

TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CONCEPT OF DISCRIMINATION AND ITS EFFECTS IN REALITY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the opinion regarding discrimination of 50 teachers that are working in public schools, from different backgrounds (both urban and rural). The questionnaire we created for this study refers to aspects connected to the fundamental opinion regarding discrimination of the targeted group and also to different activities that take place in different schools regarding the integration of every minority group of children into collectivity, regardless of their ethnicity, their race, or their religious beliefs. The results obtained proof an insufficient correspondence between the subjects' opinions regarding discrimination and the concrete measures they take for reducing the actual discrimination among children.

Keywords: discrimination, minority group

Introduction

According to the Romania Law No. 324/2006, discrimination is defined as “any differentiation, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, social class, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, non-contagious chronic disease, HIV infection, belonging to a

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disadvantaged category, and any other criterion which has the purpose or effect the restriction, removal of recognition, use or exercise, equality, human rights and fundamental freedoms and rights recognized by law, in political, economic, social and cultural or any other areas of public life” (Legea 324, 2006, para. 2).

According to the European Union Council Directive, 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 (Council Directive 2000/43/CE) regarding the implementation of the principle of equal treatment of persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin there are two types of discrimination:

1. Direct discrimination occurs where “a person is treated less favorably than another, if they could be treated in a similar manner”. A classical example would be schools that specifically state that they do not accept children with disabilities or minority group children.

2. Indirect discrimination which occurs when “certain rules, criterion or practice disadvantages some people [...] to other people”. A typical example would be introducing expensive uniforms in some schools, which results in having children from a poor economic background move to or select other schools.

In the arena of public schools most people would agree that every student should have equal opportunities to receive a quality education regardless of any differences among students (e.g. color, race, socio-economic status, religion, sexual orientation, gender, special needs, language or ethnicity). Most people would agree, though, that discrimination is present on a daily basis in most schools. Discrimination occurs among adults, among students and among adults and students. There are more and more Romanian school students that report they have been bullied in school. At the high school level bullying might also take the form of cyberbullying. Students who are obese, gay or have special education needs are significantly more likely to be bullied. Plous (2003) suggests that stereotypes still abound in schools today in terms of race, religion, sexual orientation and gender.

Stereotyping begins early and has long lasting effects on the adult lives of students (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Gender bias at a young age can negatively affect later attitudes, interpersonal relationships, work relationships, and personal emotional and social growth (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Teachers have immense impacts on the development of their students, and today, with students spending up to ten hours per day in school settings, the impact may be more critical than ever for the student’s social growth.

Amanda Sullivan (2009) states: “Every student has the right to an education free from discrimination that provides high quality, equitable opportunities to learn. Unfortunately, sometimes individuals or systems may act in ways that violate this right. Discrimination occurs when people are treated unequally or less favorably than others because of some real or perceived characteristic. In every community and every school, discrimination exists in both intended and unintended ways. It may take the form of direct, overt discrimination, such as barring all members of a specific group from being admitted to an organization. Discrimination may also be indirect or less obvious, such as seemingly neutral admission policies that actually favor one group over another. All kinds of discrimination are wrong and can be harmful to those involved” (p. 1).

Schools and teachers can affect this issue in positive or negative ways. In order to ensure positive school climates and eliminate discriminatory practices the adults in schools must become aware of their own biases and negative actions and we must also search for and eliminate discrimination in the actions of our students. Adults often tacitly encourage discrimination by either not seeing or ignoring actions which are negative and discriminatory (Preble & Gordon, 2011).

Within schools and in society we also see education-based discrimination (Tannock, 2008). Tannock describes education-based discrimination as the “arbitrary and unjust” denial of the rights of people (students and adults). This discrimination includes rights, privileges, ability to be heard, respect, or freedom that some people have and others are denied based on natural ability, achievement, intelligence, or credentials. In other words in the classroom if we deny equal treatment or access to any of our programs or activities based on the items mentioned here then we are applying discrimination to our students (Tannock, 2008). We can see that if we take seriously Tannock’s concept of education-based discrimination then we will have look in the mirror and ask ourselves many more questions about why we do what we do in school.

