CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS WITH CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH, PRACTICAL BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract

Inclusive education aims to ensure that every child has genuine opportunities to learn, participate and feel accepted in the school environment, regardless of differences in abilities, development, communication or learning styles. However, its implementation in everyday practice presents numerous challenges for teachers. These challenges are related to professional preparation, the adaptation of curricula and teaching methods, classroom management, the lack of resources and adapted materials, interprofessional cooperation, and communication with families. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the main challenges teachers face when working with children with special educational needs and to examine possible ways of addressing them. The paper is based on a review of relevant literature and international documents, as well as an analysis of the context of inclusive education in North Macedonia. Data published by UNICEF in 2024 indicate that insufficient teacher training and a lack of educational assistants remain among the important barriers to the implementation of inclusive education. The paper concludes that inclusion cannot be the individual responsibility of teachers alone; rather, it requires coordinated institutional, professional and family support.

Keywords: Inclusive education; children with special educational needs; teachers; educational assistant; differentiated instruction; interprofessional cooperation.

1. Introduction

Contemporary schools have a responsibility to create equal opportunities for all students and ensure their active participation in the educational process. In this context, inclusive education means more than the physical presence of a child in the classroom. It also involves meaningful participation in learning, social relationships and everyday school life.

Children with special educational needs form a diverse group. They may have different needs related to communication, learning, mobility, behaviour, sensory processing, or social and emotional development. For this reason, there is no single method that can be applied in the same way to every child. Teachers need to understand each student's strengths and individual needs, adapt the presentation of content and create conditions in which every child can make progress according to their abilities.

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities establishes the right to inclusive education, reasonable accommodation and individualised support within the general education system (United Nations, 2006). This right obliges schools

and the institutions responsible for education to remove barriers that restrict students' participation.
Nevertheless, there may be a considerable gap between the principles of inclusive education and their implementation in the classroom. Teachers often work with large classes, different levels of student readiness, limited time and a lack of specialised materials. At the same time, they are expected to deliver the curriculum while responding to individual needs. This makes it essential to analyse the actual challenges and identify practical forms of support.

2. The problem and significance of the study

The central problem addressed in this paper concerns the difficulties that arise when translating the principles of inclusive education into practice. Even when teachers are willing to include every student, a lack of specialised knowledge, time, support staff and adapted teaching resources may limit the quality of the educational process.
The significance of this topic lies in the fact that teachers are among the key actors shaping a child's everyday school experience. Their preparation and the support they receive directly affect students' opportunities to understand learning content, communicate, build relationships with peers and develop independence. Therefore, identifying these challenges should not be viewed as criticism of teachers, but as a step towards improving the conditions and support systems available to them.

3. Aim and objectives of the paper

The main aim of this paper is to examine and analyse the professional, pedagogical and organisational challenges teachers encounter when working with children with special educational needs, and to propose measures for improving inclusive practices.
The specific objectives are:

- To identify challenges related to teachers' professional preparation and competencies.
- To analyse difficulties in adapting teaching methods, materials and assessment.
- To examine the impact of class size, limited time and insufficient resources.
- To assess the importance of cooperation among teachers, special educators and rehabilitation professionals, educational assistants, parents and school support teams.
- To present recommendations for developing a more accessible and supportive school environment.

4. Research questions and hypotheses

The paper is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the most common challenges teachers face when working with children with special educational needs?
2. To what extent do professional preparation and training influence teachers' readiness to implement inclusive education?
3. How does the lack of resources and support staff affect the delivery of the educational process?
4. What role does cooperation between the school and the family play in students' inclusion and progress?

Main hypothesis (H1): The challenges teachers face when working with children with special educational needs are significantly influenced by a lack of specialised preparation, adapted resources and continuous professional support.
Supporting hypotheses:

- H2: Continuous training and access to professional consultation increase teachers' readiness to implement inclusive practices.
- H3: Regular cooperation among teachers, specialists and parents has a positive impact on adapting the educational process and increasing student participation.
- H4: A lack of educational assistants, materials and appropriate facilities makes the implementation of individualised support more difficult.

These hypotheses are presented as theoretical assumptions that may be tested in a separate empirical study. This paper does not claim to have statistically verified them.

