



Assistant Teacher and His Role in Inclusive Classes in Lower Secondary Education

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Abstract

The role of the assistant teacher in inclusive classrooms is essential in supporting children with special needs. This necessity should mean adapting teaching based on the skills and needs that different children have in learning. For this adaptation to have a scientific basis, it must first and foremost aim at the adaptation of teaching, which is inseparable from the use of IEP in teaching, and the need for teacher-assisted assistance to students with special needs. This responsibility is compounded by the global situation in which we are all involved, such as the pandemic period we are going through. Teaching and special care for some children is not done only through campaigns nor only on the international day dedicated to them. Teaching and care for them should happen on daily basis, they do not accept "conditions" or "protocols" as the skills and needs that some children have do not accept the fulfillment of some of these protocol "rules". Therefore, adaptive teaching and the role of the assistant teacher is essential and a necessity. The findings of the study were realized by processing qualitative data using as instruments: interviews, observations and Focus group with lower secondary school teachers (SET).

Keywords: Adaptive teaching, assistant teacher(support), IEP, inclusive classes

1. Introduction

The increase in the number of children with special needs is noticeable not only in the preschool system, but is also noticeable in the school system (AMU). This requires more and more educational institutions to include in a comprehensive work, all actors who are part of the multidisciplinary group, dealing with the treatment and education of children with special needs.

The characteristics of these children make them more "specific" and as a separate challenge in terms of their management in inclusive classes, and more specifically in lower secondary education classes (grades 6-9). This means that the staff that will work with them should be more "specialized" and work with them should be more concrete about the needs and skills that everyone has to learn.

New teaching methods as well as the use of digital technology, is making the lesson seen as an opportunity for interaction even for children with special needs. Teaching should be seen as an opportunity for the teacher to adapt it, based on the needs and opportunities that everyone has. Each student with his individuality, as well as with the opportunities and skills he presents, will form the basis of a differentiated and individual work in inclusive classes.

1.1 Research Questions

The study questions addressed to the perception of teaching work on the inclusion of children with special needs in lower secondary education (AMU) are:

- How much does the perception of teachers in lower secondary education affect the need for an assistant teacher to support students with special needs if these children are integrated in inclusive classes;
- How effective is the support of teachers in the face of the challenges offered by inclusive classrooms.

The focus of this study is the perception of teachers regarding their preparation and effectiveness in differentiated or individual teaching of this target group of children.

The first research question refers to the needs in terms of academia as well as the purpose for "intervention" and "impact" on lower secondary school teachers regarding the need for an assistant teacher to support students with special needs if these children are integrated in inclusive classes. In the curricula based on the skills and needs of children with special needs, teachers should think about the possibility of involvement in the learning process and the adaptation of teaching materials so that these children are also an active part of the lesson and this role plays very good assistant teacher or assistant.

The second question takes a look at the challenges or difficulties that Albanian teachers face when working in inclusive classrooms. Seen this in a broader perspective, both in the necessity of the material base as well as in the time that the teacher devotes to the planning process and the provision of specialized services such as PEI for students with special needs.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is: to analyze the perception of teachers, in terms of their work for a "differentiated" or "individual" teaching based on the needs and abilities of everyone for a more sustainable learning. This study can also provide supportive information for new teachers who have or may have these children in their classrooms. Perceptions to be analyzed will include the approach of teachers recognizing in the first place the characteristics of these children within the classroom; how prepared teachers feel and are to enable appropriate teaching and programs depending on the needs and abilities these children have to learn, and what kind of support would help them. In other words, the effects of the necessity that the design and implementation of IEP have on inclusive classrooms and the role of the assistant teacher

3. Literature Review

The teacher should act as a mediator in the interaction with the students, as well as the students with special needs, which significantly affects his effective role. He can be considered as a "guide" and "supporter" of students to benefit from this teaching. Students can not achieve "benefits" in the classroom without this support (Ashman & Conway, 1997). Teaching can be thought of as mediation by a "leading expert" such as the teacher, who, through assignments, reassures students to become "experts" in "skills" (ibid., P. 137). For the teacher, his efficiency in this teaching is essential, which can play an important role in overcoming various problems.

Collective effectiveness, as defined by Bandura (1997), implies a common "belief group" in this interaction that relates to the organization and manner of teaching requiring an achievement for certain levels. Collective efficiency helps us to understand how to work in a shared teaching by increasing the efficiency of the teacher. Ideas related to this teaching, enable teachers to learn from each other and stimulate their cognitive development.

