 2008). In families facing emotional, financial or other problems, the occurrence of a child with disabilities can serve as a catalyst for its dissolution, it can affect the couple causing strong emotions in both partners, acting as a symbol of demoralization, sadness, disappointment and failure in the couple, redesigning family organization and creating a fertile environment for conflicts. The couple experiences anxiety, anger, guilt, fatigue, fear of communication and especially frustration due to lack of time for intimacy in the couple (Featherstone, 1980).

Like their parents, siblings may experience anger, loneliness, anxiety and guilt expressed by aggression, behavioural problems, somatic diseases, depression, low self-esteem and social maladjustment. They may feel that it is necessary to substitute in the parents' eyes the sibling's vulnerabilities, thus they feel pressured to succeed on all

levels, feeling mental fatigue and frustration (McConnell, Savage, & Breitkreuz, 2014).

In terms of the impact the child with disabilities has on the teachers, the results showed that teachers in special education feel lonelier and experience negative feelings in the educational process because students with mental deficiency, due to their specificity, cannot provide immediate feedback (Chang, 2009; Gholamitooranposhti, 2012). This can cause emotional and social problems among teachers (Coplan, Closson & Arbeau, 2007) as a significant positive relation was found between loneliness, anxiety and aggression, and a significant positive relation between social difficulties, depression and reduced ability to perceive a potential hazard (Galanaki, Polychronopoulou & Babalis, 2008).

Foloştină & Tudorache (2012) studied the relationship between coping mechanisms used by teachers in special schools under stress and burnout. The respondents' answers revealed that the reasons for job satisfaction are:

● the specificity of the activity (which is perceived as a challenge);
● the usefulness of their work (the ability to help these children and to grow personally and professionally);
● close collaboration with their colleagues.

In contrast, the sources of disappointment and frustration mentioned are:

● lack of staff compared to the number of children with severe disabilities;
● very low wages and limited resources in special schools.

The results show that teachers with greater experience in special education activate their own active stress coping strategies, while teachers with little experience more frequently resort to emotional expression as a means of coping. Analysing the results, the authors suggest as stress management strategies for special education teachers the organization of trainings focused on the open expression of emotions to avoid their suppression and of team buildings.

Research has suggested that successful integration of children with special needs in mainstream educational settings is dependent on teachers' attitudes towards the concept of inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000). Such attitudes are influenced by gender and teaching experience (Alghazo & Gaad, 2004), and can be favourably modified through information-based instructions and structured fieldwork experience (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2003). Besides attitudes, teachers' emotional abilities to cope with disabled children are also important in facilitating inclusion. Working with both disabled children and their nondisabled peers, may expose teachers to higher levels of stress, emotional arousal and burnout which in turn could affect their teaching and behaviour in class. Negative emotions can further be transferred towards teachers' families and could therefore interfere with their work-life balance. In a recent study, teachers who were unable to regulate their emotions and to cope with stressors were less likely to respond sensitively and effectively to children's emotional states and needs (Jeon, Hur & Buettner, 2016). In addition, teachers in chaotic environments demonstrated lower reappraisal and coping skills. This suggests that clear guidelines and rules are needed to support teachers working with disabled children and that intervention programmes should be targeted at helping them cope with difficult situations. To date, little is known however, about successful strategies that prepare teachers to deal with unpleasant emotions in the classroom and what type of support teachers need for their emotional health.

2. Method

2.1. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The current study aims to investigate the issues described above through: (a) a qualitative investigation aimed at identifying the emotional states experienced by teachers and at discovering their real needs in relation to students with disabilities and their families; (b) a quantitative investigation of the relation between emotional intelligence and management of the emotions experienced in these professional relationships. The research hypotheses are:
   (1) Emotional intelligence is associated with emotional dissonance.
   (2) Emotional intelligence is associated with emotional effort.
   (3) Emotional intelligence is associated with emotional labour.

2.2. Participants and Procedure

There were involved 120 teachers working at pre-university level who interact with family members (parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.) and children with various disabilities integrated in schools in the counties of Galati, Braila, Vrancea, Tulcea, Vaslui, Arges, Ialomita and Iaşi. To organize focus groups, the subjects were divided into 12 groups with 10 participants each and the interview plan for each focus group comprised the following questions: (1) What emotions are experienced in the relationship with students with disabilities and their families? and (2) What are their real needs in these professional relationships?

