



Equal Opportunities for all Albanian Learners

Dr. Gentjana Taraj

"Aleksander Moisiu" University

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Abstract

Inclusive education guarantees the right of education for every child despite their physical and/or mental disabilities. In other words inclusion aims at placement of special education students in general classrooms giving learners equal possibilities of education within the differences in their abilities to learn. Unfortunately, the implementation of inclusive education in Albania is still facing lots of difficulties. Traditionally, Albanian children with disabilities are segregated into separate learning environments. However, during the last two decades attempts are made to integrate them in the mainstream education. Although we are far from a successful implementation of inclusive education we consider it as very important since it maximizes the learning experiences of both mainstream and disabled learners. In this paper, the factors related to the inclusion of learners with disabilities in the mainstream education are discussed. Drafting of an inclusive curriculum which is the same for all schools and all learners, whether they are in mainstream or special schools is considered as crucial. The paper raises the questions of changing the attitude of educators in regard to learners with disabilities, increasing their professional knowledge about the learning differences as well as highlighting the tools of how to address each of them so that equal possibility to gain knowledge within the limits of capability are given to all learners. The significance and relevant effects of these factors will be the basis of the conclusion of this paper.

Keywords: *curricula, inclusive education, learners with disabilities, teachers.*

1. Introduction

Social integration of children with disabilities has always been a challenge for the Albanian society. Until the early 1990s children with learning disabilities were taught in special schools, where they were totally isolated from the mainstream schools. The same holds true for the extracurricular activities, since the interaction of children with learning disabilities with the rest of their peers was rare, if not impossible. However, the discrimination and exclusion of people with sensory impairments and disabilities from a normal integration in society is not a problem affecting only the Albanian society, but a problem present even in more developed countries such as America (Humphries & Gordon, 1993; Osgood, 2005; Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012). The isolation of the children with disabilities is a practice rooted early in the history of humanity, where severe disabilities were considered as witchcraft, lunacy, criminality, etc., and people with disabilities were called in different names like subhuman organism, object of pity, menace, diseased organism, etc (Wolfensberger, 1972). No matter how unbelievable it might sound, very often they were subject to cruel treatments such as sterilization and confinement.

However, mankind has shown that beyond the fear of what is different in appearance and function knows how to be sympathetic and fight for the human rights. As the result, enormous efforts have been made both domestically and abroad to develop laws and policies for the rehabilitation of children with disabilities in school and society. The Albanian legal framework has continuously suffered changes and improvements in this aspect. It suffices to mention the progress noticed from

the Article 57 of the Albanian Constitution which establishes the rights of all children in respect to an equal, free and adequate education to the changes done in the Normative Provisions 2002 which mark the beginning of the initiative to consider inclusive education as a more effective alternative. It is worth mentioning that recent policies in education are oriented toward the placement of learners with disabilities in general education classes instead of special schools. This new approach known as inclusion seeks not only to integrate the learners with disabilities in general classes, but also to create an effective evaluation system, whose focus is not where the learning process is taking place, but how it is being developed and what is being taught (Turnbull et al., 2007).

2. Research Methodology

Despite the contemporary level of the Albanian Constitution and the laws on disabilities, the number of children with disabilities who attend the mainstream education is very small compared to the number of Albanian children with disabilities (Save the Children, 2013). The purpose of this study is to consider the challenges related to the implementation of inclusive education in Albania. The present paper is an attempt to give an answer to the following questions:

1. What are some of the challenges inclusive education is facing in Albanian?
2. At what extend does the university curriculum for special educational needs and mainstream teachers help their training in regard to inclusion?

The first part of the paper represents an overview of the studies and inclusion practices for children with disabilities in Albania including the main challenges reported in them. Teachers' lack of information on disabilities and the different ways to deal with it in a mainstream class is identified as one of the most prominent challenges. For that reason, the rest of the paper discusses the necessity of an inclusive education and the role of the curriculum in its implementation. University curriculum for special educational needs and mainstream teachers are compared. Based on the findings from different studies as well as on our personal teaching experience at study programs for special educational needs and mainstream teachers some recommendation are given on how this process can be improved.

