

# **Inclusive Education Through the Friendship Bridge Project**

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## Abstract

### Keywords:

educational projects; special educational requirements; inclusive education.

The Friendship Bridge project is an educational project born from the desire to remove some existing barriers between children, especially between children with special educational requirements and other children, from the desire to achieve the socialization of children with special educational requirements and the development of the associative capacities that determine the children to be able to live in permanent association with others, to be capable of friendly relations and, in particular, to want to maintain connections with their peers. The ongoing project since the fall of 2009 was initiated by the School Center for Inclusive Education No. 3 Oradea in the period 2009-2010, then by the School Center for Inclusive Education Orizont Oradea, in the period 2010-2013, the Teachers Training House of Bihor County in the school year 2013-2014, and the School Center for Inclusive Education No. 1 Oradea in the period 2014-2023. In this paper, we will make a retrospective of the activities carried out within the Friendship Bridge educational project identifying the role and importance of the projects in the integration and socialization of students with special educational requirements.

## Zusammenfassung

### Schlüsselworte:

Bildungsprojekte; besondere pädagogische Anforderungen; inklusive Bildung.

Das Freundschaftsbrücken projekt ist ein Bildungsprojekt, das aus dem Wunsch heraus entstanden ist, einige bestehende Barrieren zwischen Kindern, insbesondere zwischen Kindern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf und anderen Kindern, zu beseitigen, aus dem Wunsch heraus, die Sozialisierung von Kindern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf und die Entwicklung der Kinder zu erreichen Assoziationsfähigkeiten, die dazu führen, dass die Kinder in ständiger Verbindung mit anderen leben können, zu freundschaftlichen Beziehungen fähig sind und insbesondere den Kontakt zu Gleichaltrigen aufrechterhalten wollen. Das seit Herbst 2009 laufende Projekt wurde im Zeitraum 2009-2010 vom Schulzentrum für inklusive Bildung Nr. 3 Oradea initiiert, dann vom Schulzentrum für inklusive Bildung „Orizont“ Oradea im Zeitraum 2010-2013 von den Lehrern Ausbildungshaus des Kreises Bihor im Schuljahr 2013-2014 und Schulzentrum für inklusive Bildung Nr. 1 Oradea im Zeitraum 2014-2023. In diesem Artikel werden wir einen Rückblick auf die Aktivitäten geben, die im Rahmen des Bildungsprojekts „Freundschaftsbrücke“ durchgeführt wurden, und dabei die Rolle und Bedeutung der Projekte für die Integration und Sozialisierung von Schülern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf ermitteln.

## 1. Introduction

Specialized research has highlighted the fact that the term education has a broad and a narrow meaning. According to Thesing and Vogt (2009), "the broad meaning of education includes all possible factors that can influence and shape a person's personality and behavior. It even encompasses self-education and environmental influence. This form is also called socialization. The narrow meaning characterizes social processes, in which a person must be educated and promoted to maturity, independence, and ability to act in society" (p. 22).

According to the authors Bocoș and Jucan, (2002) "education is a deliberate, organized, systematic, continuous form of training and modeling of the human personality, giving them a second nature, the axiological one, closely related to the social and

cultural dimension of the matrix it's existential" (p. 13).

In the work Theoretical Approach Critical Thinking in Education, published in Journal Plus Education, Roman and Nădăban (2022) consider that: "Teaching is the activity through which the learning process is organized and conducted. It is based on didactic communication through which the relationship between teacher and student is achieved" (p. 11).

From this perspective, school represents:

"an area of professionalism and responsibility, in which the teacher shows pedagogical quality which it leads the student to success. The overall skills for the teaching career include the



professional (general and specific) skills, the transversal and the specialized ones, supported by a wide and flexible theoretical purview, as well as on the research skills of the educational phenomenon. The communication skills are one of the most important skills in the series of professional ones that ensure the efficiency of the didactic act and the success of the entire instructive-educational process" (Catalano & Catalano, 2017, p. 119).

According to UNESCO (1994) "Each child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning requirements, and therefore, for the right to education to have meaning, educational systems must be designed and educational programs must be implemented that take into account the extremely great diversity of these characteristics and requirements...schools must be compatible with all children, regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions" (p. 8).

