

Teachers and supportive teachers in inclusive classes for children with special needs (SEN), the value they bring to Inclusive Education for SEN children

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Abstract:

The paper brings the positive experience of an inclusive education pilot in mainstream schools of three regions of Albania. Inclusive education (IE) is generally known “a process that involves the transformation of schools and other centres of learning to cater for all children” (UNESCO 2009). In its philosophy Inclusive Education embraces the change of policies, cultures and practices in all levels of education. As such it is not a static process but an evolving one which seeks for constant analyses and adjustments in all its three dimensions. Although efforts to establish IE in Albania started years ago, it is officially introduced as a necessity in education system by the new Law for pre-University Education 2012 and its Normative Dispositions 2013. Such legal provisions form strong bases for IE implementation across the county, yet the process is challenged in

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many ways. Scarcity of the knowledgeable and experienced human resources, as well as the allocation of sufficient financial resources remains the main challenge. The paper aims to bring an overall view of the IE pilot interventions, focusing on the values of teachers as agents of change in the process of including SEN children in education settings in Albania. The paper tries to analyse their role, highlight the positive experience and provide some recommendations for distributing this positive experience and making it sustainable.

Key words: Teachers, supportive teachers, inclusive education, children with special education needs.

INTRODUCTION

This paper sheds light to the issue of inclusive education (IE) for children with special education needs³ (SEN) in Albanian in compulsory education settings. In the last decade, the IE issue received a special place in the domestic education agenda. Starting from 2012, time when the Government of Albania ratified the UN Convention for the rights of Persons with disabilities, positive steps were undertaken to align the domestic legal framework with the provisions of the convention. It was the momentum for civil society organizations and other groups of interest to finalize their prolonged advocacy efforts with the Ministry of Education, in emphasizing the need for the provision of inclusive education for SEN children and designing the relevant education legal and policy framework.

Similar to other countries, the implementation of IE for SEN children in Albania dates years ago. Documentation of the best practices served to develop the new education legal and policy framework during 2012-2015. The paper brings the Albanian experience of IE for SEN children based on the

³ “Children with special education needs” term used in this paper is meant to include the categories of children with disability as well as the one of children with learning difficulties/disabilities.

documented best practices, especially from three regions where Ministry of Education with the support and expertise of the Civil Society Organizations piloted IE education for SEN children, as a bases for advancing education policy and legislative framework.

IE for SEN children is quite a wide topic and requires constant changes in education policies, practices and cultures. This paper intends to narrow the focus to as regards policies, practices and cultures that affect the role of teachers in general, and more specifically the role of assistant teachers, as a requirement in achieving the inclusive education goals for SEN children.

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 in the psycho-medical model, originally under the positive intention to provide special care to persons with disability. Later the research hold responsible psycho-medical model for drawing dividing boundaries between 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 locating the problem inside the person and pathologysing the difference, under the guise of care, the medical model expelled 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 were taught (French and Swain, 2004). Special education was at first criticized by scholars with disabilities based on 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.

While Inclusive Education is usually meant as education of learners with disabilities and difficulties in regular schools, the meaning of Inclusive Education is broader. As per definition of UNESCO (2009): “Inclusive education is a process that involves the transformation of schools and other centers of learning to cater for all children’. However, looking at inclusion as a generic frame, UNESCO definition may overlook the specific needs of children with disabilities whose interests are capital in inclusive education. Social model drained the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006)⁴ where inclusive education is seen as 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).

Such a definition implies the undertaking some necessary steps such as embracing diversity of all learners, improving policy and practice, widening access to education to excluded and marginalized children to mainstream education and applying a shared curriculum of culture. It is clear from that definition that inclusion is called to challenge segregated special education for people with disabilities by promoting a

⁴ Albania has ratified UNCRPD in 2012.

child-centred rather than a professional-oriented education. Instead of fitting children to the existing forms of special education, inclusion urges that the educational system should fit to children's needs.

Inclusion is “*rights-based*” rather than “*needs-based*” driven. The ‘needs-based’ model of disability, which uses remediation and compensatory approaches, fails to increase the capacity or capability of schools and education systems. The “rights-based”⁵ model of disability focuses on the full development of the human personality and on the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms⁶ by promoting mutual understanding, tolerance and friendship and by combating discriminatory approaches to education⁷. Therefore, Inclusive Education offers the best educational opportunities for SEN children⁸.