3. The History of Inclusive Education in Albania

Albanian education system began to show an interest in children with disabilities around the 60s. The first special classes were created for deaf and mute children. Fortunately, the attempts to include Albanian children with disabilities in the education system became more intense in the years to come. As a result, special classes for children with mild mental retardation were created in different countries in Albania such as Tirana, Vlora, Elbasan, Durrës and Korça. These attempts were followed by the creation of day care centers in Librazhd, Pogradec and Fier, which were specifically designed to address the children' individual needs related to their disabilities, in this case, severe mental retardation (FSHDPAK, 2010).

Since the 90s, there have been implemented many projects in Albania which are financially supported by foreign donors in cooperation with the local organizations whose aim is the implementation of an inclusive education. Among them, we can mention: (1) the project initiated by Children's Aid Direct (CAD) which in cooperation with the National Parents Association "Helping children with mental retardation" managed to integrate children with mental retardation in some of Tirana's kindergartens; (2) MEDPAK organization enabled the enrollment of 11 children with disabilities in mainstream schools in Librazhd; (3) in the late 90s Child Development Centre managed to place some children with autism, hearing loss, hyperactivity, psychomotor and speech disorders in regular schools in Tirana; (4) supported by UNICEF and implemented by MOVIMONDO and MED-PAK the project "Special Integrated Education" (2000-2003) achieved the inclusion of 304 children with mental retardation, psychomotor disorders and sensory impairment in regular schools in Elbasan, Librazhd and Peqin; in 2006-2008 the Dutch organization CORDAID made possible the enrollment of 77 children with disabilities in regular schools in Shkodra and the training of 30 teachers, etc. From 2005 to present, the organization Save the Children Albania has given an indispensable contribution in the implementation of inclusive education in Albania.

Studies on the implementation of inclusive education in Albania show that it is still a challenge. The most commonly reported problems are teachers' training, economic status and school curriculum. Nano (2002) reported that despite a positive change in teachers' attitude toward inclusive education, Albanian mainstream schools do not have a clear policy on how to implement it. Teachers work in isolation and do not cooperate to overcome the difficulties encountered in the teaching process. The study suggests that the implementation of inclusive education should become step by step, giving teachers and learners the necessary time to overcome their barriers and adapt a positive attitude. Another study (Closs et al, 2003) identifies the economic status of the Albanian families, the lack of equipment and facilities at school and difficulties in transport as factors to be blamed for forcing children with disabilities to quit the school.

In a survey conducted with parents of 20 children with disabilities and 20 teachers who work with children with disabilities, Cenaliu (2004) found that although parents appreciate the work done in school with their children they are critical in regard to the school's program which according to them is beyond their children's capacities. Similarly, teachers working with children with disabilities claimed that the actual program is very difficult and overloaded with concepts which makes it difficult for them to work with all learners. Results from the study raised the necessity for an inclusive curriculum which must fulfill the needs of all learners. Attempts are made to design a curriculum that ensures equality for all learners. The Institute of Curriculum and Training published a set of practical guidelines and teaching materials for teachers and parents. No information was given on the specific needs of children with disabilities according to their age, category and subjects at school. In 2007 Save the Children organization published a manual on how to write comprehensive lesson plans at school. This was followed by another attempt when a second manual informing teachers on how to work with children with disabilities was published by the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports and World Vision (2014).

4. The Necessity for an Inclusive Curriculum

Besides other aspects of life, education requires a continual reformation because society changes very rapidly and so does knowledge and technology. Change is an important and necessary process because it is often accompanied by improvement. In education system, positive changes take time and energy, and require that appropriate resources are available. There is a considerable amount of important key factors which force changes in the education system. Some of them are students' needs, parents, standards of teaching and learning process, curriculum, the needs of the society, etc. In the following discussion we will focus on the improvements brought about as the result of changes in curriculum. Changes in curriculum are important and desirable as curriculum focuses on student's needs and characteristics and helps teachers to adopt a proactive anticipatory approach to their learning and teaching. As Stenhouse (1980:158) says: "All education ideas must find expression in curricula before we can tell whether they are daydreams or contributions to practice".

