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The Role and the Challenges of Teacher Assistants in Integrating Children with Special Needs in Regular/Mainstream Classes

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Abstract

Inclusive education is a very wide term in which we involve all children, including children with disabilities. This service that can be provided to children is influenced by a large number of factors but the main role in schools in Albania is played by assistant teachers. These teachers play the main role in teaching children with special needs, the purpose of this study is to understand the challenges and difficulties of assistant teachers and was done through a questionnaire with teachers to understand how useful and involved they are in participation of children with disabilities in their classes and what tools do they use to make children more environmentally friendly to get an education at the highest levels like all other children. This study also explored the barriers that children with disabilities face in their education as well as the strategies they need to use teachers to realize inclusive education.

Keywords: *Children with disabilities, inclusive education, support teachers*

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Nowadays, there are many children facing different problems related to their development and education and, this is due to various factors. These children need to be integrated in inclusive education where they can be accommodated with regular children in the same learning environment. Inclusive education is a process that started being implemented in the 80s of the last century and is progressing at a fast pace. Beauchamp (2004) stated that: “children with disabilities do not have all the learning difficulties, but as a rule, they are educated in special schools according to the type of disability” (p. 44). In Albania, most of the students with special needs enter mainstream classes together with other students, and they are provided with an Individualized Education Plan implemented by an assistant teacher for each student with learning difficulties. The process of enrolling students with special needs in the Albanian Education System is highly conditioned by the country’s context. This study is important as it explores the situation of inclusive education in Albania and assistant teachers' role in educating students with different abilities. It is very important that children with disabilities are involved in such education to help them progress both socially and academically. Inclusive education should be implemented by all primary schools in Albania for children with disabilities and the challenges of assistant teachers during their work should be taken into account.

Therefore, this study will address the challenges faced by teachers and the opportunities they might have. This work will further explore assistant teachers’ role and the support they receive during this process from the educational institutions. This study includes several objectives such as:

- to identify the factors that interfere with the teachers’ work with these children to adapt to a new learning environment.
- to identify the challenges of on-duty assistant teachers in relation to their current work in inclusive education settings.
- to explore the opportunities assistant teachers have to help children with disabilities in mainstream classes.
- to draw conclusions and provide recommendations to determine the need to improve comprehensive pre-assignment curricula and address challenges for support teachers.

The hypotheses of this study are as following: 1. There is a considerable number of factors and challenges that may prevent teachers from doing their work accordingly with children with disabilities in mainstream schools in Albania; 2. There is a great lack of educational materials needed to educate children with disabilities; 3. There is a huge need for more trainings and qualifications in the field of special education in addition to the university degrees for assistant teachers in Albania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview of the legal framework for students with disabilities in Albania

In the Albanian context, people with disabilities have been identified with different terms such as: disabled, people with disabilities, para-tetraplegics, people with mental retardation, blind, etc. In accordance with the United Nations terminology and the concepts of Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities and in accordance with the WHO international categorization, there has been used the term "person with a disability". According to the National Strategy [4] of Persons with Disabilities 2005, from now on "Persons with Disabilities" are those individuals in whom physical functions, mental capacity or psychological state tend to be avoided for more than six months by the typical situation for the respective age, which results in restrictions on their participation in social life. Similarly, Simo (2005) states that, "A person with a disability (PWD) is an individual who has a disability as a result of physical, sensory, intellectual, psycho / motor impairment, born or acquired during life from accidents, temporary or permanent illness, who do not come from employment-related causes". If we refer to disability, that is manifested in different types but physical disability is more prevalent than all the others. Another definition disability is that related to any injury that restricts the physical functioning of the limbs, or dexterity. Other physical disabilities are related to injuries that limit other aspects of daily life. Developmental disability: This disability results due to growth and development problems. These children have delayed development of brain resulting in problems with speaking or thinking. Sensory disability is associated with an impairment of one of the senses. These include visual impairment, hearing impairment, taste or olfactory impairment, somatic and sensory impairment (related to touch, cold, heat or pain) or imbalance. Emotional and mental health disabilities include mental disorders and emotional sclerotic Dementia (WHO, 2005).

