

A Teachers' Perspective of Inclusive Education for Students With Special Needs in a Model Demonstration Project

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Abstract

The goal of the study is to give the teachers' perspective on challenges and rewards of inclusive education for students with special needs. Participants (N=50) were teachers of four mainstream schools involved in inclusive education through a model demonstration project. The data were collected through a written questionnaire and a focus group. The results show that the participating teachers believe in the message of inclusive education and have embraced it. The challenges are related to (a) lack of adequate professional preparation to work with students with special needs in general and in inclusive settings, in particular; (b) lack of administrative support such as reduced class size and teaching load; (c) lack of support by other professionals and special education teachers; and (d) lack of any supportive resources such as special equipment and modified didactic materials.

Key words: inclusive education, mainstream school, student with special needs, teacher, special education teacher.

“Inclusive education is broadly understood... to be the process by which schools attempt to respond to all pupils as individuals by reconsidering and restructuring curriculum organization and provision, and allocating of resources to enhance equality of opportunity.”¹ As such, inclusive education creates the conditions for the education of all students of the same chronological age in the same classrooms in the mainstream schools, despite their academic abilities and/or special learning needs. In addition to the social benefits of this approach towards an inclusionary society for all², numerous studies in various countries with a history of inclusive education for students with special needs have also indicated abundant educational benefits for them and their peers (Blandul 2010; Downing 2002; Leatherman and Niemeyer 2005;

¹ European Training Foundation, *Mapping Policies and Practices for the Preparation of Teachers for Inclusive Education in Contexts of Social and Cultural Diversity*. (Albania Country Report, 2010), 22.

² The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) states that: “Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.” (Salamanca Statement, Art. 2)

Nind and Wearmouth 2006; Thousand, Villa and Nevin 2002; Turnbull, Turnbull and Wehmeyer 2006; Zambelli and Bonni 2004).

Inclusive education for students with special needs does not happen by itself. A variety of factors play a role on its effectiveness of educating special education students. These factors range from the attitudes and beliefs of the main stakeholders such as children (Blandul 2010) and teachers (Sharma, Moore and Sonawnae 2009; Hassan, Parveen and Riffat-un-Nisa 2010; Zambelli and Bonni 2004; Avramidis and Kalyva 2007), and parents (Wehbi 2006) to pedagogical approaches (Nind and Wearmouth 2006; Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden 2002) and support in the classroom (Leatherman and Niemeyer 2005). There is general consensus, however, that among these factors, the key to success rests with teachers. A plethora of studies have researched teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and their needs. The following section will provide a summary of these studies conducted in various countries.

Reporting the data of their qualitative study with 136 Canadian educators, Bunch and Finnegan (2000) noted that although the educators were enthusiastic about inclusive education as a model of social inclusion beneficial for both students with special needs and their peers, they had some concerns related to its implementation. The concerns were related to teacher preparation to respond to the learning challenges of students with special needs, heavier workload, and lack of sufficient support, especially from the administration. The authors of another mixed design study conducted in Canada with 22 teachers reported that the regular education staff surveyed agreed that students with special needs belong fully in the regular classroom, since "teachers are there to teach children, not subjects, and teachers tended to look at what is best for each child in their class" (Horne and Timmons 2009, 281). Among the needs expressed were further training, as well support from students, parents and departments. Their main concern was lack of adequate time.

The need for specific training of the teachers teaching in inclusive setting becomes more apparent when one takes into account the multitudes of pedagogical strategies needed for effective inclusion. In their systemic review of the literature on the pedagogy of inclusion in the classroom used by teachers, British authors Nind and Wearmouth (2006) found that some of the successful pedagogical approaches reported in literature were adaptation of instruction, materials, assessment, classroom environment as well as behavioral and programmatic interventions, computer-based pedagogy, peer tutoring, peer group interactive and team teaching.

A study conducted by Zambelli and Bonni (2004) in Italy, where the practice of inclusive education is prevalent, revealed that experience with inclusive education did not determine attitudes (both teachers with direct experience and without it maintained positive attitudes whereas another similar group of teachers with direct experience and

without it had negative attitudes). The teachers with positive attitudes maintained that inclusion is more than placing a child with special needs in a regular class: it requires a positive school environment, collaboration among teachers, the integration of the support teacher in the process, as well as the employment of cooperative learning strategies. An additional finding is that these teachers believed in working closely with the students' families and they took into consideration the students' specific needs when they planned their class work.