Curriculum is the key factor which underlies the entire teaching and learning process since without curriculum no goals can be achieved in the education system. The curriculum derives from a Latin word 'currere' which means 'the course of a chariot race' (Schubert, 1986). In other words, curriculum means to run toward a goal through a systematic management approach whose purpose is to raise the standards of teaching in school. A school curriculum is designed in such a way that it reflects not only the regular programs but also the extra-curricular activities; thus, it represents the total learning experience of individuals in schools and in society. In other words, curriculum describes everything that happens within a class, lecture or seminar given that it controls the subjects, their contents and the key knowledge which aims to highlight the necessary skills for work and personal development. For this reason, curriculum is in a continuous change.

Traditional approaches in Albanian curriculum design focus on teaching individuals based on their "deficits", meaning their individual needs. This has resulted to be not efficient since it calls for changes on the individual and not on the system. The right to have an equal education despite the differences in learning or other abilities asks for changes in education system which will transform it into an integral and holistic system. An inclusive education calls for an inclusive curriculum which inspires the use of all methods, types and styles of learning so that the learning objectives are

achieved both by typically developing children and children with disabilities. Inclusive curriculum enables each student to gain access to new knowledge at their individual pace of learning since "an inclusive curriculum is one where all students' entitlement to access and participate in a course is anticipated, acknowledged and taken into account" (Morgan & Houghton, 2011). However, there is a huge gap between the belief in the principles of an inclusive approach in education and its practice in Albania.

Albanian reality reveals that we are far from the implementation of an inclusive curriculum for both mainstream and special education. Albania applies a system of education where children with disabilities attend the learning process either in general or special classrooms. While mainstream schools are subject to the same curriculum this cannot be said for special education schools. In Albania, each of the special schools follows its own special curriculum and the subjects that are very few in number are taught in a unique way. The consequence of this practice is that learners in special schools do not have access to the same concepts as their peers in mainstream schools. It is the teacher in the special school who decides which of the key learning concepts is to be taught. In addition, while in mainstream schools the quality of education is measurable via the competencies and key learning concepts clearly defined in the curriculum, in special schools learners' progress is not measurable because such competences and concepts are not defined. Consequently neither the teacher nor the student is motivated by their achievements in the field of education as they are practically immeasurable. This raises the need for an inclusive curriculum where clear standards are defined for both typically developing learners and learners with disabilities.

5. The Role of Curriculum in Teachers Training

Although inclusion is beneficial for the development of competencies and skills in students and teachers, its implementation puts teachers under the pressure of restructuring the teaching process and the learning environment. Studies in this area have shown that teachers at the beginning of the implementation feel that they do not have enough time to implement inclusion (Semmel et al., 1991). They are often anxious in terms of pace, learning styles, adaptation of the environment and the amount of time they have to dedicate to children with disabilities. Teachers list among other obstacles the class size, the attention and care they should give to each of the learners in classroom, scarcity of funds, teaching materials and teachers training. Data reported by INSTAT (2015) show that only 55.6% of Albanian children with disabilities have completed the basic education, whereas 24.6% of them have not attended school at all. The large number of learners in class, lack of necessary facilities, absence of the special educational needs teachers and above all lack of information on the nature of disabilities and the way disabled children learn are the reasons why these children are not entirely included in the learning process (Duka, 2015; Nano, 2002).

However, studies show that at the end of the implementation teachers' attitude changes, because now they have gained the necessary experience and their confidence on teaching children with disabilities has grown (LeRoy & Simpson (1996). Ensuring teachers' positive attitude toward inclusion seems to be very important since positive changes and practices in teaching are followed by a positive progress in academic achievements. By recognizing the human values of children with disabilities, teachers might increase their level of positive attitude and fulfill their mission successfully. Studies have shown that teachers who work with students with disabilities become more open to inclusion than teachers who do not have such experience (Kern, 2006). The more they know about children with disabilities the easier it is for them to accept and assist these learners (Yen & Westwood, 2001).

