# Teachers' perception about the socialization of children with special education needs with peers in inclusive education

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**Abstract:**

*Inclusive education is founded to be the only education system that accepts all children equally and provides them with the best quality education possible. It is the process of establishing and constantly improving the education policies, practices, and cultures. As such it is the promoter of best social values in education settings, to which not only SEN children benefit, but also their class peers. To this, teachers are seen as key actors in promoting and increasing the socialization of SEN children with their peers within the school settings, and as the role model for children with their attitudes. Research proves that the attitudes of children mirror one of the teachers and other adults. This article, which is part of a wider study, and brings the perception of teachers as regards to SEN children attachment to other peers in the class and as regards the extent to what*

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*peers accept and support SEN children. Findings of the study show that, in classes where SEN children are enrolled, there is positive progress in developing inclusive education culture. Most of SEN children find themselves comfortable to socialize with their peers and vice versa.  To conclude, it is worth saying that inclusive education is found to be an evolving process rather than a static one and as such, teachers need to constantly analyse their achievements, challenges and failures and make the necessary amendments, as the only way to improve policies, practices, culture at school and class level.*

**Key words:** inclusive education, special education need, socialization.


## INTRODUCTION

This paper is extracted from wider research conducted on the perception of Albanian teachers as regards inclusion of children with Special Education Needs (SEN) in mainstream education.
From the researches, which has a wider scope and includes four research questions, this paper sheds light on the findings and results of one of the research objectives and more specifically on *the perception of teachers, as regards to SEN children attachment to other peers in the class and as regards the extent to what peers accept and support SEN children*. Out of various sub-questions, the results related to the level of attachment, support, and tolerance between SEN children and their peers in leisure time have been extracted.

        Although it may look like a luxury, the attachment, support, and tolerance between SEN children and their peers in leisure time form one very important entry point to educating such values in everyday class learning activities, where the pressure for students and teachers increases. As such, developing a culture of tolerance, acceptance, and support, starting with entertaining activities is seen as important.

        Since from 2012, the IE issue was placed quite high in the Albanian education agenda, following the ratification of the

UN Convention for the rights of Persons with disabilities from the Government of Albania. Surely, efforts of civil society organizations and groups of interest to fight for the rights of children with disability and SEN children in education settings date back about two decades ago, yet scattered and sporadic enough to make a difference to the education of all children with disability in the country. Only from 2012 to 2015 the education legal and policy framework was revised and aligned with the provisions of the convention and embraced the inclusive education principle, by making it beneficial for all children with disability and special needs.

The inclusion of SEN children dates back to about 40 years ago, and it has its origins in Special Education. Special Education or segregation of SEN children in special schools was based on the psycho-medical model, originally under the positive intention to provide special care to persons with disability. Later the research made responsible psycho-medical model for dividing people into normal and abnormal, valued and devalued, educable and uneducable, special and typical that resulted into exclusion of people with disabilities from society (Barnes, 1990; Barnes 2007; Deal, 2007; Finkelstein, 2002; Oliver, 1986; Wolfensberger, 1996). By placing the problem inside the person, the medical model left people with disabilities out of the collective space (Armstrong, Armstrong & Barton, 2000) and confined them in segregated institutions for rehabilitation and education where control over life was lost, and dependency was taught (French and Swain, 2004). Special education was at first criticized by scholars with disabilities based on the social model of disability which was created by UPIAS (1976). Regardless, on the way of its implementation, special education has involved a series of stages during which education systems have explored different ways to respond to children with disabilities, and to students who experience difficulties in learning (UNESCO, 2005), which led to

development of inclusive education philosophy based on social model of disability.

Inclusion is *"rights-based"* rather than *"needs-based"* driven. The "rights-based"[3] model of disability focuses on the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms[4] by promoting mutual understanding, tolerance, and friendship and by combating discriminatory approaches to education[5]. Therefore, Inclusive Education offers the best educational opportunities for SEN children[6].

A social model where is based the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006)[7] sees inclusive education as a prerequisite to social inclusion, and it should be provided within the general education system (Article 24 on Education). As per UNCRPD definition the main outcomes of inclusive education are: (i) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity; (ii) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential; (iii) enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society (Article 24).