## 2. Theoretical foundation

To the question What is integration? Gherghuț (2005) offers the following answers:

"to educate those children with special requirements in regular schools alongside other normal children; to provide specialized services (recovery, educational therapy, school counseling, medical and social assistance) in the respective school; to provide support to teaching staff and school managers in the process of designing and applying integration programs; to allow the effective access of children with special requirements to the regular school program and resources (classrooms, offices, laboratories, library, sports fields), to encourage friendships and communication between all children in the class/school; to educate and help all children to understand and accept their differences; to ensure individualized support programs for children with special educational requirements; to accept radical changes in the organization and development of instructional-educational activities in the school" (p. 267).

For the successful integration of children with special educational requirements in mainstream schools, it is necessary to go through several stages aimed at ensuring the optimal conditions for a reorganization of the school and the curriculum

applied at the level of the educational unit with an emphasis on sensitization of the school community, training and instruction of the teaching staff, reorganizing the school's functional structures and adopting new teaching methods.

One of the forms of integration used relatively frequently but with a major impact on the integration process is occasional integration, which involves the joint participation of students with special educational requirements alongside their peers in the regular school in various school and extracurricular activities.

According to Gherghuț and Ceobanu (2009) the concept of school improvement/development (school improvement) is used more and more often, which implies: "action orientation and continuous professional development of the school, concrete changes in the curriculum, active partnership with other schools or community institutions, openness towards the real needs of students and the community, creating a school environment favorable to the understanding and acceptance of other schoolmates, regardless of their culture, experience or learning potential" (p. 43).

Vrăsmaș (2001) appreciates that "Alignment with international regulations has made Romanian education more and more open to the idea of inclusion. A series of pilot projects, which were carried out in our country, highlighted the fact that the integration of children with disabilities in regular schools is possible and can be extended at the national level" (pp. 185-217).

Another study described by Horga and Jigău (2009) indicates that "a significant number of children with disabilities enrolled in mainstream education and their parents declare themselves satisfied with the learning experience in the regular school and the educational services they have benefited from" (p. 13).

The Friendship Bridge international project, through the targeted objectives and organized activities, paves the way for occasional integration.

The Friendship Bridge is an educational project born from the desire to remove some existing barriers between children, especially between children with special educational requirements and other children, from the desire to achieve the socialization of children with special educational requirements and the development of the associative capacities that determine the children to be able to live in permanent association with others, to be capable of friendly

relations and, in particular, to want to maintain ties with their peers.

The ongoing project since the fall of 2009 was initiated by the School Center for Inclusive Education No. 3 Oradea in the period 2009-2010, then by the School Center for Inclusive Education "Orizont" Oradea, in the period 2010-2013, the House of the Didactic Body of Bihor County in the school year 2013-2014 and the School Center for Inclusive Education No. 1 Oradea in the period 2014-2023.

The Friendship Bridge project, in its twelfth edition this school year brings together preschoolers, students and teachers from Romania and EU member states. The project addresses the following categories of children and students:

- preschoolers and students between the ages of 3 and 16 with educational requirements from special education;
- preschoolers and students between the ages of 3 and 16 with educational requirements integrated into mainstream education;
- preschoolers and students between the ages of 3 and 16 integrated into mainstream education.

The general objectives of the project aim to cultivate the spirit of initiative and creativity; satisfying the need to demonstrate the usefulness of each individual in a community, restoring each child's confidence in his own possibilities and abilities, eliminating communication blockages, and developing team spirit emphasizing mutual respect, familiarizing students with the means of information and communication technology, the involvement of children in artistic and greening activities that respond to their various interests and concerns, to highlight their talent and abilities in different fields, to promote art and the taste for beauty, to develop skills to protect nature and the environment.

Among the specific objectives pursued by carrying out the project activities, we mention:

- the creation of artistic-plastic creations (paintings/drawings, collages, molds, models) using various techniques over 6 months by approximately 200 participants on a given theme;
- making a number of 10-20 virtual works on a given topic (created by teachers using IT tools in Paint 3D format, Canva, and PPT video);
- presentation of artistic creations in local, county, and international exhibitions;

- harnessing the artistic potential of children and promoting love/respect for nature;
- students' familiarization with information and communication technology means;
- the participation of students with SEN from special education institutions and those with integrated SEN in various activities with other children.