2.3. Measure

The teachers were asked to fill in four individual psychological tests:
   (1) *Emotional Intelligence Scale* - EIS aims to assess emotional intelligence (EI) from the perspective of skills, based on the original model proposed by Salovey and Mayer, via a self-administered questionnaire. It consists of 33 items and the Cronbach alpha coefficient is .90 which indicates a very good internal consistency (Schutte, Malouff, Hall, Haggerty, Cooper, Golden & Dornheim, 1998). The scale has good psychometric properties for this study ($\alpha = .89$).
   (2) *Test for assessing the four skills of emotional intelligence* - TASEI has four parts: identifying emotions (IDE), using emotions to facilitate thinking (UEFT), understanding emotions (UE) and managing emotions (ME) (Caruso & Salovey, 2012). Regarding the psychometric qualities of the test, the results of this research prove a good internal consistency for the total score ($\alpha = .81$). The test components range from a high Cronbach's α coefficient ($\alpha = .74$ for identifying emotions) to a low level ($\alpha = .51$ – the using emotions to facilitate thinking).
   (3) *Hospitality Emotional Labour Scale* - HELS measures the employees' perception on the emotional labour in organizations that involve direct interaction with customers. The scale includes 19 items divided into two subscales: emotional dissonance (11 items), and emotional effort (8 items). The original version of the scale has good internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$ for the emotional dissonance scale and $\alpha = .77$ for the emotional effort scale) (Chu & Murrmann, 2006). In the present study, the results indicate good internal

consistency (α = .73 for emotional dissonance and α = .76 for emotional effort).

(4) Emotional Labour Scale - ELS investigates strategies for emotional labour (EL), regulating emotional states (RegE) and regulating the expression of the face with two subtypes, later conceptualized by the authors (simulating emotions - SimE and hiding them - HidE). ELS also seeks to investigate: the frequency of interactions with customers (Freq), the intensity of emotions expressed in interactions with customers (Inte), the variety of emotions expressed (Vari) and the duration of interactions with customers. The scale has internal consistency coefficients ranging between .68 and .85 for the investigated dimensions (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003). Regarding the psychometric qualities of the instrument, the results of this research prove a good internal consistency for the total score (α = .78). The dimensions of the scale range from a high Cronbach's coefficient α (α = .78 for variety) to a low level (α = .53 – regulation of emotional expression by simulating emotions).

3. Results and Discussion

The research began with the focus groups focused on identifying the emotional states experienced by teachers within the professional relations with family members of a child with disabilities and the teachers' real needs in these relations. The method used for data interpretation was the thematic analysis, according to which there were generated four themes:

(A) *The emotions experienced by teachers in relationships with students with disabilities*. The teachers reported that they felt strong negative emotions in the professional relationship with children with disabilities and their work could be affected by them. For example, mercy, compassion ("*I think of him at home, too, he is an innocent little soul and I do not know how to help him.*") prevented them from having an effective teaching intervention, blocked their creativity and made them no longer able to be objective. The anger they felt ("*I just want to scream when I have agitated kids in class.*", "*I hate it terribly when I have to go to his class.*") amended reactions in the educational process. In addition, some teachers have identified the presence of fear ("*When I think I'm going the next day into his class I am terrified.*"), helplessness ("*I wish I could do more for them.*"), disappointment, shame ("*I do not know.*" "*I can't handle it.*").

(B) *The emotions experienced by teachers in relation to the family of children with disabilities*. In relation to the family of children with disabilities, teachers have identified a number of negative emotions like disappointment ("*I feel lied to by the parents.*", "*The family does not come to school.*"), helplessness ("*The parents are illiterate, what can I do with them?*", "*They are poor, how can they take care of the child?*") and anger ("*They are not interested in their own child.*").

(C) *The teachers' needs in relation to students with disabilities*. A specialized training encompassing the description of the symptomatic picture for each disability, specific intervention strategies and individualized intervention plans was one of the needs identified by teachers in order to relate effectively to students with disabilities ("*I haven't learned by now how to integrate these children into the school group.*"). The teachers also mentioned the need to be part of a multidisciplinary team providing different perspectives and complementary solutions for the problematic situations in the educational process, the need for a smaller number of students in the school group, the need for specific instruments and teaching materials. In addition, many teachers have identified as essential in the relationships with children the need to acquire techniques for managing their own

emotions and occupational stress ("*I feel on quick sand, I do not know how to behave around them.*", "*It's very stressful to work with these children.*").