The current debate and research address that inclusion practice is strongly influenced by the school culture mirrored at the teaching philosophy[8] (Jordan, A., Shwatz, E. & Mc Ghie-

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[3] UNCRPD (2006) and CRC (1989) provide a framework for a rights-based approach for all children.
[4] UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) Article 26, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf
[5] UN, the United Nations Convention the Rights of the Child, CRC (1989), Article 23, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx
[6] UN, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities UNCRPD (2006), Article 24, https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html
[7] Albania has ratified UNCRPD in 2012.
[8] Forlin, C., Earle, C., Loreman, T. & Sharma, U. (2011) The Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised (SACIE-R) Scale for Measuring Pre-

Richmond, D., 2009; Forlin, C., Earle, C., Loreman, T. & Sharma, U., 2011). Teachers are seen as agents of social change and the key to inclusion (Fullan, M., 2007). The school culture is conveyed to children by educational professionals, especially teachers that are the most influential actors in creating an inclusive environment because of the direct contact with students. Alongside this important mission, teachers carry the heaviest burden and responsibility to deal with the inclusion of all children in day-to-day learning activities.

On the other side, it is the Ministry of Education to ensure that school-accessible and child-centered programmes are elaborated, implemented and evaluated. These programs and their assessment need to switch from the traditional ones, limiting the measurement of the children's school achievement in literacy and numeracy, to the ones measuring the emotional growth of learners or their development regarding values and attitudes, generally agreed-upon indicators of the quality of learning processes and the environment. Numeracy and literacy skills that are often measured do not necessarily influence the development of social skills in children and therefore do not have a societal impact on education. The focus must be on supporting education and teachers' education aligned with inclusive approaches to support societal development, thereby ensuring that each citizen can participate effectively in society (UNESCO, 2009).

## METHODOLOGY

This article is part of a wider research study conducted with teachers in Albania based on the quantitative research method. The quantitative method it is used as the best way to achieve the objectives of the study and to respond to research questions.

Service Teachers' Perceptions about Inclusion. *Exceptionality Education International*, 21(3), 50-65; Jordan, A., Shwatz, E. & Mc Ghie-Richmond, D., (2009) Preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(4), 535-542

Data are collected through a survey. The instrument used is a standardized questionnaire from "Quality of teaching in four European countries: a review of the literature and application of an assessment instrument" published in the Educational Research, Volume 49, no.2 June 2007, pg.127-152.

It is worth mentioning at the beginning that the research conduction sees the entire issue of inclusion of children with special needs (SEN) in education with positivist lenses.

The research design employs the descriptive correlative type, which aims to describe the relationship between various variables and to test the hypothetical relation deriving from the theoretical aspect of the issue discussed (Best & Kahn, 1993)

*This study aim*s to make an overall analysis of the perceptions of teachers who work with SEN children in inclusive classrooms of basic education, as regards the attachment of SEN children with the group and vice versa.

*Research questions*

Research question no. one and two are related to the perception of teachers, as regards to SEN children attachment to other peers in the class and as regards the extent to what peers accept and support SEN children.

*Research question no. 1:* What are the perceptions of basic school' teachers as regards the social progress of SEN children in getting adjusted with other peers and in interacting with them in leisure time?

*Research question no. 2:* What are the perceptions of basic school' teachers as regards the tolerance of the class towards SEN children in leisure time?

## *Research limitations*

The research is conducted in public schools only due to limited access of the researchers in private schools. Regardless, the number of basic education' public schools in Albania prevails over the private schools and as such, the results of the study are not substantially affected by this limitation. Moreover, there is a tendency of teachers in public schools to attend teacher training programmes, and as such, the assumption is that they are much more specialized to work with SEN children compared to private school teachers.

Given that the study measures the teachers' perceptions, the survey/questionnaire used could have been combined with class observations, to validate the findings and have a better picture of the social progress of SEN children in their classes. Such a combination of research techniques was restrained from the resources available to conduct the study.

## *Ethical considerations*

Ethical considerations applicable to a research study are strongly considered while conducting the research. As such, data collection was anticipated by requiring the official permission from the responsible institutions. The official permission, among others, made possible for researchers to access schools and teachers.

Respondents were informed at the very start of data collection, about the objectives and aims of the study. They were invited to respond on volunteer bases as well as about their right to withdraw from the research at any time they decide to do so. They were informed that the information provided by them should remain anonymous for as long as the research' results shall be presented in an integrated way and shall be used for academic purposes only.