The themes addressed over time within the 13 editions were a means of getting to know and befriend our project partners better. For example, we will review some of the most representative themes addressed throughout the course of the project:

2009-2010

- My school and class
- The best teacher, the most exciting subject

2010-2011

- A gift for mom
- European spring
- A gift for my best teacher

2011-2012

- Waiting for Christmas
- Welcome spring!
- The Easter holidays are approaching

2012-2013

- The magic of the winter holidays
- Congratulations to the mother
- What does the bunny bring us?

2013-2014:

- My country in images and photos
- Europe and my country in pictures

2014-2015

- My favorite story
- Story characters

2015-2016

- Landscapes from nature
- SOS Nature!

2016-2017

- Flowers from my school
- Flowers from Romania and Europe

2017-2018

- Romania and Europe - Landscapes from nature
- SOS Nature!

2018-2019

- My school, my country
  - My school, my country - Romania and Europe
- 2019-2020

- Seasons in Romania
  - Seasons in Romania and Europe
- 2020-2021

- My school, my country and Romania
  - My school, my country, Romania and Europe
- 2021-2022

- Romania - Landscapes from nature
  - Romania and Europe - Landscapes from nature
- 2022-2023

- SOS Nature - protect my locality
- SOS Nature Romania and Europe

In the 2009-2010 school year, the Bridge of Friendship project was the first international project in Bihor County that offered children with special educational requirements and those in mainstream education another way of communication: communication through art and communication through the Internet. The activities started with the mutual acquaintance of the children who are partners in the project, and conversations on the Internet on different topics.

Over time, the Bridge of Friendship project has taken on different projects. To begin with, when it launched in 2009 it was a local project. In the period 2010-2013 and 2014-2017 respectively, the project was included in the calendar of national educational activities approved by the Ministry of Education.

During the 2013-2014 school year, the project was approved and included in the inter-county educational activities calendar approved by the Ministry of Education, and during the 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years in the county educational activities calendar approved by the Bihor County School Inspectorate.

Starting with the 2017-2018 school year, the project was proposed and promoted on the eTwinning platform internationally, as can be seen in Figure 1.

The evolution of the number of partners who have joined the project is fluctuating. If at the beginning their number was relatively small, namely 9 institutions according to the image below, there is an increase in the number of institutions participating in the project's activities, the largest number of participants (38) registering in the period 2016-2017,

followed by a slight decrease in them due either to the change in the type of project, or to the pandemic period, or to the direct involvement of the project coordinators at the level of the institutions. Currently, there is a recovery and a slight increase in the number of partners involved in the project.

