STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AT SCHOOL: THE ROLE OF PEERS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract

One of the most widespread challenges in education during the last years is the role of peers in the inclusion of students with special needs, in order to achieve socialization and academic achievements. With a descriptive character, this research has collected quantitative and qualitative data, the quantitative data were collected through the instrument of the questionnaire carried out with 128 students of the eighth and ninth grades of those classes where there were students with special educational needs. For the collection of these data, we focused on the Inclusion Index manual by the authors Tony Both and Mel Aincow, adapted and adapted in the Albanian language by Prof. Dr. Naser Zabeli, MA. Lulavere Behluli (Zabeli & Behluli, Indeksi per gjitheperfshirje, 2014) and a semi-structured interview was conducted with 5 support teachers and 5 assistants of students with special educational needs. The research was carried out in Kosovo, in four primary schools in the city of Gjilan. These schools were randomly selected while the classes were purposively selected. The results show that peers positively affect the socialization of students with special needs as well as educational development. From the obtained results, we also observed the differences between boys and girls, where we concluded that girls have more positive behavior-attitudes than boys towards peers with special educational needs.

Keywords: Peer, education, students with special needs, lower secondary education

1. Introduction

Students with special educational needs are students who need additional support or changes in learning methods to achieve success in school. Peers play an important role in inclusive education for these students. Peers can help encourage students with special educational needs by offering them support and befriending them. Peers can also help develop the social competences of students with special educational needs by encouraging them to participate in different activities and helping them build relationships with other students. Inclusive education is a learning environment that provides access, accommodation and support for all students. Educational institutions must be adapted for all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. Inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream learning environments has become a common practice around the world (Meijer, Jan Pijl, & Hegarty, 1994).

The educational system has the potential to provide quality education to all individuals and rise above the stigma that still exists in society. Conversely, the education system can perpetuate inequalities related to gender, ethnicity, class or disability (Beckett, 2009). Proponents of special education see specialized institutions as the best alternative for educating children with special needs, while other studies prove that children who attend specialized institutions are at high risk of being socially isolated (UNICEF, 2014). The factors that contribute to the successful inclusion of children with special needs in regular schools are many, but the purpose of this study is to investigate how the cultural factor in this case, the behavior of peers, influences inclusion, and how the latter can become a source of encouragement and not an obstacle for the realization of comprehensive processes. Based on many studies, we have oriented our research with a special

focus on the role of support teachers and assistants who work with students with atypical development. Their role within the school is considered a key factor in the correlation through teachers, parents and other actors within the school. All children have their own individual characteristics and needs (Gjelaj-Zhitija, 2014). The Individual Education Plan is an instrument that helps teachers in schools to understand the needs of children, at the same time to plan suitable activities to achieve the goals, which are not all academic but can also be from everyday life.

The role of the support teacher is best reflected in the MEST document - "Inclusive education - Everyone's right", where it is stated that the support teacher in cooperation with the class teacher or class guardian identifies special needs and organizes, plans joint activities according to the individual needs of the student and in cases where it is necessary to do individual work, compiles the individual education plan together with the teacher or class guardian, the parent, the school director and also helps to raise the awareness of the school staff about the process of all inclusion (MASHT, 2010). According to the Education for All World Monitoring Report (UNESKO, 2015), it is underlined that the lack of opportunity for education and the deficits in the learning process, "defeat" education to fulfill its function as an agent of equality.

Inadequate academic performance, poor relationships with peers and teachers, play a major role in explaining low levels of school involvement and overall school satisfaction (Bossaert, 2015). This finding is also reinforced as a result of professional activity as support teachers in schools, recognizing the importance of education in the personal, cognitive and psycho-social formation of an individual. But what happens to FNVs who stay isolated at home and don't even have the opportunity to learn the word "school"? And in cases where children are integrated into the education system, how much do they benefit, do they develop their potential? What about children who attend school and are constantly exposed to the discriminatory behavior of their peers? What about those who drop out of school after class IX? All these questions are for us to answer as a society because we can directly influence overcoming these challenges and address these concerns to the developers of comprehensive policies in education (Syla, 2002). This study is important because it will critically examine the national education strategy and will propose the interventions that should be made in the practices of inclusive education in lower education institutions and will serve as reference material for many researchers who in-depth studies in the field of comprehensive education will continue.