*The research population and sample*

Given that the research aims to measure the perception of teachers regarding the extent to what SEN children attach to the group of peers in the class, the research population is teachers of basic education who work with SEN children in their classes. The statistics collected from the Albanian National Inspectorate for Education are used to define the population of the study. As per these statistics, there are 2923 SEN children in public basic education schools. Due to the lack of resources in Albanian schools, one to two SEN children are enrolled in a class, and therefore the number of SEN teachers is almost the same as one of the teachers working in inclusive classes.   As such the population of the study consists of about 2923[9]  teachers, 351 teachers from the population was selected as the research sample (Krejce & Morgan, 1970, found at Cohen, Manion & Morrison, pg 94).   The extraction of the sample from the research population is based on the probability stage sampling method.

The sample consists of teachers holding a Bachelor Degree (88.3%) and teachers holding a master degree (11.7%). 47% of the respondents report to have attended training programmes in the last five years, and 53% did not attend training programmes in the last five years. As regards the distribution of respondents, 43% work in the capital and 57% in other districts[10]. To generalize the research findings, the sample proportionally represented 10% of teachers working with SEN children in 38 cities and towns across Albania.

The questionnaire was completed on individual bases. All 351 teachers who accepted to participate in the research completed the questionnaire.

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[9] Inspection report, dt. 23 May 2015, Albanian National Inspectorate for Education
[10] As per the statistics of INSTAT (Albanian National Institute of Statistics) about 1/3 of the Albanian population lives in the capital, Tirana

*The instrument*

The instrument used in this study includes two sets of indicators. The first set of indicators (7 in total) intends to collect information about the perception of teachers as regards the attachment of SEN children with their class peers. The second set of indicators (15 in total), intends to collect information about the perception of teachers as regards the level of group' acceptance towards SEN children.
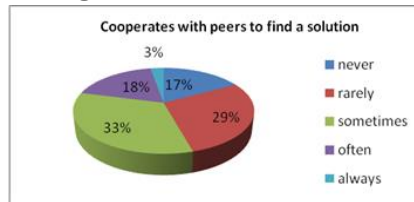
*Data collection*

Data collection was conducted in a three month period during the academic year 2016-2017. Respondents were informed about the objectives of the study, and they were asked the consent to participate in the research. They were informed about the voluntarism and anonymity character of data collection. All teachers who were invited to participate in the research filled the questionnaire. The average time to fill the questionnaire was about 25 – 40 minutes. Respondents filled the questionnaire in their school/class, which is a familiar setting for them and a precondition to receiving as realistic data as possible.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research question no. one and two are related to the perception of teachers, as regards to SEN children attachment to other peers in the class and as regards the extent to what peers accept and support SEN children.

The findings related to research question no. 1 (What are the perceptions of basic school' teachers as regards the social progress of SEN children in getting adjusted with other peers and in interacting with them in leisure time?) are as follows:

**Graph 1: SEN child cooperates with peers to find solutions and common working strategies with them.**



The analyses of the data collected show that the respondents confirm that 54% of SEN children usually cooperate with peers to find a solution and common working strategies and 46% of them usually don't.

**Graph 2: SEN children accept to learn and use the same game' instructions as for their peers**
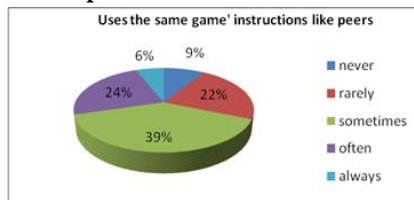


As regards the indicator "do SEN children accept to learn and use the same game' instructions as for their peers?" the data analyses show that 69% of SEN children usually do learn and use the same game instructions as peers and 31% of them usually don't.

**Graph 3: cooperation and solidarity of SEN children with peers in achieving success in games/class works**
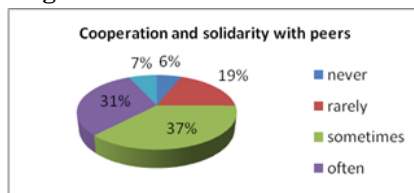
As regards the indicator "Do SEN children cooperate and solidarize with peers in achieving success in games and class works?" the data analyses show that 75% of SEN children usually do and 25% of them usually don't.

