SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN PRE-SCHOOL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

One of the important advantages of early childhood involvement is its positive impact on children's psychological well-being. Inclusion fosters a sense of belonging, acceptance and self-worth in all children, regardless of their abilities, which is exactly what preschool institutions do. The benefit of inclusion for children with special needs is the ability to observe, imitate and play with normally developed children, and successful inclusion in kindergarten is the basis of their integration throughout life.
The purpose of this research is to analyze the socialization of children with special needs (CHSN) according to educators' perspectives, embedding the involvement of parents, peers' behavior, and independent involvement CHSN in the process. To conduct this research, 30 kindergarten educators voluntarily participated and were tasked with filling out a questionnaire that measured the socialization of children with special needs.
Results showed that 86% of educators considered that CHSN have difficulties on participating in group social activities, supported bz 43% of them who considered peers offer some group support but limited, and this makes 43% of educators consider that CHSN do not participate independently in group activities. The only positive perspective of educators towards socialization of CHNS is the involvement of parents in this process, with 66% of educators evaluating them as highly engaged.

Keywords: children with special needs, socialization, inclusion, kindergarten

Introduction

Socialization is the process by which children become acquainted with a particular culture and develop socially acceptable behaviors. According to Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, learning and development are mediated by society (Vygotsky, 1978). Early childhood care and education reflect a holistic view of the care (e.g. health, nutrition, hygiene, safety and security, responsible care) and education (e.g. early stimulation, education, developmental activities) of young children from 0 to 8 years of age (UNESCO, 2016). Children learn concepts and skills through interaction with other members of society. Bouillet (2019), also argues that without providing sufficient opportunities to interact with peers of a similar age, it would be difficult to expect children to become successful members of society, during the preschool years, children begin to develop an awareness of others, as well as their own preferences and the choices of their peers. In addition, they begin to form stronger and more reciprocal friendships with their peers. Early social acceptance facilitates social competence, and social competence is often associated with success in school and society, as well as in their relationships with peers (Bouillet, 2019).
Brown et al. (1999), also mention that in most cases, children with disabilities tend to remain socially isolated in society, unless educators invest special time and effort to encourage social interactions. One of the key periods for the development of social competence is the preschool age, Katz and McClellan (1997), emphasize the following ways of learning and practicing social competence: encouraging the child to develop skills in the social, emotional and cognitive areas and allowing the child to spend time with other children. Since children learn best by observing and exploring, they emphasize the interaction of children of different ages and behaviors in order to learn and practice social competence. A child's experiences during the first five years

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of life create the foundation for all future social relationships. The foundation here is laid by attentive, patient parents, educators, and the wider community (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

Promoting the social development of an individual is primarily related to fostering the development of social competence, a preschool teacher is a key person in fostering the development of social competence in a child with special needs in the context of kindergarten (Zic-Ralić, 2013; p.18). The approach and strategies used by teachers at the level of preparation, arrival, and stay of a child with developmental difficulties in the group have great educational importance and meaning. The aim is to include children with disabilities in joint activities with other children in order to progress in accordance with their abilities (Zic-Ralić, 2013; p.18). Mikas and Roudi (2012) list the advantages of including children with special needs in preschool institutions. The child has the opportunity to socialize with peers and create social interactions. This promotes the development of social skills, empathy, but also a sense of belonging to a group. By observing and interacting with peers, a child can adopt positive behaviors and skills. By succeeding in play, they will strengthen their potential, encourage personal growth and compensate for areas in which they have certain difficulties. Research shows that children with developmental and early learning difficulties learn best in their natural environment and in interaction with other children in the group. (Allen & Cowdery, 2004). This interaction is also important for children who do not show developmental deviations, because they learn from an early age about tolerance and acceptance of differences.

Research methodology

The purpose of this research is to analyze the socialization of children with special needs and the challenges they face in preschool institutions. Hypothesis: Children with special needs encounter many problems and challenges during socialization in preschool. The research used analytical, statistical and descriptive methods. For data collection, we used a survey, respectively an instrument with questions related to difficulties of socialization of CHSN, parental involvement, peers' behavior, and independence on CHSN engagement in group activities. The instrument is dedicated to preschool educators and we processed the data using the SPSS program. This research was intended to be a pilot study, which is why only 30 educators who are employed in preschool institutions in the city of Tetovo participated in the research. We wanted to screen the situation in one city in order to compile an instrument for a broader research.

In this research, participated overall 30 educators, from which 27 or 90 % were female and only 3 or 10 % male. Another demographic data was their age which we grouped under 35 years old (N=18, F=60%), from 35-45 (N=9, F=30%) and above 45 (N=3, F=10%), as can be seen in table 1.