The current debate and research inform that inclusion practice is strongly influenced by the school culture mirrored at the teaching philosophy⁹ (Jordan, A., Shwatz, E. & Mc Ghie-Richmond, D., 2009; Forlin, C., Earle, C., Loreman, T. & Sharma, U., 2011). By shaping the pedagogy and didactic methodology the teaching philosophy creates the conditions for an inclusive culture in formal educational settings. Teachers are seen as agents of social change and key to inclusion (Fullan, M., 2007). The school culture is conveyed to children by educational professionals, especially teachers that are the most

⁵ UNCRPD (2006) and CRC (1989) provide a framework for a rights-based approach for all children.

⁶ UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) Article 26. http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

⁷ UN, the United Nations Convention the Rights of the Child, CRC (1989), Article 23. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

⁸ 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>

⁹ Forlin, C., Earle, C., Loreman, T. & Sharma, U. (2011) The Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised (SACIE-R) Scale for Measuring Pre-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

influential actors in creating an inclusive environment because of the direct contact with students.

Inclusion today is a rights-based approach that allows children to attend the mainstream school and be fully included in its academic and social process (Mittler, 2000). Since 1990, many scholars share the idea of inclusive education (Ainscow, 1991; Allan, 1999, Booth, 1999; Clough & Corbett, 2000; Dyson, 1990; Slee, 2001). Thus, introducing inclusion as a guiding principle in education sector, has implications for teachers' attitudes. As such it is the teacher who has the utmost responsibility for the pupils and their day-to-day learning. Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education to ensure that school-accessible and child-centred programmes are elaborated, implemented and evaluated. The outcome of such programmes and the results of their evaluation will facilitate new incentives and ideas for teaching.

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 emotional growth of learners or their development in terms of 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 of education. The focus must be on supporting education and teachers' education aligned to inclusive approaches to support societal development, thereby ensuring that each citizen is able to participate effectively in society (UNESCO, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of a wider research. The research method employed to conduct this study is qualitative research method.

Data were collected on good IE practices developed in three geographic areas, where SEN children are learning in inclusive classrooms. Data collected aimed at finding out the situation as regards, amongst others, provision of quality education for promotion of inclusive practice. In response to the purpose and aims of research, the key questions include:

- Are schools and teachers enabled to respond to the special educational needs of children, in providing access and quality education?
- What lessons can be drawn from both positive examples and current barriers, to support further improvement of the quality of education for children with disabilities?

The research considered a number of specific research questions, as follows:

- Are attitudes of teachers open to admitting and providing quality education for SEN children?
- Are teaching strategies adapted to the needs of SEN children?
- Are teachers adequately trained to support SEN children in class?

Study sample was selected randomly among school staff: school principals, members of the school commissions for SEN children, teachers of primary education, subject teachers, class teachers, supportive teachers.

The sample was highly representative as the research covered all schools of three geographic locations where Ministry of Education supported by the expertise of Civil Society Organizations have been piloting an inclusive education pilot project. The selection of sample considered the balance of geographical representations of schools, meaning that schools are selected in both, urban and rural areas.

Instruments

The instruments used to collect the research data were: A) Interviews: The interview guide contained questions on: professional/teachers capacities, work and cooperation experiences, areas for improvement of current practices, cooperation with parents and with local community. The purpose of the interview guide was to look into the existing support services and referral mechanisms of relevant institutions and their professionals; B) Focus groups: The focus group methodology was used to gain deeper understanding of the cooperation mechanisms of different schools and local education authorities and of their capacities to provide support to SEN children; C) Observation: the observation took place in classrooms and school activities to understand the teaching methodology used and how they fit to the needs of SEN children, and the level of socialisation of SEN children with peers; D) document analysis such as legislation, policies, reports and statistics on inclusive education produced by official entities on inclusive education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Inclusive culture in school

The research found that in general schools have created a culture of inclusion. The schools community (teachers, students and parents) are making efforts to maintain and improve the inclusive culture by revising school policies relevant for inclusion of SEN children. The school curriculum is adapted to the individual needs of SEN children through development of Individual Education Plans (IEP) and provided additional support through the presence of support teachers.