Sullivan (2009) would include the following in her list of discriminatory practices that occur in schools:

- Facilities (e.g. bathrooms, gyms, second floors of buildings);
- Programs (e.g. advanced classes, special education needs);

- Classroom Assignments (e.g. inaccessible areas);
- Co-curricular Activities (e.g. field trips, athletics, clubs);
- Biased Treatments (e.g. discipline practices, Groupings, Grading);
- Harassment, Bullying, Hate Crimes;
- Unfair Treatment based on gender (e.g. pregnant girls);
- Misuse or non-use of appropriate techniques for students with special needs or language barriers;
- Anything that denies a student the same free and appropriate education granted other students.

This list is extensive and there are many other potential sources and forms of discrimination found in our schools.

Discrimination emanates from prejudice - the pre judging attitudes that lead to “contempt, dislike and loathing” (Plous, 2003). Plous points out that “rigid categorical thinking” leads to prejudice. When one group wants to be better, right or more powerful than prejudicial feelings emerge for other groups. This kind of categorical thinking leads to distortions in the perceptions of the group members, exaggerated similarities between its own members (the in group) and exaggerated contrasts between them and the other groups (the out group).

Prejudice, bias, personal discrimination, institutional discrimination, harassment, bullying, stereotyping, hate, active discrimination, tacit discrimination, de facto discrimination and other negative and often exaggerated feelings and attitudes about individuals and groups lead to negative interactions that can have disastrous effects on the lives of our students and teachers in school. Discrimination is evident in schools in various forms (e.g. race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual harassment, bullying, disability, color, language, cultural) and in all forms discrimination leads to a negative school climate and in some or many cases a dangerous school experience. In order to generate the school and classroom climate that will lead to rigorous and relevant learning the adults in schools should directly attend to the issue at hand. They should approach their schools and classrooms with an open mind and an attitude to improving the culture and climate in schools for every student and adult (Preble & Gordon, 2011).

The goal of the study

The research investigates teacher's attitude towards discrimination and its practical implications.

Specific goals

We wanted to investigate urban vs. rural teachers' attitude regarding discrimination for the following areas:

- basic ideas regarding discrimination;
- creating a physical school environment that takes into consideration diversity;
- suggestions regarding possible educational standards for creating an antidiscrimination training program;
- implementing activities that deal with discrimination concepts.

Method

Hypothesis

We started from the premise that the teaching activity in school that is related to discrimination is influenced by the specificity and background of the school in which teachers are working (urban vs. rural background)

1. There are significant differences between urban and rural teachers' attitude towards discrimination.
2. There are significant differences between urban and rural teachers' attitude towards organizing the physical setting in the school.
3. There are significant differences between urban and rural teachers' attitude towards elaborating an antidiscrimination educational program.
4. There are significant differences between urban and rural teachers' attitude towards implementing activities that deal with discrimination issues

Participants

50 teachers participated in this study. 23 of them teach in urban schools, and 27 of them teach in rural schools.

Data collection tools

We adapted and used with the authors' approval the "Scale of Respect for Diversities" questionnaire (Spinthourakis, Aktan, Ekmişoğlu, Krohnen, Laurian, & Kuščer, 2009). The tool investigates teachers' attitude towards discrimination in school. The questionnaire has three subcategories: 1) the basic opinions regarding school discrimination 2) objectives and activities that focus on reducing the discrimination phenomenon 3) physical environment in school. The questionnaire uses a 0-5 Likert scale for each of the items.

Data analyses and results

The results show that there is a decreased discrimination rate in the state schools. The highest scores were recorded for individuals with intellectual deficiencies ($m=2,83$), for those who have speech impairments or a different color of the skin ($m=2,73$). The lowest averages were recorded for individuals with a different type of hair ($m=1,89$), or who cannot see ($m=2,24$).

The interest for this study was generated by the desire to find antidiscrimination solutions or to reduce the level of discrimination in schools. The answers to the questionnaire offered enough data that show the degree to which teachers include in their curriculum antidiscrimination issues. Both groups obtained a score over the average, depending on the background ($m_{\text{rural}}=3,77$; $m_{\text{urban}}=3,81$), which means there is a preoccupation, at least declarative one for introducing antidiscrimination issues into the curriculum. The results obtained for item 10 using the sign method (item by item), depending on the background, lead to the conclusion that there are significant differences between the two groups regarding *the basic ideas* related to discrimination. The rural group obtained equal or higher values for the biggest median. The explanation could be related to the fact that rural students are more heterogeneous compared to the urban students, and rural teachers' attitude is an integrative one because it happens very often that rural classrooms are ethnically diverse.