Table 1

Gender	N	F	Age	N	F
Male	3	10	<35	18	60
Female	27	90	36-45	9	30
			>45	3	10
Total	30	100		30	100

Results

The main goal of this research was to assess the level of difficulties that CHSN face in the process of socialization in preschool institution, or kindergarten. Table 2 shows that according to educators, 86% of them consider that CNSN face great difficulties when they try to be part of group activities, or socialize in general, which raises different questions regarding educators' involvement, their competence in using different strategies, etc.

Table 2. Children with special needs encounter more problems and difficulties during socialization at preschool ages

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Yes	26	86.7	86.7	86.7
	No	4	13.3	13.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Analyzing deeper what can contribute to these results, we can refer to Table 3, respectively whether they consider if CHSN participates independently in group activities, results show a division between the educators. $3 % consider that they do not participate independently and 43 % consider that they do partially. This indicates that there is a space for improvement if the kindergarten is ready to intervene.

Table 3 Do you think that children with special needs are included independently in your group?

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Po	4	13.4	13.3	13.3
	Jo	13	43.3	43.3	56.7
	Pjesërisht	13	43.3	43.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

The third are of concern, was the peers behavior towards CHSN inclusion in social activities, and the results on Table 4 show that, the majority od the educator (N=13, F=43%) consider that peers play with CHSN but only when they are inside the kindergarten, not when they have activities outside it, and is worrying the fact that 20 % consider that peers consider CHSN not capable of participating in group activities.

Table 4 How do other children most often behave towards children with disabilities?

	N	F
They accept them as equal members, help them with activities, and socialize with them outside of kindergarten	10	33.3
They treat them with respect and share materials with them, but interaction is mostly limited to activities in the kindergarten	13	43.3
There is limited communication because children without disabilities think that children with disabilities cannot participate in games and fun.	6	20.0

Children with disabilities are not accepted and do not participate in social life alongside their peers.	1	3.4
Total	30	100.0

The last question gave a little light on the perspective of socialization of CHSN regarding involvement of parent in facilitating the process of socialization to the educators, and Table 5 shows that 66% of educators consider that parents help is very beneficial, which is why we should consider different programs with which we could include parents more in educators work.

Table 5. Do parents influence the child's socialization and facilitate your work?

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Yes	20	66.7	66.7	66.7
	Partially	10	33.3	33.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that 86% of the teachers believe that children with special needs (CHSN) have great difficulties in participating in group social activities. This is consistent with the results of other studies that indicate the challenges children with disabilities face in inclusive settings. Specifically, 43% of the teachers indicated that while peers offer some support, it is still limited, indicating the challenge in developing effective peer interactions. Furthermore, 43% of the teachers believe that CHSN cannot engage in group activities on their own, i.e., they need extra support and inclusive practice. This corroborates Brown et al.'s (2008) findings, who revealed that children with disabilities may find it challenging to join in with peers in inclusive preschool environments. The study emphasized the importance of teacher facilitation in supporting social interactions. Similarly, Pihlaja, Savolainen, and Nieminen (2021) demonstrated that developmental disabilities children spent considerably less time during peer-related actions, necessitating organized inclusion attempts in early childhood education. Of the many results in this research, one most important finding is the strong assumption that parental action has an integral role to play in the process of socializing CHSN. It is from Table 5 that it is apparent 66% of teachers consider parental support as of great help. It reaffirms the crucial contribution of partnership between teachers and parents in promoting social inclusion among special need children. That's corresponding to a previous study in which parental support was the key to inclusive success. For example, Björck-Åkesson et al. (2022) emphasize the necessity of creating collaborations between teachers and families so that CHSN can actively participate in social activities.

Conclusion and further implications

Developmentally disabled children require special help to integrate well in their social environment. This study confirms that preschool teachers are aware of the social challenges faced by such children and have started to make changes in their institutions to ensure inclusion. Socialization during early childhood is essential, and this process is highly influenced by peer interaction, teacher attitude, and family involvement. The conclusions point out that being

accepted and relationships with peers are crucial for establishing self-confidence and emotional well-being in children with special needs. Teachers have an important role to play in this through establishing a warm, accepting environment and making teaching instruments and approaches suitable for individual requirements. Besides, parents' involvement is found to be an invaluable factor for the progress of children socially, affirming the necessity of strong communication and cooperation among families, teachers, and professionals. Though the results are notable, the small number of participants in the study calls for the necessity to carry out additional research with greater numbers of participants and in other preschool institutions. Later studies may yield a better understanding of effective interventions towards enhancing inclusive education and CHSN's social lives.

In conclusion, the successful socialization of children with special needs requires collective efforts by educators, parents, and peers. By fostering inclusive, nurturing environments, we can empower each child to live up to their full potential—socially and emotionally.

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