It is generally noted that inclusion of SEN children has improved the attitudes of teachers and peers as regards acceptance, tolerance and non-discrimination. The training

provided to teachers on the rights of persons with disability, children rights and on legislative and policy framework has contributed to such attitudes.

SEN children in mainstream schools are cared of by trained teachers: primary teachers in elementary grades and subject teachers in upper grades. Supportive teachers have been also additional supportive human resources. Trained teachers have disseminated their experience and knowledge on how to work with IEPs to other teachers in regular schools within their geographic location. Wherever possible, cooperation has been ensured with teachers of special schools.

IEP as a learning tool for SEN children contributed to the provision of quality education and their social inclusion in the school community. Trained teachers alongside with school psychologists and parents of SEN children worked together to design and apply the IEP. Teachers have been key actors in applying IEPs for SEN children. They cooperate with preschool teachers to make the transition of SEN children from kindergarten to school as easy as possible.

Education policy making regarding inclusive education

At a higher level of policy making, Ministry of Education and its dependent institutions such as Institute for Education Development (IED) of Education Regional Education Authorities (REA) have been consulted and cooperated with pilot schools in implementation of legal and policy objectives of inclusive education. IED has developed and included inclusive education training manuals in the in-service teacher training programmes.

Education policy in place, foresees the transformation of special schools in resource centers which can support mainstream schools with their expertise, teachers and facilities. In the regions where special schools exist, supportive teachers have been trained in special schools by observing the work of

special school staff and the way of IEP implementation. Pre-service (student) teachers of Universities have been doing their internships in special schools and pilot schools, and have been made familiar with implementation of IEP for SEN children.

Teachers and their training on inclusive education

Teachers are the front-line service providers in education as child education depends on them. They have a crucial role for their inclusion in mainstream education, for as long as they are the ones mostly in contact with the child and the family. To prepare the stage for an inclusive education of high quality, in-service teachers of the pilot schools working with SEN children were trained. School principals and teachers were trained on how to apply the Index of Inclusion in the context of their school. Pre-service teachers (students attending the faculties of education) were trained on inclusive education and prepared to work in regular kindergartens and primary schools. Training of the in-service teachers of pilot inclusive schools, has directly contributed to the increase of teaching capacity which in turn impacts the academic and social progress of SEN children.

Training has contributed to enhance capacities of teachers in identifying SEN children at pre-school age or elementary school age. Very often, they were those who have informed the school principal and asked to initiate an assessment from REA multidisciplinary commissions. They have afterwards followed the recommendations of REA assessment commission to design the IEP for SEN children. They have been school commission members and have had a strong position in IEP design and implementation. Being in constant contact with the child, the class teacher knows better than other school commission members the child strengths and weaknesses. Their opinion was very often more accurate in deciding upon IEP objectives.

Supportive facilities in inclusive schools

Pilot schools have created space for psycho-social service team to work with children with special educational needs, especially with children with behavioural disorders¹⁰. To increase the opportunities of the child to learn, the school has created resource rooms where children can work on individual basis with a supportive teacher. Supportive teachers spend the most of the time inside the classroom with the child, depending on the needs of the child and objectives written in IEP. However, in some cases children may not support the class discipline and class work demands, which renders them frustrated. In other case, the child needs to work longer and slowly. For that reason, extra hours and special space is needed for the child to finish the individual task. The resource classrooms /spaces provide the child the opportunity to work further in the areas they present difficulties or have some rest if tensioned from class work or noise. Supportive teachers can easily work in these resource rooms on individual basis with the child and fulfil the IEP objectives for class work. However, the stay of the child in the resource room is carefully addressed, as the main scope of schooling is to learn together with other children, and not to provide to a child a segregated education in the inclusive school.

Supportive Teachers in regular schools

The supportive teacher is a new profession in Albania. This profession was initially introduced in the Article 57 of Law on Pre-University Education, 2012. They are employed on the same basis as other teachers and should have completed the post-graduation studies on education. The number of teaching hours per supportive teachers is the same as for class

¹⁰ Space provision in school is a legal obligation for school principals, as per normative dispositions.

teachers¹¹. The need for supportive teacher is assessed by the multidisciplinary commissions that operate in REA. Depending to the severity of child disability, REA commissions decide whether a supportive teacher is needed or not and how many teaching hours they should spend with a SEN child. REA commission makes an annual assessment of child needs to decide whether the child needs a supportive teacher for the next academic year or not.