2.2 Children with special needs in inclusive education

Inclusive education aims at educating all children according to their age, in accordance with their special opportunities and needs in shared school environments. This is a contemporary international practice accepted as the most appropriate form of exercising the right to education, as a fundamental right of all children “without any distinction, regardless of race, color, gender, language, religion, political opinion or any other opinion of national, ethnic or social origin, wealth, disability, family background or any other condition of the child or his or her parents or legal representatives (International Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Inclusive education means more than the presence of students with special needs in mainstream classes. It has developed from a long history of educational innovation and represents multi-level school improvement for all students (Skrtic, Sailor & Gee, 1996) and is concerned with promoting dignity and distinction (Barton, 1997).

2.3. General overview of previous studies on children with disabilities in Albania

The education of children with disabilities in Albania began during the 60s. For the first time special classes were created for deaf and dumb children (today they have the status of national institutes). In '70s and '80s, as a result of the identified needs, and also in the implementation of compulsory 8-year education for the education of children with mild mental retardation, special schools of special education were established in some cities in Albania, such as Tirana, Durrës, Shkodra, Elbasan, Vlora and Korça (Nano, 2002). They have been enriched in the following years with the establishment of day care centers in Librazhd, Fier and Pogradec (ADRF, 2010) to enable care and education of children with deeper mental retardation. Efforts for inclusive education in Albania began and became apparent after 1990s. Local organizations in cooperation with financial support of foreign donors initiated projects aimed at inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. The project implemented by Children's Aid Direct (CAD), in cooperation with national association of parents “Helping children with mental retardation” undertook the initiative for integration of children with mental retardation in preschool system in city of Tirana. Within this project, training of some primary school teachers was also made possible. During the same period, the organization MEDPAK enabled the integration of 11 children with disabilities in mainstream classes at the city of Librazhd. The Center for Child Development (Tirana) in the years '97 -'98 made serious efforts and realized the inclusion of many children with different disabilities, such as autism, hearing problems, hyperactivity, problems in psycho- motorcycle and in speaking, in ordinary city schools. In this project parents were

evaluated as good collaborators to achieve results in inclusion of their children (Nano, 2002). The project "Integrated Special Education" (2000-2003), implemented with the support of UNICEF and implemented by MOVIMONDO (Italian non-governmental organization) and MED- 14 Education issues: Inclusion of children with special needs (disabilities) in the Albanian school PAK (Albanian non-governmental organization) is another important initiative in context of inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

2.4. Benefits of society, education system, and children from inclusive education

Inclusion is a topic that suits everyone and not just the education system. All persons with disabilities have their rights and these rights are primary to be respected within every institution and not only in schools. You should no longer consider them as poor, needy beings care and specialized care, for a school to look good, students who are supporting these children in need should also help a little. Growing up together, children learn to live together as adults and work together for individual and collective well-being. Through coexistence in school with children with disabilities, other children learn human values that are essential to society because recently they have almost become obsolete and people are becoming more and more savage with each other. In addition, inclusive education is also beneficial for teachers and makes them more aware of the key role in civic education for all children. This education aims to provide equal opportunities for all children, regardless of abilities, and to create a global society.

2.5 The role of the assistant teachers in educating children with special needs

The assistant teacher, especially in Albania, has taken on a very difficult and important role. The word assistant teacher itself means a huge support to a child who has major learning difficulties together with other students. In Albania before it is not that there were many such teachers but in 2014 and onwards the number of assistant teachers has increased a lot. In school where we teach in rural areas, every student with different abilities corresponds to an assistant teacher who monitors and helps and makes easier all the problems that child has.

2.6. Teaching methods used by assistant teachers in teaching children with special needs

The ways that assistant teachers use are more the provision of security and love stay with students with disabilities in special classes and with extra hours. Teachers help children with homework, if they need to accompany them home, play with them.

2.7. Challenges of assistant teachers in educating children with special needs

Based on the questionnaires developed, we see many problems related to teachers in general. But this time we need to specify the assistant teachers. The first thing we see is the problem of education of these teachers because in Albania or in the area where we live most of the assistant teachers are only with secondary education and do not have a specific education for children with disabilities. In Albania there are still many parents who do not want to admit the problem to their children and often do not accept that an assistant teacher is only for their child and this is a problem and a clash between parent and teacher. In schools where we teach, the classes have become collective and the number of students is very low, which makes the child with different abilities distracted and the assistant teacher is unable to decide to work. It happens that children are a little older and with problems such as nervous disorders and teachers are unable to manage them in cases of nervous crises, and do not even have the right protection to deal with them. Lack of teaching aids and infrastructure is again an aspect that teachers face as difficulties every day and more.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach has been used to better address the research questions and understand the challenges that assistant teachers face in their work with children with special needs.