Confronting with discrimination issues more often, the rural teachers are forced to look for solutions of positive integration and life for each of their students.

One of these solutions is related to the *physical school setting*. Thus the hypothesis that sustains the idea of significant differences between the groups

regarding the measure they took for organizing the physical space is confirmed. The items analysis that refers to physical space used the median test and shows significant differences for the following components:

- There should be included in the classroom pictures representing children with special needs performing specific activities ($\chi^2=6,65$, $p=.01$);
- There should be included in the classroom pictures representing people with a different body structure performing specific activities ($\chi^2=6,66$, $p=.01$);
- There should be included in the classroom pictures representing people with a different cultural legacy wearing their local clothes ($\chi^2=4,09$, $p=.04$);
- There should be included in the classroom pictures representing people belonging to different ethnic groups or nationalities working together ($\chi^2=3,40$, $p=.06$);
- There should be included in the classroom pictures representing people performing activities that are more likely to occur for the opposite gender (a man doing the housecleaning, a woman lifting the weights etc.) ($\chi^2=3,42$, $p=.06$).

The superior values of the median were obtained with predilection by the rural group.

Organizing the school and classroom setting is a teacher responsibility. Framing the questions in the questionnaire hypothetically does not ensure the fact that in the rural area the teachers really practice what they preach.

On the other hand when we analyzed the average we obtained highest scores for both groups for the following components:

- Including books representing the culture and background of each child.
- Displaying pictures representing children working and communicating together.

Another common practice in the rural area is displaying pictures of different socio-economical background families.

The lowest average scores for both groups was related to the idea of using a mirror in the classroom to create an awareness of the self image and also related to the idea of using dolls of different races. It is most likely that using dolls of different races is not a common practice due to the financial implications (supplemental costs for buying the dolls or practical skills to create them). The rural group obtained a low score for displaying pictures that

represent different ethnic groups and nationalities, neighbor countries that live in different geographical areas.

Another category of the questionnaire was identifying the practical modalities through which the antidiscrimination concepts are applied *during the lessons*. For the intergroup comparisons (depending on the area and using the median test) we did not obtain statistically significant scores for none of the actions included in the questionnaire. Even so, the most frequent actions referred to:

- teachers' observations regarding the children's discriminatory behavior in specific contexts for raising children's awareness and reducing the risk of generating a discriminatory behavior;
- teaching activities have as a specific goal the explanations of different values, attitudes and ways in which people live and think;
- collaborating with students' families for reducing the unwanted discriminatory behaviors, both in school and at home.

The less used actions for both groups were:

- teaching in a different language than their birth language or including music activities to explain the idea of diversity;
- familiarizing the children with food types of different countries or ethnic groups etc.

A first observation that can be drawn from analyzing the data is that teachers prefer to use general strategies in order to overcome an issue: from identifying the problem and giving feedback on the unwanted behavior, to including a third party as a mediator for the conflict.

We noticed a similar attitude for reducing discrimination; the less used activities are those that implement and focus on cultural diversity (food, musical, sport activities that are specific to a nation or culture).

The results obtained for validating *the 3rd hypothesis* (creating standards that should be included for creating an antidiscrimination program) are statistically insignificant for the intergroup comparisons, using the median test, for none of the questionnaire's items.

When teachers were asked to create *standards* for a hypothetical antidiscrimination program, both groups have included the following:

- the child should understand that he/she belongs to a family ($m_{\text{urban}}=4,75$; $m_{\text{rural}}=4,74$);

- learning strategies should include all types of learning ($m_{\text{urban}}=4,70$; $m_{\text{rural}}=4,77$);
- the child should understand that he/ she (similar to other children) has a unique personality as well as different points of view ($m_{\text{urban}}=4,66$; $m_{\text{rural}}=4,66$).

For the rural group the most important standard was the one that shows how the child should understand that her/his family belongs to a greater group (that can have a different cultural structure etc.) ($m=4,66$).