Supportive teachers work in several regular schools to complete the teaching norm and by going in other schools they have spread their experience. They have created their professional network to share experiences with each other and to spread their knowledge to other schools. They are trained to work with SEN children. Other SEN children, except for those included in the pilot schools, have benefited from the work of supportive teachers who work in more than one school. They are provided with IEP which is a practice that supportive teachers use in schools where REA assigned them to support SEN children. Other schools ask from supportive teachers to design IEP for SEN children. The work of supportive teachers is very much appreciated by other schools that do not have supportive teachers yet. Given the importance that supportive teachers has for the inclusive education of SEN children, there is an increasing demand and pressure from mainstream schools to REA to employ more supportive teachers, or to train subject teachers and primary teacher in inclusive education.

The supportive teachers performed several tasks to support the learning and socialization process of SEN children in the class. They co-worked with the class teacher, primary teacher, subject teacher and school psychologist or social worker to ensure inclusion of SEN children in regular schools. In cooperation with the main teacher of SEN child, subject

¹¹ For more on teacher assistant employment see MoES Guideline Nr.38, date 07.10.2014 "On employment criteria of the teacher assistant for children with disabilities in educational public institutions"

teacher and parents, the supportive teachers designed and implemented IEP, which was approved by the school commission. Supportive teachers collaborated with subject teachers to assess the SEN children's outcomes as per IEP objectives. They assisted the SEN children in the indoor and outdoor activities in order to increase child participation in school activities. Supportive teachers paid particular attention to the improvement of social skills. The aim of support teaching is to teach the child to be less dependent and build self-autonomy. Supportive teachers and subject teachers worked with parents to implement some of IEP objectives at home. They informed parents about the existence of rehabilitation public services for disability.

The study has identified challenges as regards allocation of support teachers to SEN children. Generally speaking, children provided with IEP were also provided with supportive teacher, but this was not the case everywhere. The assignment of a support teacher to assist a child was often conditioned by whether the child has the medical report of disability or not. This practically means that not all SEN children could benefit from such provision. On the other hand, the schools report to have more children with learning difficulties than CwD (holding a medical report for disability). Children with learning difficulties are in need of supportive teachers too, but they do not benefit one.¹² But the paradox is that, although the teaching support is meant to optimize the learning capacity of all children with learning difficulties, this facility was provided only to a small number of CwD that hold a medical report. As such, the schools were somehow confused whether to design the IEP for children without medical report or not. Some schools provided them with IEP and some did not, out of fear that parents may contradict, or because of staff insecurity, or because of the absence of supportive teacher. The schools have

¹² Information from schools and REA.

asked REA to appoint supportive teacher for children with special needs (with medical reports and without medical reports), but REA on its side is conditioned by the limited annual budget allocated from the MoES.

The fact that REA and schools condition the design of IEP with the allocation of the supportive teacher, and the later with the medical report, and with the fact that even in the case of the medical report REA do not always provide with a supportive teacher, has created a justified confusion for parents of SEN children. Insecure that the mainstream schooling can provide a better education service for their children, they chose to send children in special schools, which have some advantages in special education compared to regular schools.

Cooperation of special schools with mainstream schools to achieve IE

REA in pilot regions, where special schools exist, have created links between regular schools and special schools. The special schools in the regions usually work with children with moderate to severe intellectual disability. Teachers of special schools have accumulated substantial experience in working with children with disabilities due to their long experience working with them. As such, the mainstream schools in regions where special schools exist, have benefited from special schools expertise. The teachers of regular schools have only recently been exposed to demands of inclusive education, especially after the approval of the Law on Pre-University Education 2012 and its Normative Acts 2013.

Education Normative Acts 2013 and education policy provide grounds for the transformation of the special schools into resource centres for inclusive education. The special schools staffs are working on a full-time basis with severely and moderately impaired children with disability. They have no additional time to work in regular schools with other CwD or

SEN children, subject teachers or supportive teachers to assist them with application of IEP. However, they have cooperated with regular schools to train supportive teachers in special school premises and have allowed them to observe the application of IEP in special schools. When need arises, the special schools have provided their special education teachers to the REA multidisciplinary assessment commission.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings of this study underline the fact that inclusive education is a dynamic and evolving process. Obviously there are positive signs for a good start of the process, yet there still are steps to undertake for improvement and advancement of the good practices as well as to distribute them to a wider geographic scope from the one of this research.