Of relevance to this topic are studies conducted in countries where the practice of inclusive education is at its beginning: For example, in Greece "where, despite supportive legislation, the inclusive education movement is still facing considerable obstacles" (Avramidis and Kalyva 2007, 367). A quantitative study with 155 general education primary school teachers indicated that while the teachers maintained a positive attitude towards the philosophy of inclusion per se, they were concerned about the practical implications of inclusive classroom settings. Professional development (i.e. training) was one of the main factors that impacted the teachers' attitude. The perceived barriers included limited knowledge of special education field, insufficient support from the school and local community, limited time and limited opportunities for collaboration. Studies conducted in India (Sharma, Moore and Sonawane 2009), Pakistan (ul Hassan, Parveen and Riffat-un-Nisa 2010), in Lebanon (Wehbi 2006), in Nigeria (Fakolade and Adeniyi 2009), and Ghana (Agbeneyga 2007) point out similar teachers' concerns: lack of professional knowledge and skills to work with students with special needs in mainstream settings, lack of adequate human and material resources, lack of coordination between school administration and inclusion programs, mixed experiences with the relations with parents, and large classes. It is noteworthy, that in all these studies, teachers who have practiced inclusion are more accepting of the idea than others.

Inclusive education for students with special needs was introduced in Albania in the mid 90s and it is still carried on through various model demonstration projects initiated by international organizations such as Children's Aid Direct (Cenaliu 2004), UNICEF and Movimondo (Haxhiymeri 2003), and Save the Children (European Training Foundation 2010) as well as Albanian non-profit organizations such as MEDPAK, Albanian Disability Rights Foundation and "Ndihmoni Jeten" [Help Life]. The lack of reliable statistical data from the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sciences makes it difficult to estimate the number of students with special needs who have received inclusive education over the years or who are currently enrolled in it. Recent data from Save the Children indicate that, in the period 2006-2010, inclusive education has been modeled in 34 kindergartens and another 34 elementary education schools in Librazhd, Berat, Tirane, Korce, Vlore and Gjirokater. The beneficiaries of these inclusive programs have been 495 students of various age groups, a very small number in comparison to the

number of children with special needs in the country. However, the inclusive approach introduced in Albanian general education has served both as a test of what can be achieved as well as a model that needs legislative and administrative support to be spread as part of the general education system in Albania.

According to European Training Foundation (2010), the legal basis for the dissemination of inclusive practices in the Albanian educational system exists in several important documents. To begin with, the Constitution of Albania³ guarantees equality of opportunities for all in Articles 18 and 25, as well as the right to compulsory education for all in Article 57. Furthermore, a series of national strategies such as The National Strategy for Children 2001-2005, the National Strategy on People with Disabilities, The Social Inclusion Crosscutting Strategy as well as educational acts such as the 1995 Law on Pre-University Education have provisions that favor inclusive education. Of special importance is the Normative Clause on pre-University Education, which encourages the integrations of students with special needs in mainstream classes by providing incentives in the shape of reduced class sizes and special remuneration of teachers. Work is underway to prepare a new act that will replace the 1995 Law on Pre-University Education. The act will enhance the inclusive character of the Albanian educational system by creating the conditions for the implementation of an inclusive quality education.

As inclusive education is spread beyond model demonstration projects to the national educational system, it is important to study the experience of the former. The goal of the study reported and discussed in this article is to give the teachers' perspective on challenges and rewards of inclusive education, as a contribution to a new discourse on a new approach to the education of a new generation of Albanian youth. The reported study is part of a case study of a model demonstration project in Southeastern Albania. The demonstration project is a collaboration of Save the Children with the Ministry of Education and Sciences. The project has piloted inclusive education for students with special needs for a period of five years (2006-2011). The approach of the project is two-pronged. It includes hands-on support and on-the job training for teachers teaching students with special needs in mainstream classrooms as well as training workshops for perspective teachers.

Method

Participants

Participants (N=50) were teachers of four mainstream schools in the Korca region who had been teaching students with special needs in mainstream classes for a minimum of two years. About half of them (48%) taught in the lower cycle of the nine-year school

³ Albanian Constitution, approved by the Albanian parliament on 21 October 1998.

(i.e., grades 1-4) and the rest in the higher cycle (i.e., grades 5-9). Sample selection was facilitated by the Regional Department of Education.

