

SENtor-Exchanging Experiences and Practices in Mentoring SEN Children (Erasmus+ 2021-1-HU01-KA210-SCH-000032368)

The SENtor project focuses on the exchange of experiences, the development of a support system and the training of its first coaches. The long-term goal is to build up a mentoring network around the formal education system that involves all actors in the educational process, taking the sole burden off teachers and using methods that help SEN children.

The coordinator organization, The Resuli Foundation (Hungary) was established in 2017, from the previous informal network of pedagogical experts - their experience goes back for decades. The main aim of the association is to renew the structure and content of the pedagogical culture in accordance with the challenges of the 21st century.

The first partner organization, Jaunuolių dienos centras (Lithuania), provides social day care services for intellectually impaired people aged 18 years and older. The centre aims to build up confidence and ability to maintain an independent lifestyle along with improving physical and mental health. Users are offered special activities and events, nutrition care, transportation service and personal hygiene services.

The second partner of the project, Aprily Lajos National College (Romania), is situated in Brasov, the heart of Romania. The school was established 180 years ago. Now it is a state school catering for 700 students aged between 3 and 18, who belong to the Hungarian ethnic minority. There are pre-primary, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels. The staff comprises 65 teachers.

We would like to understand and treat our students better, offering them and their families appropriate support in the educational process. We need more professional insight, training and change of experiences in order to fill the existing gaps. This project will help us to improve the quality of educational support by building up a mentoring network that involves all actors in the process of education using methods that help SEN children.

In order to build up a mentoring network the first step was to questionnaire 50 specialist and 50 parents in each country about their perspectives and experiences in terms of education about children with SEN.

The questionnaire was completed in 3 countries (Romania, Lithuania, Hungary). The main objective of the SENtor project is to build a mentor network in formal education that involves all educators and parents working with children with special needs and supports their work. From the results of the questionnaire we identified the challenges in the field of teaching and learning of pupils with SEN.

Teachers/specialists responses

More than 75% of the specialists who filled the form come from city area and work in public schools. Therefore, we should pay more attention on informing and engaging teachers from rural areas too.

- In Romania most of the specialists are primary school teachers 27%, special education teachers 23%, special language therapists and teachers 10%.
- In Lithuania most of the specialists are school teachers 62%, special education teacher 22%, logopedist 16 %
- In Hungary special needs teacher, speech therapist, development teacher

In all three countries more than 50% of the institutions include an inclusive program for SEN children, but there is an interesting fact that 4-10% of specialists don't know about the existence of an inclusive program in their institution. Also, less than 30% of teachers work in a special schools. They described their institution in the following ways:

- they have both special education classes and mainstream education classes
- the inclusion of children with SEN is achieved on several levels
- they respect the individuality, adapts the programs to the children's developmental level

In Lithuania some specialists work in day care centers. It is interesting to mention that in Hungary specialists consider that their institutions are overcrowded, there are not enough material conditions and they are short of nursery teachers.

More than 58% of the teachers consider that there are not enough professionals in their institutions and less than 42% of the fillers think that they are enough developmental educational services. In Romania and Lithuania 22-24% of the special needs children receive

the required therapy but in Hungary 70% receive therapy. It can be assumed that in Lithuania 34% of professionals do not know whether pupils with SEN are receiving sufficient therapeutic education. The main reasons why SEN children don't receive enough therapy are the same: lack of professionals, lack of services and educational policy problems.

According to experts, the ideal profile of a teacher who is working with SEN children is: empathy, patience, openness, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, self-improvement, tolerant, strong-willed, committed, loving, happy, calm, persevering, basic knowledge of special education and psychology/training in special education psychology, ability to adapt learning programs and materials to the needs of children.

According to specialists, students with SEN should have the following knowledge and skills as adults: basic skills for independent living: reading, writing, counting, dressing, cleaning, nutrition, orientation ability. Basic household skills: cleaning, washing up, washing dishes, cooking. Basic money management skills. A spontaneous sitting used and understood by others. Knowledge of emotion management strategies.

Specialists would recommend mainly skilled jobs for students with SEN such as: hospitality, trade, construction etc., or IT, or creative work, e.g. It is interesting that nobody mentioned that children with SEN could have higher education. 27% did not give a specific answer because they think that every child is different, depends on ability/match to interest/depends on what they are good at. According to specialist, approx. 50% of their students with SEN would be able to live independently in a non-parental home as an adult, but are not specified the living conditions or the grade of their disability.