(D) *The teachers' needs in relation with the family of children with disabilities.* Regarding the relationship with the family of children with disabilities, teachers identified the need for the establishment of multidisciplinary teams with the active involvement of parents ("*I'm alone, no one gets involved.*", "*The family denies the child's problem.*", "*Parents say it's school's job to educate them.*"). There was also highlighted the need for learning specific techniques for working with families of children with disabilities and techniques for managing their own emotions in the professional relationship with them ("*I feel insecure, as if I cannot find my words when talking to the child's parents.*", "*I do not know what to do with my own emotions.*").

In order to check the first two hypotheses we did a correlational analysis and the results are shown in Table 1.

Correlations between emotional intelligence and emotional labor dimensions   Table 1

	EI EIS	EI TASEI	IDE TASEI	UEFT TASEI	UE TASEI	ME TASEI
Emotional dissonance HELS	.158	.093	.165	-.082	.106	.096
Emotional effort HELS	.135	**.273****	.140	**.235****	**.226***	**.215***

* p< .05, ** p< .01

The level of emotional intelligence development measured by EIS does not correlate statistically significant with affective dissonance and emotional effort. The results obtained emphasize that the level of emotional intelligence development measured by TASEI correlated positively and statistically significant with the teachers' emotional effort put into the relationship with the students with disabilities and their family members (r = .273, p < .01). Also, the extent to which the teacher strives to alter the emotions experienced or displayed in the professional relationship is associated with three out of the four skills of emotional intelligence, as follows: using emotions to facilitate thinking (r = .235, p < .01), understanding emotions (r = .226, p < .05) and managing emotions (r = .215, p < .05).

Pearson coefficients show that there are significant relations between emotional intelligence and emotional labour (Table 2).

Correlations between emotional intelligence and emotional labor   Table 2

	EI EIS	EI TASEI	IDE TASEI	UEFT TASEI	UE TASEI	ME TASEI
Frequency ELS	.160	**.183***	.115	.123	.159	.153
Intensity ELS	.121	.156	.051	.141	**.202***	.075
Variety ELS	.094	**.308****	**.202***	**.243****	**.350*****	.123
Hiding emotions ELS	-.137	-.051	-.054	.061	-.060	-.111
Simulating emotions ELS	**-.186***	.025	-.067	.159	.036	-.062
Regulating feelings ELS	.031	**.220***	**.188***	.120	**.241****	.108
Emotional labour ELS	.035	**.258****	.149	**.241****	**.282****	.092

* p< .05, ** p< .01, *** p< .001

The level of emotional intelligence development measured by EIS correlated negatively and statistically significant only with teachers' strategy to change through simulation of the emotions displayed in relationships to students with disabilities and their family in order to match the rules of emotional expression ($r = -.186$, $p < .05$). The level of emotional intelligence development measured by TASEI correlated positively and statistically significant with: frequency of teacher interactions with family members of children with disabilities ($r = .183$, $p < .05$), variety of distinct emotional expressions ($r = .308$, $p < .01$), teachers' strategy of amending the emotional state so that it became consistent with the rules of emotional expression ($r = .220$, $p < .05$) and emotional labour ($r = .258$, $p < .01$). Regarding the four skills of emotional intelligence, the results indicated that three were associated with the teachers' strategies of managing their emotions in the relationships with students with disabilities and their families: identification of emotions was associated with variety of emotions and emotional adjustment, use emotions to facilitate thinking with emotional variety and emotional labour and understanding emotions was associated with intensity, variety, regulations of feelings and emotional labour.

Pearson coefficients showed that there were significant relations between the level of emotional intelligence development measured by EIS and the four skills of emotional intelligence (Table 3).

Correlations between EI and the skills of emotional intelligence   Table 3

	EI TASEI	IDE TASEI	UEFT TASEI	UE TASEI	ME TASEI
Emotional intelligence EIS	.495**	.478**	.217*	.397**	.384**

* p< .05, **p< .001, N = 119

The results indicate a convergent validity of the test for assessing the four skills of emotional intelligence (TASEI), both instruments based on the original model proposed by Salovey and Mayer (as cited in Caruso & Salovey, 2012), comprising four dimensions: the perception and identification of emotions, emotional facilitation of thinking, understanding emotions and managing them.

Pearson coefficients showed that there were significant relations between emotional dissonance, emotional effort and emotional labour (Table 4).