This study used a qualitative approach used to show the challenges and difficulties faced by assistant teachers in the process of integrating children with disabilities in mainstream schools in Albania.

3.1 Sampling procedure

This study was conducted to provide a broader understanding of the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools and difficulties faced by assistant teachers who are a major force in helping these children. A total of 10 assistant teachers from three different schools in Puka district were questioned.

Of these teachers, three (3%) were males and six (7%) were females. The participating teachers were interviewed where they were asked to answer the questions as best they could. The teachers provided information about the purpose of the study, ensuring confidentiality, and they were grateful for willingness to participate in this study.

3.2 Research Design

This study used a qualitative design. In this study, the aim was to understand the role of assistant teachers in integrating children with different abilities, what are the problems faced by these teachers and the support they have to be motivated at work as much as possible. Therefore, open-ended interviews were used to obtain data about participants' opinion about this phenomenon.

3.3 Measurement tool

In this study, open-ended interviews with teachers were conducted with the aim of obtaining accurate information and data on the inclusion of children with disabilities in normal schools and meeting the challenges of assistant teachers. They could express different opinions and there are no restrictions on their answers. The questions are open-ended and the confidentiality of teachers is maintained in order to express themselves freely and to provide as much information as possible so that we can achieve the purpose of our study.

4. RESULTS

A summary of interviews conducted to the study participants is found below:

4.1 Assistant teachers' answers regarding the years they work with children with different abilities

Participant #1

The first participant is a female teacher who has been working for 20 years with children.

Participant #2

The second participant is a female teacher who has been working for 10 years with children.

Participant #3

The third participant is a female teacher who has been working for 20 years with children.

Participant #4

The fourth participant is a male teacher who has been working for 16 years with children.

Participant #5

The fifth participant is a female teacher who has been working for 4 years with children.

Participant #6

The sixth participant is a female teacher who has worked for 7 years with children.

Participant #7

The seventh participant is a female assistant teacher who has 1 year working with children.

Participant #8

The eighth participant is a male teacher who has been working for 12 years with children.

Participant #9

The ninth participant is a male teacher who has been working for 10 years with children.

Participant #10

The tenth participant is a female teacher who has been working for 10 years as a teacher.

4.2 The answers provided by the teachers

Teachers' responses to:

1. "How many children did u have under your supervision?"

Four out of ten teachers reported having 3 children with disabilities during their educational careers.

Four out of ten teachers had only 2 children with disabilities. Two out of ten teachers said they had only 1 child with disabilities.

Regarding the question:

2. "What education or courses did you attend to deal with these children"

Teachers reported, ten of them had higher education, but only 4 of them had attended a course for the treatment of children with disabilities and 2 of them had attended regular training related to these children. Teachers answered to:

3. "Do you have didactic methods or curricula to deal specifically with these children?"

Four out of ten teachers said they did not have childcare facilities, but tried to provide them with their own resources. Four out of ten teachers argued that they have very little supporting material (geometric figures, enigmas, colored letters and shapes). Two of ten teachers said they had very

aggressive children and had no materials for their defense nor didactic materials other than those they received online.

One out of ten teachers said there were also daily plans for children with disabilities.

Regarding the question:

4. “Do you have the support of any institution, any association or from the school directorate for your safety even when these children are aggressive, etc.”

Four of the teachers said that the school administration makes it impossible for them to protect us and provide us with conditions of learning, 3 others who attend various trainings with SAVE THE CHILDREN associations, often have financial support by offering these children trips and various games. While 3 others say that children are very aggressive and often use physical violence against these teachers but have no protection from any institution, they already try to talk to the parents of children and find a solution on their own.

Teachers’ responses to the question:

5. “What are the basic ways you use to deal with these children?”

All teachers responded that the way they deal with students depends on the problem that children have. Three of the teachers had children with secondary intellectual disabilities, and the teacher has to take care of them even for personal needs for escort to school and at home, deal with even the smallest things, use motivational games, picture boards and music. Three other teachers responded that the children had autism spectrum which makes their work more difficult, teaching sessions for children with autism should be implemented according to a predictable program, the classroom environment and daily routines should always be consistent new information, skills or behaviors should be taught on a small scale through systematic and direct methods. Two teachers responded that the children have vision problems and the main thing is that they are under supervision at all times, more audio is used. While the other two supervised children with learning difficulties, teachers used methods that are used with all the other children in contrast to these children want more time and want peace and security.