The resources of a model in collective efficiency (Doddard 2000), as from the structure of the collective efficiency model, is an extension of Bandura (1977) self-efficacy work. Teaching task analysis and evaluation of teaching competencies are two important aspects in increasing collective efficiency in teaching (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007).

In terms of experience, Woolfolk suggests: creating daily routines so that students have a sense of control over the behaviors expected of them; ensure that the level of learning is at a level appropriate for all students; needs-based learning support guarantees student success (Woolfolk 2007).

These suggestions are useful for teachers regarding student engagement and classroom management. Students are encouraged to take on their responsibilities in learning and thus "disruptive" or "different" behaviors are reduced. As teachers' instructions are more concrete and specific, their belief in the impact of student learning is also more effective.

Woolfolk also points out that all suggestions should be clear, and students should be checked to make sure they understand the instructions for their assignments. Instructions can also be written on the board, instead of being told orally.

For students, folders should be created for all their work such as projects, presentations or any completed product (ibid., 160). These suggestions make possible a free classroom environment where teachers and students work together and from where students can learn unaffected by their teachers (Bandura 1997). Teachers also face difficult situations throughout teaching. On the other hand, high levels of stress and anxiety with fear of losing control (Tschannen- Moran & Woolfolk 2007), which can lead to low efficiency or act as a barrier to increasing an individual's efficiency (Yu-Laing, 2009).

4. Methodology

This paper, by the nature of data collection and analysis will be a quality paper. Where the sample are the teachers of lower secondary education in 3 schools in the city of Durrës. The choice of schools was made at random. The paper aims to create a realistic picture of the capacities and potentials of teaching-educational work in inclusive classrooms.

The instruments used are: interviews, observations, focus groups. All these instruments are performed in "natural conditions". The purpose of this paper is not only to collect as much data as possible, but to research questions to be answered by helping the reality of Albanian teachers in teaching children with special needs, in inclusive classrooms.

The sample selected for completing the Interviews (Gerson & Horowitz 2002), shows the importance in the selection of participants without prejudice. They emphasize that "in the selection, the interviewees should be part of the field of study". The purpose of this selection is to select the "incidents" and then to collect data to ensure the understanding of the phenomena being studied. Interview sample (n = 51)

5. Study findings

The number of teachers interviewed from the three schools was 51 teachers, (n = 51), of which 49 were female teachers and 2 were male teachers.

Below is a summary of the participants' teaching experience in: interviews and focus groups.

According to the teaching experience of the respondents we have this reflection: up to 5 years - 6 teachers; 6-10 years- 2 teachers; 11-20 years- 14 teachers and over 20 years- 29 teachers.

For the analysis with the qualitative data collected from the Interviews and the Focus Group, the following was done: first, an indicator was created where the raw data can be easily seen; second, codes were created for each respondent; third, several sections were created where the collection of data became feasible according to some issues that were identified from the beginning as an integral part of the interview and focus group; finally, the creation of summary tables, where everyone can easily view all categories or issues in all cases.

If we talk about the percentage figures, out of 51 teachers interviewed, in their classes 30.6% have students with undiagnosed special needs; 13.9% have them diagnosed but the parent does not submit the diagnostic report to the school and 55.5% of them have the students diagnosed. But anyway, the figures declared by teachers should be viewed with caution, as teachers are not specialists in diagnosing students, but they think that some students are easily verifiable.

Based on the experience that teachers have in relation to students of this age to the reaction/ actions that some students have compared to other peers in the class, this makes it possible for teachers to make a rough diagnosis, as they are not specialists to make the diagnostic determination of students.

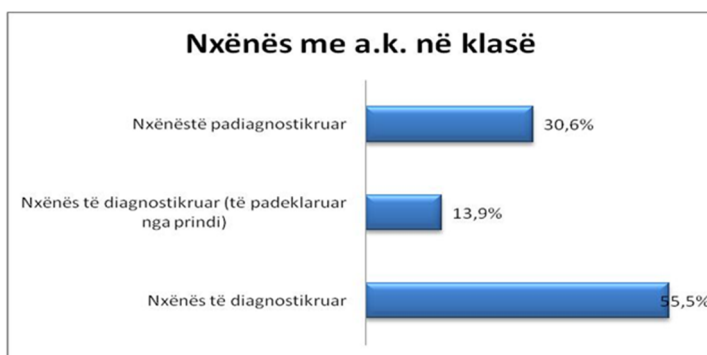


Figure 1: Classroom situation of students with special needs.