Correlations between emotional labor (HELS) and emotional labor (ELS)   Table 4

	Freq ELS	Inte ELS	Vari ELS	HidE ELS	SimE ELS	RegE ELS	EL ELS
Emotional dissonance HELS	-.265**	-.104	-.120	-.449***	-.431***	-.321***	-.453**
Emotional effort HELS	.391***	.143	.259**	.273**	.259**	.447***	.503***

* p< .05, ** p< .01, *** p< .001, N = 120

In the relationships with students with disabilities and their family, the discrepancy felt by teachers between the emotion lived and the appropriate one according to the rules of emotional expression correlated negatively and statistically significant with the frequency of interactions, with the strategies of amending by suppression and simulation of the emotional expression displayed, with the emotional regulation and emotional labour. The

extent to which teachers strived to modify the emotions displayed or experienced during their professional relationship with family members of children with disabilities were associated with the frequency of interactions, the variety of distinct emotional expressions, with the regulation of the emotional expression (by suppression and simulation), with the strategy of amending the internal emotional feelings and especially with the emotional labour.

4. Conclusions

In our study, the discrepancy felt by teachers between the emotions experienced during the interactions with family members of children with disabilities and the appropriate emotion in accordance with the norms of emotional expression did not correlate with emotional intelligence. However, teachers who successfully amend the emotions expressed or experienced were able to change their perspective on the professional relationship easier, could understand complex emotions and how they evolved, they recognized the causes of various emotions and, especially, they could express emotions in an accessible language and could adequately manage their own emotions and those of parents and children with disabilities. Also, teachers who used distinct emotional expressions within the professional relationship with students with disabilities and their family were able to accurately perceive and express emotions, to use them to improve cognitive processes and to understand the relations between these emotions.

The results obtained from the qualitative analysis of the focus groups have shown that teachers were willing to apply the principles of inclusive school and to respond appropriately to different educational needs of all children to ensure a flexible and efficient educational process. But they need a psycho-pedagogical and emotional training specific to the professional relationship with students with disabilities and their families and to adapt their teaching activities, human resources and materials to the new working conditions.

Thus, there is worth mentioning the results according to which the teachers who interact more often with family members of children with disabilities and who avoid to adopt strategies of amending by simulation of the emotional expression displayed in accordance with the rules of emotional expression have high levels of emotional intelligence. Those who are emotionally skilled (can accurately perceive and express the emotions that are also cognitively processed) resort to strategies of amending the emotional internal state so that it becomes consistent with the rules of emotional expression within the professional relationships with students with disabilities and their families.

The research results highlight the importance of implementing support groups for these teachers that focus on developing emotional abilities and the most effective strategies of emotional labour in their professional relationships. The objectives and topics of an intervention plan aimed at addressing psychotherapeutic support for these teachers would be required to cover: awareness and managing emotions and professional stress, overcome own blockages, fears and vulnerabilities regarding the profession, awareness of border contact, identification of personal resources that can be used in the teaching approach and the professional relationship with families of children with disabilities. To implement such a plan within the framework of a support group, experiential techniques from the creative-expressive therapies, gestalt therapy, metaphor and metaphorical scenario can be used. We propose this approach because the emphasis is on self-transformation, on the interpersonal relationships and the experience lived *here* and *now*,

which will make teachers discover their own way to best meet the challenges of life and give them a chance to negotiate with themselves, to forgive and accept themselves, to self-appreciate and reward themselves consciously and responsibly, and especially to change their perspective on personal and professional life challenges (Năstasă, 2010).

They are strengthened by Truță's vision (2012) who considers emotional labour as a phenomenon inextricable to education as it represents both an important component of professional identity and a specific form of emotional support from the teacher to his students. There is also research supporting that a high level of emotional intelligence can be highly beneficial both for family members where there is a disabled child and for teachers involved because they:

● maintain teachers' health and welfare (Austin, Saklofske & Egan, 2005; Brackett & Katulak, 2007 Stough, Saklofske & Parker, 2009; Vesely, Saklofske & Leschied, 2013);

● mediate educational actors' stress management (Chan, 2006; Saklofske et al., 2012);

● determine the raise of adaptive coping mechanisms and effective management of adverse situations (Brackett & Katulak, 2007; Humphrey et al., 2007; Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts, 2009);

● can especially facilitate the learning process, due to the teachers' ability to manage their own emotional reactions, to harmonize with the students' emotional needs and to interact with them in ways that expand opportunities for individualized learning (Perry & Ball, 2005).

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