Related to the question:

6. “Do you think that these children should be in this school with all the other friends or they need a special school with special teachers”

Five of the teachers answered that these children should be included in education with other children because in this way they integrate better and have better development, but the relevant institutions should turn their heads more to have security for both teachers and children. Three others said that

children of autism spectrum should have special places because they are very aggressive and other children feel endangered by these children. Two others pointed out that if a children have visual or hearing problems they should be taken from special places, to learn sign language but different sounds, which in the case of our schools is not possible to do so.

Teachers answered to question:

7. “What are the solutions you find as a teacher for these children?”

All teachers said that the solution they could give is support and love for these children. Creating a safe environment for these children to feel as good as possible and a cooperation with parents so that they are also satisfied with their work. The answer to the question:

8. “What would you like to change or what help do you need to achieve the best results with these children?” was as following:

Four of the teachers said that many things should change. Six of the teachers working in the village schools were not satisfied even with the environment where they were. They demanded that since the adjustment of environment with basic tools, with new curricula with activities which absent. While four of the teachers working in city of Puka said that they needed different trainings, often they needed the help of a doctor and asked for a psychologist and a better diagnostic team to work alongside them.

5.1 CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the work that assistant teachers encountered during teaching children with different abilities. This will be a guide for students, parents and schools to understand the daily problem of students with disabilities in society and the problems of teachers dealing with these children. Teachers and society are the first to read this research. Understanding the needs of their children in collaboration with school staff would lead to better generations and comprehensive classes in following years. The findings showed what teachers have expressed and what has been observed in three public schools in Puka.

All assistant teachers reported that they had children with disabilities in their classroom but did not have didactic materials, and did not have the conditions to provide more assistance to this category of children in their education. They said that they do not have any kind of support from institutions, the trainings were very few and tools they had in use were very few. The lesson learned from teaching is different from recommended literature. What the literature suggests does not match what teachers can

provide because conditions are scarce. Primary school teachers do not have means to help them get a better education for these children but they all focus on traditional teaching with few changes. Also, opinions on the inclusion of students with disabilities in schools with others were different because some said they should be in schools with normal students, because they integrate more when they are with peers, but others said that these children they had to be in special places because they often compromised the safety of other children.

5.2 Recommendations

All the teachers suggested that if they want to be so good at teaching, they should be involved in regular training, should read the curricula regularly and have plenty of materials. They need to be coherent with any new information that comes up and any changes regarding children with different abilities.

Teachers play an important role in the appearance of children with disabilities and are teachers themselves who do the identification of support needs for children with special needs in schools; assessment of pedagogical support needs; support the process of transition of children with disabilities in special education from resource centers to regular schools; Materials, lesson plans must also be changed.

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- <https://www.portalishkollor.al/news/integrimi-i-femijeve-me-aftesi-te-kufizuara-ne-shkollat-e-zakonshme>

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview questions.

1. Cila është gjinia juaj?
2. Sa kohe keni duke u marrë me fëmijet me aftësi ndryshe?
3. Sa fëmijë keni në mbikqyrjen tuaj?

4. Cfare arsimi apo kursesh keni ndjekur per tu marre me keto femije?
5. A keni metoda didaktike apo kurrikula qe te merren enkas me keto femije?
6. A keni mbeshtetjen e ndonje institucioni, ndonje shoqate apo nga drejtoria e shkolles per sigurine tuaj edhe kur keto femije jane agresiv etj.
7. Cilat jane menytrat baze qe perdorni per tu marre me keto femije?
8. A mendoni se këta fëmijë duhet të jenë në këtë shkollë me të gjithë shokët e tjerë apo ata kanë nevojë për një shkollë të veçantë me mësues të veçantë?
9. Cilat janë zgjidhjet që ju gjeni si mësues për këta fëmijë?
10. Cfare do te donit te ndryshonit apo cfare ndihme kerkoni qe te arrini rezultate sa me te mira me keto femije?

Interview questions

1. What is your gender?
2. How long have you been dealing with children with different abilities?
3. How many children do you have in your care?
4. What education or courses did you attend to deal with these children?
5. Do you have didactic methods or curricula to deal specifically with these children?
6. Do you have the support of any institution, association or school directorate for your safety even when these children are aggressive, etc.?
7. What are the basic ways you use to deal with these children?
8. Do you think these kids should be in this school with all the other friends or them need a special school with special teachers?
9. What are the solutions you find as a teacher for these children?
10. What would you like to change or what help do you need to achieve the best possible results with these children?