Specialists propose the following improvements:

- less children in one class, more suitable programs for children with SEN, larger time frame for their development, training of the teachers in the methodological issues of teaching children with SEN, creating separate rooms for development sessions for children with SEN, the existence of the financial funds necessary for development, involvement of outsiders, rehabilitation groups, early development (nursery, kindergarten), fewer theoretical subjects
- the possibility of going with children to different places/ socialization with other students from other schools

- teacher's assistant for each class in which a child with SEN is integrated
- to make the society more aware and more responsible regarded to children with SEN
- revision of the curriculum/ more practical materials
- project mentor program start-up, special programs

Generally, institutions support its specialists with learning materials, equipped classrooms, special trainings and projects with EU or national support. The most frequent means through which the teachers gain professional knowledge are trainings, individual learning, forums and groups.

Specialists defined the following ways to collaborate with families of SEN students: regularly discuss difficult situations with parents, developing individual learning plans as a team with parents, decisions are made as a team, together with parents. Some parents are not open, do not address their children's problems, have little contact with their kids, do not cooperate, have no demands, no partnership when asked. More than 94% of the specialists consider that they initiate the communication/collaboration with parents.

Specialists obtain information in the following ways:

- books:

- Barabási Tünde - Dósa Zoltán: A különbözőség pszichológiája és a differenciáló pedagógia
- Gyarmathy Éva: Waldorf pedagógia, Montessori pedagógia, Gyógyító mesék c. könyv,
- Bartók Éva: Játék, öröm, csillogás
- Gyarmathy Éva: Diszlexia
- Adrian Rosan: Psihopedagogia speciala. Modele de evaluare si interventie
- Sue Cowley in her book "How to control the naughty?"
- Sue Cowley "Training Clinic", Viv East and Linda Evans' "At a glance: a practical guide to meeting a child's special needs"

- internet:

- online forums, online platforms, facebook groups, webinars, seminars, training, internships,
- <https://smsm.lrv.lt>, www.educator.lt, www.mkc.lt, <https://smsm.lrv.lt/?lang=lt> ,
- nild.hu, sniikt.wordpress.com, OFOE (osztalyfonok.hu), skatulya.hu, mfflt.hu, demoszthenesz.hu, Finn oktatási minisztérium honlapja, gyogyepedagogia.lap.hu, auti.hu, Gyogyepedagogiai Szemle, Slachta Margit NSZI: nszi.hu, ojs,elte.hu/gyogyepedszemle, Vadaskert: vadaskert.hu, Bethesda: bethesda.hu, Mars Alapítvány: marsalapitvany.hu.

- other ways:

- professional conferences, lectures by Dr. Eva Gyarmathy and Dr. Nandor Danauer
- collaborating with professionals and asking for advice and opinions
- library
- Conferences (Pl. Zöldkakas, ELTE)

Parents responses

In all the countries parents of younger children are more interested in this topic. Parents of children aged between 1-16 years completed the Form. Therefore, we should make contact with these parents as early as possible.

The parents whose children attend public school completed the questionnaire with more interest. In the majority of cases the school has an inclusive program for SEN children. But, it is very interesting that 11% in Hungary, 14% in Lithuania and 17% in Romania don't know if the institution has an inclusive program. We should explain what an inclusive program is, and also highlight the information about such programs available in their institutions. It may have a negative impact on the SEN students if the other students or parents are unaware of the advantages they are entitled to.

In Romania the most positive description is that schools are very accepting, taking in children with learning difficulties and intellectual disabilities. The negative side is that most of

the children are just tolerated within the school and there are only a few specialists. In Lithuania the most positive description is that there is an adaptive program, with competent professionals. The negative side is the lack of tolerance. In Hungary the responses are mixed. The parents are satisfied that there are enough specialists, and they are unsatisfied about the school's lack of professionals.

We can conclude that in all three countries there is a shortage of professionals. In Romania and Hungary more than 70% of parents think that there are not enough professionals. In Lithuania more than a half of parents think that there are not enough professionals. It is interesting that in Lithuania 8% of the parents, in Romania 13% of parents and in Hungary 6.1% of parents don't know if there are enough professionals.

It is an interesting finding that in all three countries there are parents who are uncertain about whether their child has special needs or not. (Romania: 10%, Lithuania: 13%, Hungary: 8.5%)

To the question on whether children receive the required therapy, the results of the answer “maybe” are similar (about 30-40%). However, as for the answer “no”, Hungarian parents’ responses stand out with 51%.

The most frequent reasons why the children do not receive the required therapy are the following:

- Romania: lack of professionals, little time for development, lack of services
- Lithuania: lack of money, professionals and lack of information, non-existence
- Hungary: lack of professionals, problem of educational politics, little time for development

According to parents, the main knowledge and skills that a teacher should have are: to be professionally trained, to have specialized knowledge and develop children with SEN according to their level of knowledge and particular personality, communication skills with parents and children, empathy, tolerance, patience, flexibility.

Knowledge and skills a parent should have to develop its child in a proper way: to know where to ask for help (more than 58% of the parents), to have a realistic image of their child (more than 58%) and 60% of the parents thought that knowing their rights represents an

important part in raising a child with SEN. The barriers which make it difficult to reach the required therapy are: not enough professionals, too expensive therapy and long waiting list.