**Graph 4: Do SEN children follow carefully and adjust to group requirements to achieve success?**
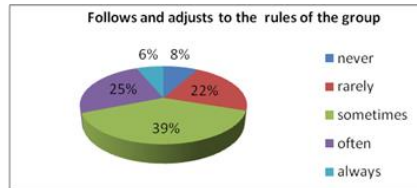


As regards the indicator "Do SEN children follow carefully and adjust to group requirements to achieve success?" the data analyses show that 70% of SEN children usually do and 30% of them usually don't.

**Graph 5: Do SEN children listen carefully to others?**
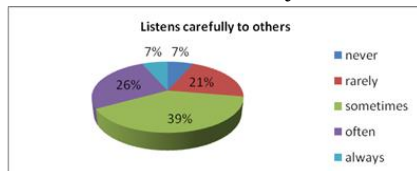


As regards the indicator "Do SEN children listen carefully to others?" the data analyses show that 72% of SEN children usually do and 28% of them usually don't.

**Graph 6: Do SEN children seek permission to speak and do not interrupt others?**
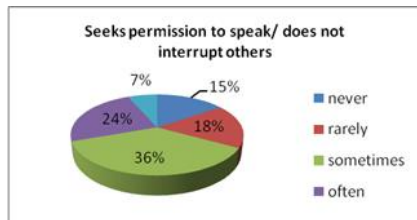
As regards the indicator "Do SEN children seek permission to speak and do not interrupt others?" the data analyses show that 67% of SEN children usually do and 33% of them usually don't.

**Graph 7: Do SEN children welcome help from peers?**
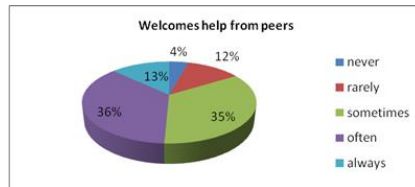


As regards the indicator "Do SEN children welcome help from peers?" the data analyses show that 84% of SEN children usually do and 16% of them usually don't.

351 respondents were responding to the set of indicators corresponding to the research question no. 1 (What are the perceptions of basic school' teachers as regards the social progress of SEN children in getting adjusted with other peers and in interacting with them in leisure time?). Seven indicators were responding to the research question number one, and as such the values are interpreted as follows:

- 7-16.4 show a low level of perception of the teachers as regards the research question no.1
- 16.5 – 25.9 show an average level of perception of the teachers as regards the research question no.1
- 26 -35 show an average level of perception of the teachers as regards the research question no.1

The calculations of all results/values under research question no.1, based on a Likert scale, show an average value of  $\square$ = 21.05. This value corresponds with the average level of perception of teachers as regards socialization of SEN children with their peers in leisure time.

The findings related to research question no. 2 (What are the perceptions of basic school' teachers as regards the tolerance of the class towards SEN children in leisure time?) are as follows:

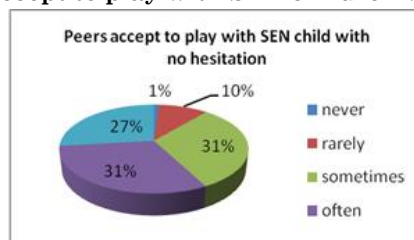**Graph 8: Peers accept to play with SEN children**
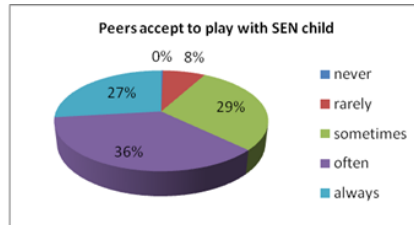


As regards the indicator "Do peers accept to play with SEN children?" the data analyses show that 92% of children usually do and 8% of them usually don't.

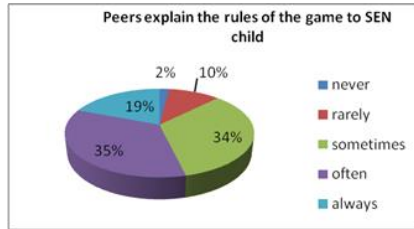**Graph 9: Peers invite SEN' children to play**
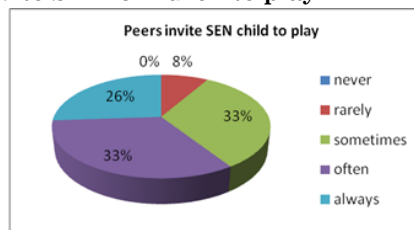


As regards the indicator "Do peers invite SEN children to play?" the data analyses show that 92% of children usually do and 8% of them usually don't.