The lowest scores were obtained for the following standards:

- The child should understand the social-cultural differences ($m_{\text{urban}}=4,23$; $m_{\text{rural}}=4,44$);
- Supporting different attitudes, values, behaviors, and cultural pluralism ($m_{\text{urban}}=4,33$; $m_{\text{rural}}=4,44$).

Urban teachers consider less useful the standards connected to the following ideas:

- The child should understand that he/she belongs to a complex social network that continuously develops (city, country, continent, world etc.) ($m_{\text{urban}}=4,33$);
- The child should understand it has a unique cultural identity for the family, city and country he/ she lives in ($m_{\text{urban}}=4,33$);

And for the rural groups the lowest scores were:

- The child should understand the difference between gender ($m_{\text{rural}}=4,44$);
- Helping the child to make his/ her own decisions ($m_{\text{rural}}=4,44$).

We even tried to delineate the scores (high vs. low) depending on the area. These scores are very similar which means that giving the participants the possibility to choose they chose high scores for every question without being able to recognize the most important or significant standards, and why not, the easiest ones to achieve for their antidiscrimination programs. Framing this item differently will surely lead to better results that will reflect a different attitude for the groups.

Conclusion

Discrimination represents a number of causes that affect the equality of chances. This means differentiating, excluding, restricting and preferential treatment between people, groups, and communities to the disadvantage of

some of them. All these choices, decisions are made according to subjective criteria. Although there have been studies on this topic, our research focuses more on the details, on teachers' attitude towards discrimination in urban and rural Romanian schools.

As a conclusion the general attitude of teachers towards discrimination between students is a weak one, but we can identify certain categories of individuals that are stereotyped. We mention here the children with mental and physical deficiency. Teachers act cautiously in the presences of this category compared to other types of people. The reduced level of acceptance for the children with (physical or mental) special needs is determined mostly by the social existing prejudices. Integration in regular education classrooms in Romania is a difficult process, mostly because teachers and parents have proven to be more resistant than the students' themselves.

The results of our study did not show statistically significant differences for the items that refer to organizing the school setting. The data shows that the classroom management is different from area to area.

Thus the rural teachers' answers have pointed out that teachers are keen to certain aspects regarding decorating and setting up the classroom. Decorating the classrooms with different types of pictures can be a factor that explains the decrease of discrimination in Romanian schools.

On the other hand there has not been any evidence of different teachers' attitudes towards discrimination for the components like: basic ideas, teaching activities, standards for an antidiscrimination program. The teachers have a strong attitude and point of view probably because the national programs that focus on reducing discrimination and segregation in schools.

Although the study aimed to underline the idea of teachers' attitude towards discrimination in schools, it would have been interesting to observe the discrimination between children based on their gender, socio-economical background, ethnicity or religion. We mention here the results of a study undertaken in Romania by the National Institute of Scientific Research for Work and Social Protection in 2008 that show the existence of a statistically significant correlation for discrimination against Romany children, against poor children and girls, as well as against children and girls with special needs. According to this study, the Romany children are a group at risk of being discriminated in schools disregarding their socio-demographical status.

According to this study, there are a few practical ideas that can be used in our educational policy:

- Knowing the potential and most vulnerable groups (of students) can determine standards that will create awareness for the just and unjust behaviors for students to each other.

- The increased interest of teachers, and also of other superior forums for reducing the discrimination in schools can determine a decrease in absenteeism and school dropout. For example, starting with 2004 – 2005 compared to previous years there is an increased tendency of including Romany students in regular education. One of the reasons is the fact that parents or legal guardians get social alimony only for children that are in school or in programs like “Access to Education for Disadvantaged Groups”, “Milk and waffle program” or “A second chance program for adults”.

- Discrimination against ethnic groups, religion, require a special attention from teachers in order to reduce this phenomenon in schools. From all Romanian communities, the Romany one should be given a special attention.

- Students need to understand the relationship between individuals, the groups they belong to and the society as a whole. This is the premise for creating a complex perspective regarding the social diversity.

- During class activities, disregarding their goal, teachers should pay a special attention to the material resources so that the theoretical antidiscrimination ideas in the lessons are backed up by the concrete examples (pictures, posters, images etc.)

- Involving parents in solving discriminatory issues in schools will contribute to initiating (or amplifying) the communication between students and parents and thus changing the discrimination attitudes.

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