

## COOPERATION OF EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS AND TEACHERS IN IMPLEMENTING THE IEP

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to assess the level of engagement of educational assistants in the educational process with students with special needs and to verify the level and areas of collaboration between teachers and educational assistants in the implementation of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Two hypotheses are presented regarding the collaboration between educational assistants and teachers in the implementation of the IEP, their work, and their behavior in the interaction between the child with special needs and other children in the classroom. The sample includes 71 teachers who have had children with special needs in their classes across several lower secondary schools in the municipalities that implement IEPs in the Anamorava and Prishtina regions (a total of 37 lower secondary schools). Based on the role of educational assistants, their role is not only to assist students with disabilities but also the entire class, which facilitates the flow of the educational process. Given that today's classrooms often include a large number of students with disabilities (often 2-3 per class), the involvement of educational assistants ensures adequate educational conditions. Moreover, the collaboration between teachers and educational assistants in the implementation of the IEP is essential for more effective and successful work with students with disabilities.

*Keywords:* IEP, educational assistants, teachers, Hi-square test, survey.

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### 1. Introduction

The right to education is a fundamental entitlement guaranteed to all children. Moreover, it is not merely a right but also a responsibility that children are expected to fulfill. Every child is entitled to equal and accessible education tailored to their abilities, needs, and interests. The state bears the obligation to ensure equitable access to education for every child, taking into account their educational requirements and psycho-physical capabilities. Inclusive education represents a matter of paramount importance and has become an integral part of educational institutions in Kosovo. However, as significant as it is, it remains a profoundly challenging process, marked by numerous complexities. Inclusion is a progressive approach in education, where all children learn together in schools or preschools, fostering order and social proximity (Avdiu-Kryeziu, 2021). Inclusive education does not merely involve the placement of children within schools or preschools; it also entails the efficient organization of support systems tailored to the individual needs of children. It emphasizes comprehensive access and participation for all children, respecting their individuality (Down Syndrome Kosova, 2017). This educational paradigm began its journey in the 1980s and has since progressed at an accelerated pace (Memedi, 2015).

In Kosovo, the education of children with special needs is now organized across various settings, including preschools, special schools/resource centers, regular classrooms, and attached classrooms within mainstream schools. These institutions are staffed with support educators, assistants for children with special needs, and support teachers. Additionally, municipal support teams are operational for assessing children with special educational needs, ensuring a comprehensive framework of assistance (MASHT, 2010).

The development of inclusive education in Kosovo has been supported by the creation of key documents that guarantee inclusive education, such as:

- *Kosovo Curriculum Framework (KCF), 2016*
- *Strategic Plan for Education in Kosovo 2016–2021*
- *Strategic Plan for the Organization of Inclusive Education for SEN in Pre-University Education in Kosovo, 2016–2020*
- *Standards for Child-Friendly Schools, 2012*
- *Development and Learning Standards for Early Childhood (0–6 years), 2011*
- *Individual Education Plan (IEP), 2017*
- *Program “Teaching According to Activity Areas,” The Index for Inclusion, and others (Save the Children, 2017, 2013).*

This study focuses primarily on the collaboration and implementation of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) by educational assistants and teachers. The IEP is carried out through a collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders, such as schools (inclusive teams), parents, children (where appropriate), and other relevant personnel.

## **2. Research Objective**

The aim of this research is to assess the level of involvement of educational assistants in the teaching and learning process with students with special needs and to examine the extent and areas of collaboration between teachers and educational assistants in implementing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in the regions of Anamorava and Prishtina.

## **3. Research Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

- It is hypothesized that the collaboration between educational assistants and teachers in implementing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) is at an appropriate level.
- It is hypothesized that the educational assistant, through their work and behavior, encourages interaction between children with special needs and their peers, while fully facilitating the learning process in the classroom.

## **4. Research Methodology**

*4.1. Sample and Research Location:* The sample consisted of 71 teachers who had students with special needs in their classrooms. This was a targeted sample, including teachers from several lower secondary schools in municipalities actively working with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), namely the municipalities of Gjilan, Kamenica, Vitia, and Prishtina. In total, the study covered 37 lower secondary schools within these municipalities, selected based on the opportunities available to conduct the research.

*4.2. Research Instrument:* A survey was employed to conduct this research. The survey included questions for teachers with responses based on the Likert scale, a type of attitude scale consisting of a series of statements addressing various aspects of an attitude. For the purposes of this research, the survey included four questions related to the contribution of educational assistants in working with children with disabilities and the collaboration between educational assistants and teachers (Tabaku, 2013).