Therefore, teachers' attitude toward inclusive education is an important factor in the successful implementation of this new approach. Being unaware of the great importance that inclusion has in the social life of the community and the lives of individuals with disabilities teachers might become an obstacle in the process (Ellins & Porter, 2005). Albanian society seems to be unprepared to fully assist and support this category of learners. There are cases where teachers themselves refuse to have children with disabilities in their classrooms. In a study conducted by Duka and Tati (2015) 51 teachers from public and private mainstream schools were interviewed. The study reported that 47% of the teachers either openly refused to have children with disabilities

in their classroom or did not give an answer at all when asked if they support inclusion. The same finding is reported in another study (Osmanaga, 2013). The study reported that Albanian teachers accept inclusive education as a human right but they have different views in regard to the implementation of this process. In general, they consider themselves as not prepared to work with children with disabilities.

Comparing the university curriculum for special education and mainstream teachers we found that the difference in knowledge between teachers of special schools and teachers in mainstream schools is quite large. While the curriculum that prepares teachers for children with special needs is oriented toward a medical paradigm which does not provide them with any knowledge in regard to the basic concepts and teaching methodology used in the mainstream schools, the curriculum that prepares mainstream teachers can be rich in knowledge in the field of teaching, but it does not provide them solid knowledge in regard to the different ways learners with special needs function in and outside the school.

To the best of our knowledge no other university but 'Aleksandër Moisiu' University offer inclusive education as a separate course for mainstream teachers so far. We hope that soon this course will be part of the curriculum in other universities so that future teachers are equipped with the necessary knowledge in regard to mainstream learners and learners with disabilities. It is important that the specific goal of the courses on disabilities and inclusive education should be not only to provide educators with core knowledge and skills required to teach and evaluate in an inclusive model, but also help them maintain a positive attitude toward inclusion and learners with disabilities. However, we are conscious that programs of master degrees must be considered as the beginning of teachers training, since they cannot cover all aspects of inclusive education. Teachers should receive a continuous training to ensure a higher quality of instruction.

6. Conclusions

Although the legal framework that guides the implementation of inclusive education in Albania can be considered complete, it is still facing more or less the same difficulties as in other European countries. The Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports has played a significant role in the implementation of inclusive education by designing and implementing different policies which protect the rights of persons with disabilities and secure them an equal education. Also, important steps and legal changes have been initiated in this area under the valuable contribution of non-governmental organizations.

The lack of knowledge in regard to children with disabilities seems to be one of the major problems in the implementation of inclusive education in Albania. Therefore, teachers' training on inclusive education is a need to be readdressed for both sets of teachers. This is for the simple reason that special educational needs teachers seem to have good knowledge on disability but a weak grasp of the key learning areas, whereas teachers in the mainstream school seems to have a good grasp of the key subjects but a weaker knowledge of the barriers that learners with disabilities face in the learning process

Actually, this situation demands a serious training of teachers so that they become not only subject experts, but also expert in the diversity of students learning differences. We suggest that curriculum of the master programs in special and general education should be reconsidered. In addition to attending obligatory courses which inform thoroughly on the nature and peculiarities of learning disabilities and how to deal with them within the learning process, students should complete their teaching practicum half in the mainstream schools and half in special schools. In other words, if regular and special educational needs teachers gain complete theoretical knowledge on disabilities through theory and a practical perspective through the teaching practicum done in special and regular classes that have children with disabilities, they will become more prepared and overcome the general misconception that children with disabilities are the responsibility only of a group of teachers who attend special training. Without every teacher believing and willingly participating in the process it will not become a reality.

A conscious participation and involvement of teachers in the implementation of inclusive education is indispensable. Teachers should be aware that it is their task:

- to increase their knowledge on the nature and importance of inclusive education,
- to continuously improve their teaching methodology so that it suits all children,
- to eliminate the barriers they have in terms of learners with disabilities,
- to move from a general training toward a more specialized one, and
- to increase cooperation with other professionals.

This way they will become not only a key factor in ensuring the successful implementation of inclusion in Albania, but also in creating a more accepting and free social environment.

Finally, Albania is a country where each special school has its own curriculum and the interpretation of the subjects depends on the school staff. This has two consequences. Firstly, learners in special schools are not exposed to the same opportunity to learn as their peers in mainstream school. Secondly, the teachers work is not measurable, because there are no shared cross-school standards about the content of subjects taught. Our suggestion is that it is high time Albania has an inclusive curriculum which is relevant for learners in both special and mainstream schools.

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