Figure 1. Project type over time 2009-2023

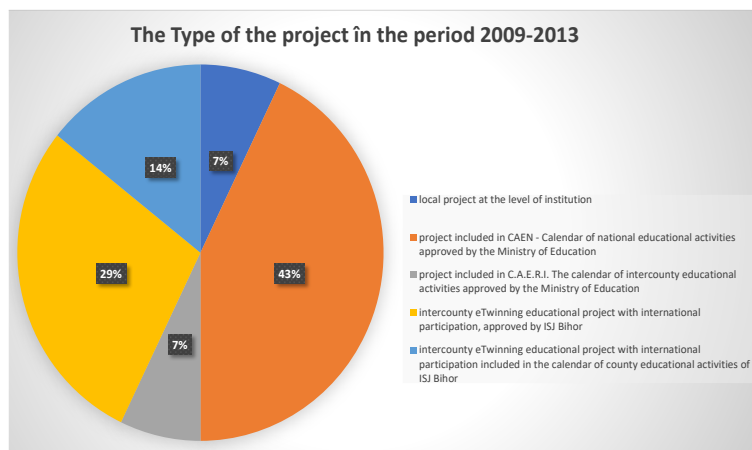


Figure 2. The number of project partners in the period 2009-2023

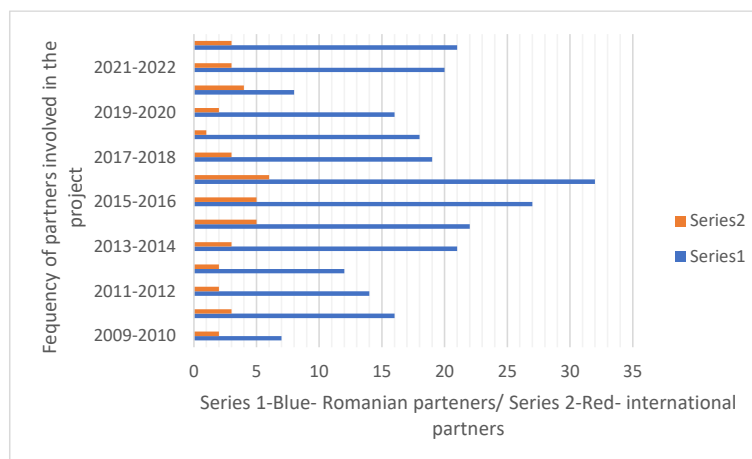
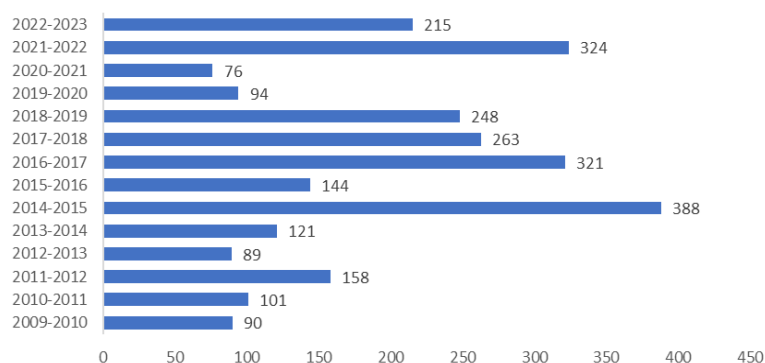


Figure 3. The number of students involved in the project activities over time



Regarding the number of students participating in the activities proposed and organized within the project, we observe their numerical evolution for the period analyzed in Figure number 3. It should be mentioned in relation to the number of participating students that the students had the opportunity to

participate in three types of activities: drawing section competition, collage section competition, and team competition organized in the form of a workshop to make objects, and decorations from recyclable materials.

### 3. Research methodology

The field investigation was carried out in Oradea, between May and June 2023. The research methods used were: semi-directive interview and documentation. A total of 22 people were interviewed, from three different groups of actors involved in the organization and running of the Friendship Bridge project activities - directors of the partner educational units within the project – project coordinators from different educational institutions; – members of the project teams organized at the level of the partner institutions, in total 22 (3 from abroad and 19 from the country). Thus, the selected population was divided into several categories, in order to compare the information obtained. In this way, "...triangulation was respected, defined as the research strategy through which data is obtained from various sources, which leads to a wide coverage and to a rich and nuanced interpretation of the studied phenomenon" (Mucchielli, 2002, pp. 422-423).

As recommended de Singly (1998) we tried to have each category sufficiently represented, to obtain "enough units of analysis to be meaningful" (p. 230). However, there is a disproportion in the sample between the categories of professionals interviewed. Thus, the best represented category of subjects is that of the project coordinators at the unit level, 11 persons, 9 members in the project team and 2 directors of the educational institutions participating in the project.

Research objective: Determining the impact of the project on students and teachers.

Research hypothesis: We assume that students' participation in the activities organized within the international Friendship Bridge project facilitates the integration of children with special educational needs.

Independent variable: children's participation in the drawing/collage contest and the workshop organized within the project.

### 4. Results

The interviewed subjects were selected from 16 mainstream education institutions, 9 secondary schools, 1 kindergarten, 4 high schools/colleges, and 3 special education institutions. As for geographical location, 7 institutions are from Bihor County, 4 from

Prahova, 1 from Timiș, 1 from Cluj, 1 from Suceava, 1 from Galați, and three international partners are from Turkey, Poland, and Great Britain. The sampling method used was the snowball method. I started the interviews with the project coordinators, and they recommended other members of the project team at the level of their institution to discuss with. The search for new people stopped when the information became redundant, that is, nothing new or significant appeared.