2. The role of peers in the social and educational development of students with special needs

A large number of authors have given their opinions regarding the influence that peers have on the socialization and education of students with special needs. During the review of the literature for the realization of this study, the various findings led to the conclusions that "Children who learn together, learn to live together, socialize, respect and accept each other".

From what was elaborated above, we can say that the socialization and education of students with special educational needs begins at school with peer influence.

Regarding the theoretical aspect and the literature written about the role of peers in socialization and academic development, it is worth emphasizing the research by (Manset & Semmel, 1997), in which case it is said that comprehensive education for children with special needs brings improvement in terms of academics, but also gives children opportunities to socialize with their peers.

Research related to the ongoing inclusion of students with special needs has a positive impact on children's lives both in terms of socialization and their education (Rafftery, Piscitelli, & Boettcher, 2003).

The process of socialization and education lasts throughout life, starting from childhood and thus continuing into adulthood, when they become more rigid in behavior and attitudes. Children with special needs must be accepted by their peers as they are without differences, so that only then they have more opportunities to interact with their typically developing peers.

Many great pedagogues and psychologists have written and discussed the issue of socialization of students with special needs. Social learning theory asserts that people serve as models of human behavior and some people are able to bring about behavioral changes in different individuals based on the individuals' value and interpretation system (Bandura, 1986).

Then Lev Vygotsky's theory of social development has had a positive impact on the field of education, as it does not focus on the isolated individual, but on the relationship of the individual in his social and cultural context. Lev Vygotsky adheres to the idea that the culture in which the learner is a part and exchanges with others are of primary importance.

Thus, learning at school plays a key role in the construction of the individual, and exchange with others is an essential factor in this construction.

The gap between students' ability to complete a task under the guidance of adults or in collaboration with peers and their ability to solve problems independently.

So the zone of proximal development includes functions that are still in the embryonic stage and can be considered as "loops" of development and not its fruit, that part of development that is in the process of formation (Payne, 2005).

Inclusive education is a matter of social justice as it creates a society that values everyone equally. It is a state obligation to support children with special needs to develop their potential and to facilitate full and equal participation in education.

3. The development of inclusiveness in the school system in Kosovo - the challenges

During the 20th century, under the influence of the medical model of disability, the educational system was specialized and separated as an expression of care for children with disabilities, in order to better respond to their special educational needs (Meijer, Jan Pijl, & Hegarty, 1994). For researchers like Armstrong (2003), this was a wrong step, since isolation from others is the response that is usually given, under the guise of caring, to people who are considered worthless, a burden, "not like us". or as needy to be taken under protection.

Inclusive education means the inclusion of all children in ordinary schools, where they are offered education according to their needs. Comprehensive education is a process that started in the 80s and is progressing at a fast pace, while in our country it started in the last decade. This system managed to replace the traditional education that represented a binary system, divided into two components: in ordinary education and in special education.

Children with special needs do not all have learning difficulties, but, as a rule, they are educated in special schools according to the type of impairment.

Inclusive education is not just a partial adjustment of the education system, but its complete renewal and deep school reform (Stangvik, 1997). The implementation of the comprehensive education reform creates the conditions for an education system that includes within itself a variety of students and that differentiates education according to this variety.

In recent years, the changes that have taken place in Kosovo had a strong impact in the field of education as well. The reform of education, along with many innovations, has also brought new notions and concepts in the treatment and the place that comprehensive education should have within the educational system.

Very positive progress has been made in the direction of inclusion, the basis of which is found in special education. Special education in Kosovo has been operating since 1950, when special schools began to operate.

It is about a greater percentage of the inclusion of children with special needs in education and the advancement of the legal infrastructure.