*4.3. Data Processing:* The data obtained from the survey were processed using descriptive analysis, where the arithmetic mean (AM) within the group was calculated. Additionally, the Chi-square test, a non-parametric method, was applied to calculate frequency differences within the group.

## 5. Analysis and Interpretation of Results

The results of the statistical analysis are presented in four tables. Regarding the statement that the work of educational assistants with children with disabilities facilitates teaching, 98.6% of respondents (70 participants) fully agreed, while only 1.4% (1 participant) indicated “Mostly agree.” The arithmetic mean (AM) was calculated at 4.98, and the Chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 274.14$ ; Df = 4; P = 0.000) confirms that nearly all teachers agree that the work of the educational assistant significantly facilitates teaching for children with disabilities (Table 1).

*Table 1: The Work of Educational Assistants with Children with Disabilities Fully Facilitates Classroom Learning*

<b>The work of educational assistants with children with disabilities fully facilitates classroom learning</b>		
	Frequency	Percentage
Completely disagree	0	0
Mostly disagree	0	0
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0
Mostly agree	1	1.4
Completely agree	70	98.6
Total	71	100.00
Arithmetic Mean	AM = 4.98; Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) = 274.14; (Df) = 4; P = 0.000	

The statement “The educational assistant treats the child with respect” is mostly agreed upon by both the educational assistants and teachers. A total of 88.7% (63 respondents) fully agree, while 7.0% (5 respondents) mostly agree. Additionally, 2.8% (2 respondents) neither agree nor disagree, and 1.4% (1 respondent) completely disagrees. The arithmetic mean (AM) is 4.82, and the Chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 210.62$ ; Df = 4; P = 0.000) indicates that the teachers fully agree that the behavior of educational assistants toward children with disabilities is at a high level (Table 2).

*Table 2: The Behavior of the Educational Assistant Towards Children with Special Needs is at a High Level*

<b>The Behavior of the Educational Assistant Towards Children with Special Needs is at a High Level</b>		
	Frequency	Percentage
Completely disagree	1	1.4
Mostly disagree	0	0.0
Neither agree nor disagree	2	2.8
Mostly agree	5	7.0
Completely agree	63	88.7
Total	71	100.0
Arithmetic Mean	MA = 4.82; Chi-square: Hi = 210.62; Df = 4; P = 0.000	

Forty-five (45) teachers (63.4%) fully agree that the educational assistant encourages interaction between a child with special needs and other children in the class. Additionally, twenty-one (21) teachers (29.6%) mostly agree, four (4) teachers (5.6%) neither agree nor disagree, and one (1) teacher (1.4%) mostly disagrees. The arithmetic mean (AM) is 4.54, and the Chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 103.96$ ; Df = 4; P = 0.000) indicates that the majority of teachers fully agree that the educational assistant encourages interaction between children with special needs and their peers in the classroom (Table 3).

Table 3: The Educational Assistant Encourages Interaction Between the Child with Special Needs and Other Children in the Class

<b>The Educational Assistant Encourages Interaction Between the Child with Special Needs and Other Children in the Class</b>		
	Frequency	Percentage
Completely disagree	0	0
Mostly disagree	1	1.4
Neither agree nor disagree	4	5.6
Mostly agree	21	29.6
Completely agree	45	63.4
Total	71	100.0
Arithmetic Mean	MA = 4.54; Chi-square: Hi = 103.96; Df = 4; P = 0.000	

The majority of the teachers surveyed state that the collaboration between educational assistants and teachers in the implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) is at an appropriate level. Among the teachers surveyed, 67 (94.4%) fully agree, while 2 (2.8%) mostly agree, and 2 (2.8%) mostly disagree with this statement. The arithmetic mean (AM) is 4.89, and the Chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 245.69$ ; Df = 4; P = 0.000) indicates that the majority of teachers fully agree that the collaboration between educational assistants and teachers in implementing the IEPs is at the appropriate level (Table 4).