5. Methodology

This paper is theoretical and analytical in nature. It is based on a literature review, analysis of normative documents and comparison of findings from institutional reports. Documents from the United Nations, UNESCO, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, and UNICEF's report on inclusive education in North Macedonia have been considered.
The analysis is organised around the following main themes: teacher competencies, pedagogical adaptation, resources and infrastructure, professional support, cooperation with families, and the social climate in the classroom. Since this paper does not include surveys or interviews conducted by the author, it does not present primary data, participant samples or fabricated statistical results. Its conclusions and recommendations are drawn from the reviewed literature and documents.

5.1. Statistical data on inclusive education

Institutional reports help clarify the barriers that affect the implementation of inclusive education. The following table summarises selected indicators reported in UNICEF's document on North Macedonia (2024).

Indicator	Value	Source / year
Insufficient teacher training	58%	UNICEF, 2024
Lack of educational assistants	48%	UNICEF, 2024
Inadequate infrastructure	40%	UNICEF, 2024
Difficulties delivering teaching in mainstream classrooms	38%	UNICEF, 2024
Schools with inclusive education teams	96%	UNICEF, 2024
Schools with resource rooms and entrance ramps	68%	UNICEF, 2024
Schools with a special educator	60%	UNICEF, 2024

Educational assistants in primary education	500 (2021) → 1,020 (2024)	UNICEF, 2024
Average number of students with disabilities per mainstream primary school	4 (2019/20) → 9 (2023/24)	UNICEF, 2024

5.1.1. Interpretation of the statistical data

The data suggest that progress has been made in increasing the number of educational assistants and the number of students with disabilities attending mainstream schools. However, the percentages related to insufficient teacher training and the lack of educational assistants show that important challenges remain. These findings underline the need to combine the expansion of support services with continuous, high-quality professional development for teachers.
Methodological note: The percentages presented are figures reported in the UNICEF document and are not results of a survey conducted by the author. They reflect the source cited and should not be generalised to every school or every teacher.

6. Main challenges in the educational process

6.1. Professional preparation and lack of training

One of the most important challenges is preparing teachers to work with the diversity of needs present in the classroom. General pedagogical knowledge is essential, but it is not always sufficient to understand alternative communication methods, specific learning difficulties, sensory needs or behaviour-support strategies.
Teachers may experience difficulties in setting realistic goals, breaking tasks into smaller steps, using visual supports and assessing individual progress. UNESCO emphasises that inclusion requires teachers to have the values, knowledge and attitudes that enable all learners to make progress (UNESCO, 2020). This means that professional development must be continuous and connected to real classroom situations, rather than limited to one-off training sessions.

6.2. Adapting teaching methods, materials and content

An inclusive classroom requires flexibility in the way content is presented and learned. Some students benefit from short and clear instructions, while others learn more effectively through practical demonstrations, photographs, symbols, concrete objects, repetition or additional time. Students who experience difficulties with verbal communication may require alternative and augmentative communication tools.
The challenge for teachers is to adapt a task without excluding the student from the common topic and activity. For example, during the same lesson, one student may respond in writing, another by using pictures, and another by pointing or using communication tools. Adaptation does not automatically mean lowering expectations; it means creating different pathways through which students can achieve appropriate learning objectives.

6.3. Classroom management and individual differences

Teachers must simultaneously manage different learning paces, levels of independence and support needs. In the same lesson, some students may work independently while others require continuous guidance. This can create difficulties in organising time and maintaining the participation of the entire class.
Difficulties with self-regulation, sensitivity to noise, anxiety, fatigue or changes in routine may affect a student's behaviour and engagement. In such cases, it is important to understand behaviour in context and identify the factors that may trigger it. Structuring the lesson, preparing students for changes, providing short breaks, using visual rules and applying positive reinforcement can help create a more predictable environment.

6.4. Lack of resources and support staff

The implementation of inclusive education requires adapted materials, assistive devices, accessible spaces and trained personnel. When these are unavailable, teachers may try to compensate on their own, increasing their workload and limiting the time available for individual planning.
UNICEF's 2024 report on North Macedonia identifies the following reported challenges: insufficient teacher training (58%), a lack of educational assistants (48%), inadequate infrastructure (40%), difficulties in delivering teaching in mainstream classrooms (38%), and a lack of special educators in schools (34%). These percentages reflect the challenges reported in the cited source and should not be interpreted as measurements of every school or every teacher.
An educational assistant can support a student's participation and independence, but the assistant's role must be clearly defined and coordinated with the teacher. Pedagogical responsibility for the educational process remains shared and should not be transferred solely to the assistant.