At the beginning of this period, some international organizations start to support, among others, the special education sector. Here it is worth mentioning: Save the Children, Finnish Support to the Development of the Special Education Sector in Kosovo (known as: FSDEK – Finnish Support to the Development of Education in Kosovo), UNICEF, Handikos, etc. The period after 2000 marks progress towards the development of a series of documents by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (Zabeli, 2010).

In Kosovo, the education of children with special needs began to be organized in pre-school institutions, special schools, resource centers, regular classes, attached classes, which function within the framework of regular schools in which supporting educators, assistants/ and for children with special needs, supporting teachers, as well as operationalized municipal support teams for assessment (MASHT, 2010). From what was elaborated above, we can say that the responsible institutions in Kosovo offer support to families who have children with special needs at school.

In order for all these reforms to be adapted in practice, it is necessary to accept the changes by all the actors of this process and in particular by the teachers and their peers as an important part of these changes (Reçica, 2016).

The process of socialization and education lasts throughout life, starting from childhood and thus continuing into adulthood, when they become more rigid in behavior and attitudes. Children with special needs must be accepted by their peers as they are without differences, so that only then they have more opportunities to interact with their typically developing peers.

4. Method

The participants in this study were (N=128) students from four elementary schools in the Municipality of Gjilan of the 8th and 9th grades who had students with special educational needs in their classes. The research was carried out in four primary schools of the Municipality of Gjilan ("Abaz Ajeti" Primary School, "Rexhep Elmazi" Primary School, "Thimi Mitko" Primary School, and "Selami Hallaci" Primary School) and (N=5) support teachers and (N=5) assistants who work with students with special educational needs (grades 6-9) of these schools. Their selection has been random while classes, support teachers and assistants have been selected purposefully.

Data analysis was performed through quantitative and qualitative methods. To collect quantitative data for our research, we used questionnaires from the authors' Inclusion Index manual (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), adapted and adapted in the Albanian language by Prof. Dr. Naser Zabeli, MA. Lulavere Behluli. The student questionnaire was prepared in accordance with the Likert scale, which was divided into two parts, in the first part, the data on the student was requested, while in the second part, the data related to the research topic using closed-type questions with the possibility of choosing answers from I do not agree at all to I completely agree. For the realization of the questionnaire, we asked for permission from the parents, and they all filled it out. We analyzed the collected data through the SPSS package. The data obtained from the support teachers and assistants was carried out through a qualitative method, a method that deals with research in the social sciences through which we collect and process non-numerical data that interpret the meaning of these data, which help us to understand social life. A semi-structured interview was used where all participants were interviewed separately. Semi-structured interviews are extremely suitable for a variety of valuable tasks, especially when they have multiple uses when open-ended questions are used and individuals are free to give their opinions independently, important opinions on unfamiliar issues (Newcomer, Hatry, & Wholey, 2015). The selection of participants was purposeful because all interview participants had relevant qualifications and experience in the process of observing students with special educational needs in the classroom. To get their opinions, 5 open questions were included in the semi-structured interview. Confidentiality was guaranteed to the participants, and they were informed that they would be presented with codes in our research.

Research hypotheses

Peers positively affect the socialization and academic achievements of students with special educational needs, and there is a significant difference between boys and girls compared to their non-atypical peers.

5. Presentation and Analysis of Results

For the realization of our research, we developed a quantitative survey which answered our research question: To what extent do peers influence academic development? 128 students (68 female and 60 male) aged 14 to 15 participated in the study, all respondents were eighth and ninth grade students of four elementary schools in the Municipality of Gjilan who had peers in their classes with special educational needs. Our study aimed to obtain the opinions of support teachers and assistants who work with students with special needs in the schools selected in the research, we obtained the data through a semi-structured interview for the research question: How much do peers influence the socialization of students with special educational needs? 10 of them participated in the interview, 5 support teachers (4 female and 1 male) as well as 5 assistants (female) who work with students with atypical development.