Table 4: The Cooperation Between Educational Assistants and Teachers in Implementing IEPs is at the Right Level

<b>The Cooperation Between Educational Assistants and Teachers in Implementing IEPs is at the Right Level</b>		
	Frequency	Percentage
Completely disagree	0	0
Mostly disagree	2	2.8
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0
Mostly agree	2	2.8
Completely agree	67	94.4
Total	71	100.0
Arithmetic Mean	MA = 4.89; Chi-square: Hi = 245.69; Df = 4; P = 0.000	

## 6. Discussion

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes the importance of establishing the necessary conditions for the successful implementation of inclusive education. According to their definition, inclusive education refers to the school's ability to provide quality education to all children, regardless of their differences. It is a process of recognizing and responding to the diverse needs of children by increasing their participation in learning, cultural life, and community activities. The rights of each student must be considered and respected, and it is the responsibility of governments to ensure equal conditions for the education of all children. In Kosovo, several documents have been developed to ensure the progress of inclusive education. These documents play a crucial role in guaranteeing inclusive education. It is important to note that in rare cases, traditional teaching models can be inclusive. Examples of this include written exercises in mother tongue classes, sports games in physical education classes, artistic illustrations for specific topics, and choral singing in music classes (Ilić, 2012).

The analysis of the results obtained shows that the work of educational assistants with children with disabilities fully facilitates classroom learning and encourages interaction between children with special needs and their peers in the classroom. According to the statements of the teachers, 98.6% agree, indicating the necessity of having educational assistants present in schools. This finding aligns with numerous studies by other authors, such as Akçin (2022) and Nyunya, Wamocho, and Munyi (2020), who emphasize that this type of teaching fosters highly motivated or engaged learning, where students' intellectual, emotional, and voluntary strengths are connected, ensuring optimal results for each student.

The goal of teaching at various levels of complexity is precisely to give each student the opportunity to fully develop their potential. The success of each student should be measured based on their starting point and the program they were expected to complete, rather than in comparison to the results of other students. Any lesson that does not adhere to this rule cannot be considered inclusive. Therefore, collaboration between educational assistants and teachers in the implementation of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) must be at the appropriate level. The research results show that 94.4% of teachers fully agree that the collaboration between educational assistants and teachers in implementing the IEP is at a high level. This is consistent with the findings of other authors (Akçin, 2022; Nyunya, Wamocho, and Munyi, 2020; Ilić, 2012), who refer to the examination of the effectiveness of individualized learning by organizing classes at different levels of complexity, especially when preparing a literary text or mastering content in subjects such as mathematics and biology. In addition to the various cognitive abilities of children, it is essential that during the development of the curriculum and its implementation, consideration is given to their learning styles and techniques, as well as their motivation.

## **7. Conclusion**

Inclusive education is an integral part of an important system that the society of our country faces. The differences between theory and practice are evident, considering that the Republic of Kosovo is part of the group of moderately developed educational countries, and this issue is even more pronounced. Some partial studies on the role and importance of educational assistants in primary schools have shown that the inclusive education system is at an unremarkable level compared to other countries in the region and beyond. The aim of this research was to evaluate the level of involvement of educational assistants in the educational process with students with special needs and to verify the level and areas of collaboration between teachers and educational assistants in the implementation of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) in Anamorava and Pristina. Based on the statistical results obtained, it can be concluded that the involvement of educational assistants in the educational programs of primary schools greatly contributes to the more appropriate social integration, greater academic success of all students, changes in teachers' attitudes, and their more realistic assessment of the educational needs of students with disabilities. Consequently, this leads to more active participation of students with disabilities in all aspects of schooling. The statistical processing has shown that both hypotheses were fully realized:

- "It is assumed that the collaboration between educational assistants and teachers in the implementation of the IEP is at the appropriate level," which was confirmed by the results presented from the teachers' statements regarding the involvement of educational assistants in the implementation of the IEP.
- "It is assumed that the educational assistant, through their work and behavior, encourages interaction between children with special needs and other children, and fully facilitates learning in the classroom," which was confirmed by the results presented from the teachers' statements.

Based on the outlined role of the educational assistant, their involvement is not only as a helper for students with disabilities but for the entire class, which facilitates the flow of the learning process. Given the large number of students in today's classrooms, including students with disabilities (often 2-3 in a class), the inclusion of educational assistants ensures adequate educational conditions. Furthermore, the collaboration between teachers and educational assistants in the implementation of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) is essential for better and more successful work with students with disabilities. Practice has shown, and this research confirms, that the performance of all students in a classroom with educational assistants is higher, and teachers are more productive and satisfied.

The presented topic is important for school management, educators, psychologists, and all teachers, educators, and parents who expect schools to provide adequate and inclusive access for all children.

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