The interview guide was designed following documentation, by consulting project documents, annual reports, articles, and published materials about the project. The questions in the interview guide were formulated in clear and concise language taking into account the attempt to look at the problem from the informant's perspective. The questions were adjusted according to how the interviewee answered the preceding questions. Due to this flexibility, it was possible to approach perspectives that were not foreseen in the initial interview guide. In this sense, they have asked to comment on some information, to clarify certain aspects, or to develop some of the ideas presented, in order to arrive at the meaning they give to that subject.

For this research paper, only part of the questions from the interview guide was taken into account, the present study being part of more significant research, which aims at the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education.

### 5. Analysis and interpretation of the obtained data

Analyzing the answers obtained, we were able to find that at the level of the educational units interviewed, the project team was set up to deal with its implementation at the level of the institution and there are partnership documents for the running of the project (centralizing tables or registration forms for the competition, judging forms of the participating works, minutes, discussion groups for information on the activities carried out, centralizing tables with the results obtained by the participants, reports on the carried out activities All the interviewees consider the project activities useful, beneficial, interesting, attractive, stimulating, relaxing and interesting and any collaboration with institutions from the European Union is useful because it offers opportunities for self-evaluation.

All those who participated in the interview stated that the students, the children involved participated with great pleasure and enthusiasm in the activities,

they were delighted to discover ways to protect/save the planet.

Regarding the difficulties encountered during the implementation of the project, 18 people did not report any kind of problem, only one partner reported small difficulties related to time management or the time zone difference.

To the question regarding the contribution of the activities carried out within the Bridge of Friendship project to the integration of children with special educational requirements, all the interviewees answered affirmatively, noting that the proposed and organized activities offer the possibility of participation for all children, the activities are relevant for the integration of students, offering opportunities to socialize with others children and the topic addressed focused on the integration and socialization of students with SEN.

The proposals, suggestions, recommendations for future activities suggested by the project partners are the following: carrying out the project at the national level, continuing the project in the following years and announcing the partners to continue the collaboration, keeping the project WhatsApp Group to facilitate communication and access to information, the expansion of international collaborations which are always beneficial, the charging of participation fees and the issuing of diplomas according to the requirements set out in the self-evaluation sheet in order to award a grade of merit, and the organization within the project of a section of literary creations in addition to the one of artistic creations.

## 6. Conclusions

In the last decades, more and more importance has been given to the inclusion of children with educational needs in mainstream schools. Being a complex phenomenon, it constitutes a challenge for the institutions involved and for the society as a whole and as a consequence the need to change both mentalities and educational policies. It is recognized that, in recent years, significant progress has been made regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools, both from a legislative point of view and by engaging several institutions in this process, and perhaps even at the level of mentality.

The present research highlights the fact that educational projects through the proposed activities can contribute to the integration and socialization of children with special educational requirements.

In order to facilitate the integration and socialization of these children, certain stages must be completed:

- writing, implementing educational projects, and signing collaboration protocols at an inter-institutional level, so as to ensure coherence and continuity of the inclusion approach;
- developing team spirit, by improving communication, assuming responsibilities, and dividing tasks between project partners;
- developing partnerships with parents and attracting them to get involved in school life; sensitizing the parents of normal children to the problems of children with CES; counseling parents of children with CES to help them adopt a realistic attitude towards children;
- the existence of a school evaluation system that focuses on the progress made by children and not only on performance.

The research hypothesis, namely students' participation in the activities organized within the international Friendship Bridge project contributes/favors the integration of children with special educational needs, is confirmed. The teachers are eager for the continuation of the activities within this project, they believe that the students participate with interest and pleasure in all the proposed activities and the involvement of students with SEN alongside normal children in the activities facilitates their socialization and integration.

## Authors note:

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formation initial and continuous training of teachers, relevant articles: The Relation Discourse–Text and Textuality. Pro-pragmatic Self-reference on Speech, Education, research, and development. Application approaches in school, The role of intercultural values in the development of school environment, Emotional education and the development of prosocial behavior.

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