All 10 participants had experience with students with special educational needs who worked in the schools selected for research.

In the following, we have presented the results obtained from the responses of eighth and ninth grade students in the municipality of Gjilan, as well as the results obtained from support teachers and assistants.

Table 1. Distribution of the sample by gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	Female	68	53.1	53.1	53.1	
	Male	60	46.9	46.9	100.0	
	Total	128	100.0	100.0		

Table 2. The influence of peers on the academic achievements of students with special needs.

Descriptive Statistics

	N Statistic	Minimum Statistic	Maximum Statistic	Sum Statistic	Mean Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Deviation Statistic	Variance Statistic
Including students with special needs in school	128	1.00	5.00	270.00	2.1094	.09997	1.13105	1.279
Support of peers for participation in school	128	1.00	5.00	223.00	1.7422	.06769	.76587	.587
The desire of peers to stay together in the bank with atypical children	128	1.00	5.00	202.00	1.5781	.07491	.84750	.718
Help offered to students with special needs by peers	128	1.00	5.00	192.00	1.5000	.06075	.68734	.472

Cooperation in activities that are organized in groups	128	1.00	5.00	166.00	1.2969	.05586	.63195	.399
Valid N (listwise)	128							

As a result, the effect of peer influence is high. The table gives a summary of the results performed with 128 participants. The survey assessed four factors related to the inclusion of students with special needs in schools: support from peers for participation in learning, willingness of peers to stay together with children with atypical characteristics, help provided by peers for students with special needs and cooperation in organized group activities. The measures used in the survey were on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating the lowest level of compliance and 5 indicating the highest level of compliance. The data in the table show that the average score for support from peers for participation in learning was 2.1094, for the desire of peers to stay together with children with atypical characteristics was 1.7422, for the help provided by peers for students with special needs was 1.5000 and for cooperation in organized group activities it was 1.2969. The standard deviation and variance columns show how much the results differ from the mean. A low standard deviation and variance indicates that the results are more similar, and a high standard deviation and variance indicates that the results are more scattered. Finally, the table suggests that the mean scores for all factors are relatively low, with the highest mean score of 2.1094 for peer support for learning participation and socialization.

Table 3. The difference between boys and girls for the academic development of students with special needs

			Gender		
			Female	Male	Total
I encourage him to answer and participate in the lesson	I completely agree	Count	33	22	55
		% of Total	25.8%	17.2%	43.0%
	Subscribe	Count	25	28	53
		% of Total	19.5%	21.9%	41.4%
	On the average	Count	9	10	19
		% of Total	7.0%	7.8%	14.8%
	I do not agree at all	Count	1	0	1
		% of Total	0.8%	0.0%	0.8%
Total		Count	68	60	128
		% of Total	53.1%	46.9%	100.0%

The total number of participants is 128, with 68 women and 60 men. Overall, most participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (64.3%). A small percentage disagree (0.8%). From the obtained results to the differences and similarities of the results between boys and girls. Girls have more positive attitudes than boys towards children with special needs. This result is also supported by the research done by different authors.

The results showed a difference for the question of whether they encourage their peers with atypical development to participate in the lesson and as seen from the data we have benefited from, we confirmed our hypothesis where there is a significant difference between boys and girls compared to their peers with non-typical development atypical, which means that girls are more sociable and have developed the affective component than boys.

6. Quotes of support teachers and assistants of students with special educational needs

Support teachers and assistants for students with special educational needs are facilitators for teachers who have students with special needs and learning difficulties in their classes. Therefore, in highlighting this topic, we think it is important to include a semi-structured interview. In the question: to what extent do peers influence the socialization of students with atypical development? The subjects included in the interview gave the following answers.

Table 4. The table shows the codes used for each participant; for example, E1-F-40 refers to E- for Assistants, D-Support Teacher; 1- for counting the participants; F/M – gender and age 27. E: Assistants for children with special educational needs D: Support teachers.