This is seen more concretely in some answers: Int. (9) shk. (2) "I have a girl with different abilities, she did not speak at first, she shouted unconsciously in class, all the students were surprised by this. I had a lot of difficulties in adapting the girl to other students"; or the answer. Int. (11) school (2) "I do not have such students, but I doubt one".

Let's get acquainted with the answers of the same teachers when the students have been diagnosed with the question: "Does the fact that the student is diagnosed and with relevant files help you?", Here is how a teacher answers: Int. (5) school (2) "There is 1 student in my class with autism syndrome, he is diagnosed. The fact that it is equipped with the relevant file helps me, but I miss the help in the classroom. "The difficulty is unimaginable."

As for the question: "Who supports you if you also have students who are with special needs but undiagnosed?" here are some of the answers, Int. (1) school (2) "Only one colleague of the other group supports me, while the parent does not." Int. (1) school (1) "He is not diagnosed, it would help me a lot if he were like that. "Nobody helps me." Here's how another teacher responds, Int. (4) school (1) "No one supports you, every teacher has to design a IEP or achieve the implementation of the program alone"; or Int. (2) school (2) "I have no support". Int. (3) school (2) "No one supports us". Int. (5) school (2) "I had full support from the school psychologist"; Int. (6) school (2) "I was helped by the school psychologist and the development center with special needs". Int. (10) school (2) "In 6 years of experience I have had several children with undiagnosed special needs. I am supported only by the work staff. Parents usually do not accept Disability"; or Int. (10) school (1) "Mostly we have no support from anyone, being unidentified by the multidisciplinary commission, as the parents themselves do not accept the child's problem, he continues to be treated and helped by the teacher as a student with learning difficulties and is valued like everyone else".

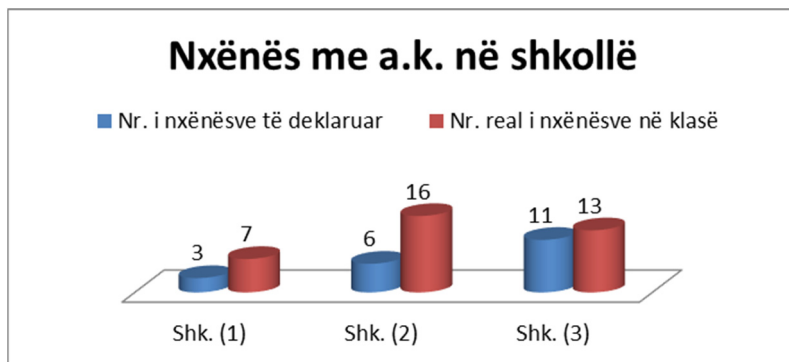


Figure 2: School situation of students with special needs

As for the question: "Who supports you if you have students who have special needs but are undiagnosed?" here are some of the answers, Int. (1) school (2) "Only one colleague of the other group supports me, while the parent does not". Int. (1) school (1) "He is not diagnosed, it would help me a lot if he were like that. Nobody helps me"; Here's how another teacher responds, Int. (4) school (1) "No one supports you, every teacher has to design a IEP or achieve the implementation of the program alone"; or Int. (2) school (2) "I have no support"; Int. (3) school (2) "No one supports us". Int. (5) school (2) "I had full support from the school psychologist". Int. (6) school (2) "I was assisted by a school psychologist and a special needs development center"; Int. (10) school (2) "In 6 years of experience I have had several children with undiagnosed special needs. I am supported only by the work staff. Parents usually do not accept Disability"; or Int. (10) school (1) "Mostly we have no support from anyone, being unidentified by the multidisciplinary commission, as the parents themselves do not accept the child's problem, he continues to be treated and helped by the teacher as a student with learning difficulties and is valued like everyone else".

Regarding the answers to the question: "Do you have a IEP for each student with special needs and who helps you to achieve it?" here are some of the answers: Int. (1) school (2) "No, I do not have it, as long as it is undiagnosed and no one helps me in its realization". Int. (3) school (1) "I only had help from the school psychologist to carry out the PEI. As a teacher, I am interested in the centers of Disability and browsing any material related to this contingent of students. I learned more about autism online. I did not have any help from representatives of ZVA for the realization of IEP ". Int. (4) school (1) "IEP was drafted by the teacher himself without any specific model and without any support". Int. (5) school (1) "The only one who helps me at school is the school psychologist."