**Graph 10: Peers accept to play with SEN children with no hesitation**

As regards the indicator "Do peers accept to play with SEN children with no hesitation?" the data analyses show that 89% of children usually do and 11% of them usually don't.

**Graph 11: Peers explain the rules of the game to SEN children**



As regards the indicator "Do peers explain the rules of the game to SEN children?" the data analyses show that 88% of children usually do and 12% of them usually don't.

**Graph 12: Peers allow SEN children to play in their own way**
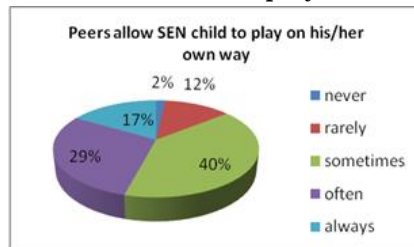


As regards the indicator "Do peers allow SEN children to play in their way?" the data analyses show that 86% of children usually do and 14% of them usually don't.

**Graph 13: Peers do not blame SEN if they lose the game**
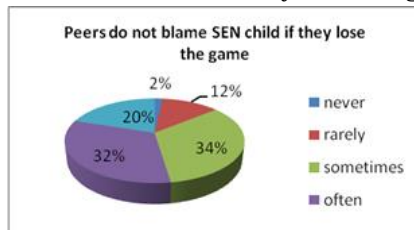
As regards the indicator "Do peers blame SEN children if they lose the game?" the data analyses show that 86% of children usually do and 14% of them usually don't.

**Graph 14: Peers keep playing with SEN regardless they may lose the game**
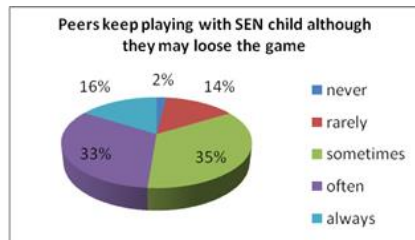


As regards the indicator "Do peers keep playing with SEN children regardless they may lose the game?" the data analyses show that 84% of children usually do and 16% of them usually don't.

328 respondents were responding to the set of indicators corresponding to the research question no. 2 (What are the perceptions of basic school' teachers as regards the perceptions of basic school' teachers as regards the tolerance of the class towards SEN children in leisure time?). 15 indicators were responding to the research question number one, and as such the values are interpreted as follows:

- 7-16.4 show a low level of perception of the teachers as regards the research question no.2
- 16.5 – 25.9 show an average level of perception of the teachers as regards the research question no.2
- 26 -35 show an average level of perception of the teachers as regards the research question no.2

The calculations of all results/values under research question no.1, based on a Likert scale, show an average value of  $\square$ = 25.34.  This value corresponds with the average level of

perception of teachers as regards the tolerance of the class towards SEN children in leisure time.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally speaking, the results of the research show positive progress in installing the culture of inclusiveness in classrooms where SEN children are enrolled. Inclusive education is found to be an evolving process rather than a static one. Schools and teachers need to constantly analyze their achievements, challenges, and failures while working with SEN children, and make the necessary amendments, as the only way to improve policies, practices, culture at school and class level. The below recommendations may contribute to address the existing challenges to creating inclusive classrooms and to boost the socialization of SEN children with their peers:

1. Teachers should extend the positive culture of socializing and support between SEN children and their peers, from leisure activities to indoor and outdoor learning activities. They should increase the level of interactivity in the class by using learning games to teach academic concepts, to increase interaction between SEN children and their peers in those activities;

2. The peer to peer learning strategies can be used by teachers following the idea that children learn best from their peers. Class peers can act as tutors/mentors for SEN children in learning activities related to literacy, numeracy, and other academic concepts, given that these are more demanding activities compared to those conducted in leisure time;

3. Teachers need to present their positive experience to parents, especially those who show resistance to accept the inclusive education of children with special needs in mainstream education settings. Meeting with groups of

parents or inviting parents in the class as well as during the school time, may be used as opportunities to demonstrate to parents that socialization and learning in the same spaces is possible and beneficial for both, SEN children and their peers;

4. There is a great need amongst teachers to learn from experiences of each other, to share achievements, to discuss challenges and advice each other on potential solutions. In such attempts, discussion forums among teachers of nearby schools would be beneficial;

5. Teachers may also use education newspapers and journals as a means to promote their achievements and open discussions amongst professionals as regards challenges they face in teaching children with special needs and socialization with their class peers.

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