Participant No	Gender	Age	Work experience	Code
P1	Female	27 years	3 years	E1-F-40
P2	Female	30 years	2 years	E2-F-38
P3	Female	33 years	2 years	E3-F-35
P4	Female	29 years	3 years	E4-F-29
P5	Female	31 years	1 years	E5-F-25
P6	Female	26 years	15 years	D1-F-20
P7	Male	44 years	2 years	D2-F-27
P8	Female	34 years	8 years	D3-F-42
P9	Female	32 years	15 years	D4-F-22
P10	Female	33 years	9 years	D5-F-46

"All the time they stay in the classroom, all students have respect for their friend and especially when there is a need for tasks during the learning process, they express their willingness to offer themselves with them" E-1-F-40

"At the school where I work with the student with Autism, she has managed to exceed expectations in achieving results in the subject of Mathematics thanks to the help of her bank friend who is very sociable with her and provides a positive social model for her. other students of the class" E2-F-38

"In the class where I work together with the guardian and the teacher of the Albanian language, we decided in the part of the achievements of the results in the Individual Education Plan, the student during the next three months to divide the sentence into syllables with the help of the friend from the bank because she is very social with it " E3-F-35

"I think that all students with special needs are helped and they do not lack socialization by teachers and classmates" E4-F-29

"There is socialization between students with typical and atypical development, I have observed this in my school, I have observed this especially in the subject of Physical Education" E5-F-25

"Students are sociable with their friends, but I think they lack information about the rights of children with special educational needs" D1-F-20

"All inclusion is at the appropriate level in the classroom and students with special needs receive respect and help and support from their peers" D2-F-27

"Teachers in the classroom are the key factors that should promote cooperation because only in this way they are socialized and achieve results in learning according to the regular curriculum" D3-F-42

"During my nine years of experience in the Education System, I think that eighth and ninth grade students have the greatest sensitivity and willingness to support their friends with special needs during the learning process" D4-F-22

"At the school where I work, at the beginning of the new school year, together with the assistant, the classroom teacher and the Albanian language teacher, when we compile the Individual Education Plan, for achieving results in the Albanian language or Mathematics, we highlight a friend or classmate who is sociable and we place him in the first bank close together with their friend with special needs and through him we achieve the goal of the Individual Education Plan" both in terms of socialization and achievements academic D5-F-46.

7. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to explore the influence that peers have on the academic development of students with special educational needs in the last period of finishing primary schooling, this period when they most need their support. We also confirmed our hypothesis that peers influence the socialization of students with special needs.

The research has drawn the conclusion that students with typical development are always willing to help their peers with atypical development in achieving the regular curriculum plan, especially in the difference we made between girls and boys, girls are closer to to help their friends with atypical development. We also support these data in the study conducted by (Bossaert, 2015) with 167 Belgian students, where it was found that girls had higher scores of the affective and behavioral component against attitudes towards disability compared to boys. According to data from a national study in England, females have more positive attitudes than males towards disability based on the findings of (Staniland, 2009), while data from a study conducted in Russia showed that female students have a more positive attitude than male students towards disability (Iarskaia Smirnova, 2002).

The study aimed to find out: How much do peers influence the socialization of students with special needs? In this study, we researched various textbooks and conducted a semi-structured interview with support teachers and assistants of students with special educational needs in primary schools in Kosovo. The findings showed that students provide support, socialization either through activities within the classroom or extracurricular activities or even various games that they play at school, especially in group form.

In the primary schools of the Municipality of Gjilan, taking into account the total number of students, inclusiveness is being implemented according to the standards and administrative instructions that are in force. Based on the value of this research and from the practical and theoretical analyses, we have come to the conclusion that the hypothesis has been proven. The inclusiveness of children with special needs within the pre-university system is at a satisfactory level and that peers positively influence the socialization and academic achievements of students with special educational needs, especially girls are more sociable than boys compared to their peers with atypical development, but it still leaves room for improvement in the future in terms of infrastructure, social mentality, curriculum adapted to the needs of students, training for inclusive education, cooperation with parents, etc.

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