According to the parents, children with SEN should be able to be independent and adapt to society, to have basic skills such as reading, writing, counting and social skills.

Regarding to the right profession for children with SEN the responses show correlation with the children's level of independence, that is, the more independent a child is, the more likely it is that they will choose a job that they can do on their own. The parents mentioned jobs as follows: crafts (e.g. gardening, hairdressing), IT (or working with data, e.g. maths, engineering), and arts (music, photography, photo editing or any creative activity).

In all three countries less than 50% of the parents considered that their child would be able to live independently in a non-parental home as an adult.

What are your child's strengths? How can the family support him/her in developing them?

- Romania:
 - compassionate, curious, eager to learn
 - affectionate, empathetic, kind, playful
 - persistent, intelligent, open to new activities
 - sociable, friendly, strong
 - talent in: music, drawing, horse riding, sculpture, design, crafts
- Lithuania:
 - communicative, very sociable, courageous
 - independent
 - patient, stubborn
 - affectionate, empathetic
- Hungary:
 - thirst for knowledge, determination, excellent memory, sense of justice, interest, perseverance
 - kindness, acceptance, honesty, empathy, friendliness, open-mindedness
 - mathematics, foreign language, sports, IT, arts

In Romania and Hungary less than 39% of the parents thought that teachers take into account their child's needs and qualities, but in Lithuania 66% of the parents considered that their child's needs are important for the educators.

In order to support their child with SEN parents train themselves by reading books and online articles, attending online/offline forums and groups, trainings.

In matter of collaboration with the school, parents mentioned the regular discussions of difficult situations, learning and finding solutions within a team. In Hungary many report as a problem, that there is essentially no cooperation between the school and the parents.

The most surprising finding throughout the analysis of the responses was the fact that the parents think it is mainly them who initiate collaboration. In the teachers' survey, the results indicate that the teachers think they are the ones who usually take initiative. More than 62% of the parents thought that they are the ones who usually initiate the cooperation.

Some suggestions/means from where parents can inform themselves to ensure the child's development in the best possible way:

- specialized books

- MáthéGábor: Szétszórtelmék,
- Sz. Annamária: Mesepszichológia,
- Meixner Ildikó: Olvasókönyv
- Gagy Erzsébet: Játékház
- Books by Jean Liedloff: In Search of Lost Happiness
- Judit Szabolcs-Singer Magdolna: Dr. Márk Seliko Witz. Sue Fletcher-Wattson
- Francesca Happé: Autism: a new introduction to psychological theories and debates
- Attwood: The odd child
- Robert J. Bernstein - Robin Cantor-Cooke: peculiar normality
- M. Hallowell, John J. Ratey: Dysregulation - Recognizing and overcoming attention deficit disorder in children and adults (ADHD and ADD)
- Tea Teadore, Clare Sainsbury: Martian in the playground

Internet

- www.asirpsichologija.lt
- www.tavovaikas.lt
- www.pasakadarzelis.lt
- www.socmin.lrv.lt

Articles:

- J.Abrukaitis. "Children with special needs" and "You are not alone"
- J.Starkute, I.Neimante "How to raise independent and creative children?"
- publications by Éva Gyarmathy, Dr. Nándor Donauer, Dr. György Büki, Prof. Judit Molnár, Győri-Stefanik

Online interfaces

- additude.com
- Autism Foundation: autizmus.hu, baranyfelho.hu, Szikra Talent Association: tehetsseggonozo.hu, National Association of Autistic People: aosz.hu, BHRG Foundation: bhrghu, Egysimaegyfordított Association: egysimaegyfordított.com, Mars Foundation: marsalapitvany.hu, Resuli Foundation: resuli.hu, Lépünk, hogyan léphessenek Foundation: lepunkhogylephessenek.hu, Kézénfogva Foundation: kezenfogva.hu, Related education: kapcsolodo.hu, fimota.hu, varazsbetu.hu, Vadaskert Foundation: vadaskert.hu

Based on the results of the questionnaire, parents are open to communication and cooperation, because they themselves consider it is important to have a realistic view of their own child and to help them develop their own skills. At the same time, they are putting more and more emphasis on development and are becoming more accepting of the child's problems.

The biggest problems are the development of SNI children, the lack of professionals, the lack of services, and the problem of the educational politics. It is challenging for children to get the developmental therapy they need. In the longer term, this may cause problems in developing their independent living.

The work with inclusive children should be further developed between teachers. Educators also think that more professionals and adequate financial resources are needed for successful development. It is also important to develop and improve the partnership between professionals

and parents. This is why we find it very useful to have a mentoring network, including cooperation between children – parents – professionals, where everyone can find help if needed. If You are interested in the topic, You can follow us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sentor.erasmus>.