The below recommendations may be useful to the advancement of IE agenda in schools where such good practice is not yet installed or may have just started:

Capacity building of teaches

Finding show that teachers in schools where the study is carried out, have been benefiting from a very useful training package. Teaching SEN children in the class and all processes involved in applying IEP have been an opportunity for them to put theory in practice. Cooperation with school psychologists, parents of SEN children, support teachers, teachers of special schools and other relevant actors has served greatly to enhance their capacities in working with SEN children in their classes.

This experience can be transferred to schools in other regions from the one where study was carries out. As such:

- Schools and training institutions can make use of trained and experienced teachers to distribute this knowledge and experience to schools in other regions;

- Experienced teachers can be a good source of knowledge and support REA commissions in those geographic areas where these commissions are unexperienced;
- IED, as the institute which designs the in-service teacher training policies, can make a mapping of the experienced schools and teachers and distribute it to all REAs in order to facilitate interaction and peer training among teachers at country level;
- IED should find a mechanism which acknowledges the contribution and provides professional credits to experienced teachers who are contributing with distributing their experience and knowledge to other schools.

In addition to improvements in the in-service teacher training policies by IED, the Teaching Universities, as teacher training institutions, hold their share of responsibility as regards the in-service teacher training. As such:

- Faculties of Educations need to cooperate to unify their curriculum or standardize them in order to provide a basic knowledge at core curriculum to all initial teachers on inclusive education;
- Departments of Educations in all universities preparing teachers should communicate and share curriculum in order to provide for student mobility and standard provision and assessment;
- In-service teachers' capacity building should be structured in comprehensive and planned manner, with included mentorships and supervisions;
- Universities Centres for Teacher Training should provide accredited training programs on inclusive education to in-service teachers' staff. They need to balance in the teaching programs the theoretical part with practical skills and on-the job training;

- IEP, ICF and Index for Inclusion should be part of the pre-service and in-service teacher training.

Supportive teachers

Supportive teacher is a new profession created to respond to the Normative Dispositions chapter XV on “Education of children with disabilities” and as such is an evolving concept. Supportive teacher is hired on the basis of the Article 57, Law on Pre-university education and has the same formal status as other teacher.

- However in schools where the study is carried out, the practice is almost settled as supportive teacher are already installed in pilot schools. However, not all CwD or SEN children in these schools are provided with a supportive teacher, although the need for this profession is huge. Sometimes parents of CWD or SEN children or CSOs offer the financial means to ensure that a supportive teacher is provided to SEN children. MoES has given clear instructions on provision of IEP for all CwD without conditioning it with the medical report, but has not provided sufficient funds to employ the sufficient number of supportive teachers IEP is an educational tool for children from all marginalised groups. According to the law, children with social difficulties, children in the move and returned migrant children may be supported with IEP if needed. As such:
- The only sustainable way to have supportive teachers in education system is employment through official employability mechanisms. MoES should employ supportive teachers for all CwD or SEN children in regular schools. The donor support and family provision are not sustainable and obligatory. Supportive teacher provided on donor-funds may be vanished, while teachers hired by families may not be available after

their children complete the basic education cycle. Moreover, the provision of private teaching service in public education system is a violation of SEN children's right to education and to the principle of equal treatment;

- Parents need to address complaints on the violations of the right to education and equal and fair treatment to MoES, National Council on Disability, People's Advocate and Commissioner for Antidiscrimination in cases where supportive teachers are not allocated with governmental funds;
- Supportive teachers nominated from the MoES need training on IE and inclusive didactics;
- The role of supportive teacher needs to be strengthened by the standardised profiles of supportive teachers. Supportive teacher role and responsibilities needs to be clarified vis a vis the role and responsibilities of regular class teacher. The supportive teacher profile need to be standardised by education policy making institutions, in order to fulfil the responsibilities of a qualified educational professional in mainstream education that provides support to all SEN children;
- REA and schools need to appoint supportive teachers in order to ensure that CwD and SEN children are enrolled in the mainstream schools. Otherwise they will contribute to the over-population of special schools which hampers inclusive education.

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