Regarding the information gathered by the Focus Group on the necessity of trainings as well as on "differentiated teaching" we can analyze the answers: (3) "I speak specifically for myself, I have not received any training, I have done a master's a course called "Special Education", but not a special training. "Special Education" has informed me and given me a lot of knowledge on how to work with these students. So I got this knowledge in the master otherwise I would not have got this knowledge". (15) "As I am the deputy director and cover class 6-7, I participate in all trainings. But this should not be limited to theoretical training, we need more concrete training related to teaching with these students, as teachers show willingness to work, but do not know "how" to work with these students. In the trainings, the number of participants should not be limited, or only the leading staff of the schools should participate, in these trainings all the teachers who have students with special needs in the classroom should inevitably participate and it should be added number of trainings organized for "Inclusive education".

If we compare the answers of the interviewed teachers, they match the answers of the participants in the Focus Group, as there is an interest in a "thirst" that is shown in relation to the training of teachers towards the recognition of "Inclusive education".

6. Conclusions

Although with a few limitations, the research results show a relationship between teachers' confidence in teaching efficiency and attitudes towards this teaching in inclusive classes. The variables that affect the levels of trust in this efficiency, are related to professional attitudes as well as teachers' experiences with these students. The number of students in the class (which in our classes is greater than the average of a considerable number), as well as the number of students with special needs in the same class (cases when there are more than two students with special needs in the class), affects teachers' confidence in the integration of these students in the lesson.

In the teachers' comments, regarding their opinions on "Inclusion", expressed in the answers of the 5th section of the interview, they accept the inclusion of students with special needs in inclusive classes, but first some elements must be met that it should be developed within the parameters that enable a normal teaching in these classes. They think that the high number of students in the class (35-40 students) makes it difficult to integrate students with special needs as the time to manage work with all students makes it difficult to succeed in this teaching.

Also, the number of students with special needs who are already integrated in the inclusive classes in AMU, which varies 1-2 students in the class, when they are diagnosed, but it happens that in the same class there are also undiagnosed students, which has increased the difficulty

in teaching in these classes with only one tutor. But, according to DN in classes where there are 1-2 students with special needs the presence of a specialist teacher or assistant, should be active. In the reality of Albanian teaching this must become a necessary fact and not only exist "dejure" but also "defacto";

As we find in the practice of schools in other countries, students with aggravated special needs should not be part of inclusive classes, because with their aggravated condition, they negatively affect inclusive classes. In Albanian classes we have the organization of teaching with only one teacher, where there is no presence of a supportive teacher or specialist in the class, the presence of students with special aggravated needs, makes very difficult the normal development of the lesson;

Professional development, being a deliberate effort of teachers, is at the same time an indicator that should be supported and organized in various forms, such as various trainings related to the recognition of "Disability" and its types. It should become an ongoing cognitive part of teachers' professional development, as only by being aware of the "limitations" that their students may present in the classroom can they organize an adaptive teaching depending on their needs and abilities. Also, a positive role is played by the training of teachers towards contemporary methods in teaching.

7. Recommendation

Success in inclusive curriculum is influenced by various factors, which, individually or together, play a progressive or minimizing role in the effect that effective teaching has on inclusive classrooms and AMU.

Recommendation 1. The school management staff should show a support to the teachers of the inclusive classrooms, this support should be in many directions, through which the teachers meet all the difficulties, as they have to successfully face the problems that are created in these classrooms. Support should be both moral and material, where teachers should be provided with a didactic material base tailored to specific cases;

Recommendation 2. The deepening and professional development that should accompany the teacher towards the

experiences of inclusive teaching, increases to some extent the responsibilities towards the inclusion of the student with special needs in the classroom. Participation in trainings, workshops, conferences or research work focusing on teaching children with special needs in inclusive classrooms, will alleviate as little as possible the need that our teachers show in relation to the differentiated teaching required for these students;

Recommendation 3. Cooperation between the caretaker teacher and the specialist teacher, for a combination and harmonization of the roles of each, in the design and implementation of the PEI, adapting as well as possible the development and skills that the student with special needs has to the actions with the adaptive curriculum, for the realization of IEP.

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