6.5. Interprofessional cooperation and communication with parents

Successful inclusion requires ongoing cooperation among teachers, special educators and rehabilitation professionals, psychologists, pedagogues, educational assistants, school leaders and families. Each professional contributes different expertise, while parents provide valuable information about the child's communication, interests, routines and needs.
When communication is infrequent or responsibilities are unclear, different expectations and uncoordinated interventions may arise. Regular meetings, clear allocation of responsibilities, progress records and reviews of the Individual Education Plan help ensure consistent support. Cooperation with parents should be based on respect, open communication and shared decision-making, with the child's best interests at the centre.

6.6. Attitudes, prejudice and peer acceptance

Inclusion is not limited to adapting teaching. It is also connected to a sense of belonging and social relationships. Prejudice, low expectations, isolation or bullying can prevent a child from participating even when they are physically present in the classroom.

Teachers play an important role in building a culture of respect and acceptance. Cooperative activities, pair and group work, discussions about individual differences, and clear responses to exclusionary behaviour can strengthen solidarity in the classroom. It is important that students are not identified only by their difficulties or diagnoses, but are recognised for their interests, abilities and contributions.

7. Discussion

The literature review indicates that teachers' challenges are not isolated and cannot be explained solely by individual competencies. UNESCO (2020) notes that barriers to inclusion are also related to insufficient support for teachers, infrastructure, governance and policy implementation. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education emphasises that professional learning for inclusion should involve all education professionals and form part of a coordinated, school-wide approach (European Agency, 2022).

The findings of UNICEF's report on North Macedonia make this discussion particularly relevant in the local context. The reported percentages relating to insufficient training and the lack of educational assistants indicate that teachers may face high expectations without always receiving the necessary support. This reinforces the argument that responsibility for inclusion must be shared among individuals, schools and the education system.

In this respect, the hypotheses of this paper are supported by the reviewed literature as reasonable theoretical assumptions. However, verifying them requires empirical research involving teachers, specialists and parents through questionnaires, interviews or classroom observation.

8. Recommendations for improvement

Based on the analysis, the following measures are recommended:

1. Continuous professional development: organise practical training in differentiated instruction, alternative and augmentative communication, positive behaviour support and the development of Individual Education Plans.
2. Professional support within schools: ensure regular cooperation with special educators and rehabilitation professionals, psychologists, pedagogues and other specialists.
3. Strengthen the role of educational assistants: clearly define responsibilities, provide training and coordinate their work with teachers.
4. Accessible materials and tools: provide visual materials, concrete learning resources, assistive technology and adapted spaces.
5. Individual planning and flexible assessment: establish achievable objectives, monitor progress regularly and adapt assessment methods.
6. Partnership with families: maintain regular communication and involve parents in planning and reviewing support.
7. A positive classroom culture: promote respect, acceptance, cooperation and the prevention of exclusion.
8. Institutional support: provide time for joint planning, sufficient staff, accessible infrastructure and monitoring of inclusive education policies.

These measures should be implemented as part of a shared school strategy rather than treated as isolated responsibilities of an individual teacher.

9. Conclusion

Inclusive education is both a right and a shared responsibility. Teachers play a key role in creating learning experiences in which every child can participate and make progress, but they cannot fulfil this mission alone. Challenges related to professional preparation, the adaptation of teaching, classroom management, lack of resources, cooperation and social attitudes require coordinated responses.

The analysis of international documents and data on North Macedonia shows that teacher preparation and the provision of professional support remain particularly important areas. Therefore, investment in professional development, support teams, educational assistants, adapted materials and partnerships with families should be regarded as essential conditions for quality education, not as optional additions.

The main message of this paper is that an inclusive school should not be measured only by the number of children enrolled, but by the genuine opportunities each child has to learn, participate, develop independence and feel valued. Supporting teachers is, at the same time, supporting every child's right to quality education.

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