Instruments and Data Collection

The data were collected in two forms, through a written questionnaire and a focus group. The semi-structured questionnaire covered questions on participant demographics, teachers' preparation to work with students with special needs in mainstream classes, pedagogical implications of teaching students with special needs in mainstream classes, the relationship with parents of students with special needs, and collaboration with other experts involved in the lives of students with special needs. The other questions covered the administrative, material and human support received and needed, as well as the perceived effectiveness of current incentives for including students with special needs in mainstream classes. The questionnaire was distributed to the teachers by one of the authors of this study, and subsequently collected. Care was shown to preserve the confidentiality of responses.

The focus group consisted of six teachers, all females. Four of them taught in the lower cycle. Members of the focus group were selected from the sample who participated in the survey. Eight open-ended questions were used to receive in-depth information about survey areas. The focus group meeting, which lasted for hour and a half, was facilitated by one of the authors and recorded.

In order to increase the findings' credibility and validity, the method of triangulation was used to gather information from other related sources such as school administrators and parents of students with special needs. Data coming from triangulation are reported as needed.

Results

The findings have been presented according to the study's main areas. They are teachers' preparation, pedagogical implications of teaching inclusive classes, the relationship with parents of students with special needs, collaboration with other experts, administrative, material and human support, and the perceived effectiveness of current incentives for including students with special needs in mainstream classes. The data of the survey and those of the focus group have been presented complementarily.

Preparation to Work with Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Classes

All participating teachers felt that they were not adequately prepared to work with students with special needs according to their specific needs. In particular, their pre-service teacher education curriculum did not have any content on the different categories of disabilities and related special academic needs. Although the teachers believed that participation in the model demonstration project had been beneficial

in the development of their professional expertise, almost all the participants (96%, N=49) agreed that continuous education on working with students with special needs is a requisite. The three top priority needed topics spelled out were: modification and adaptation techniques that address the specific needs of students with disabilities, a better understanding of the work with the Individual Education Plan (IEP) and knowledge of various categories of disabilities. The focus group revealed that the need for instructional strategies is particularly acute for teachers of math and sciences in the higher cycle. Table 1 summarizes the results on topics of trainings most needed, whereas the following quote best captures the sentiment:

“I and my colleagues feel the need to have more knowledge on how we could work individually with children with certain disabilities. We need detailed information on the disability and how we can build our work to respond to the student’s need related to his or her disability.”

Table 1. Training Topics Most Needed in Descending Order

Topic	Percentage*	Number
Instructional strategies for students with special needs	38%	19
Writing and implementing the IEP	30%	15
Categories of disabilities	24%	12
Assessment of students with special needs	22%	11
Relevant legislation	12%	6
Best practices of individual work	8%	4
Communication with students with special needs	8%	4
Information on addressing students’ health care needs	6%	3
Inclusive education	4%	2

Note: Participants were asked to check more than one option.

Teacher training, both on-the job and through workshops, is offered as part of the model demonstration project. About three fourths of the participants (76%, n=38) had participated in various training workshops, and 38% of them considered them to be beneficial. Besides providing information on topics of interest, the training workshops are also seen, *“as a very good opportunity to exchange experiences”* among teachers. The school administrators consider teacher training a very important factor in ensuring quality inclusive education and they believe that it needs be better planned to meet the needs of teachers in regards to content and frequency.

Teaching Students with Special Needs in Mainstream Classes

Although 100% of the participants agree that the individual work with student with special needs is the most significant factor impacting academic achievement, only 76 % of them (n=38) state that their students with special needs have IEPs. Teachers' reporting seems to be at odds with that of the school administrators. According to the latter, 100% of the students with special needs have IEPs. This discrepancy may be explained with how students are labeled as "special needs". On a positive note, the teachers credit the project for the assistance with writing up the IEPs and implementing them. The IEPs, which are prepared in collaboration with the students' parents, guide the individual work with the student. They are regarded as a dynamic document, due to change as needed. About half of the teachers participating in the survey (48%) report that the IEPs are reviewed three times a year.

The teachers seem excited about the opportunity to teach students with special needs in inclusive settings even though they are aware that that requires individualized approaches, but they encounter many difficulties. Lacking specific training on how to modify and adapt subject specific curricular content for the specific needs of the students stemming from their disability category, and how to address their disability specific needs, the teachers rely mostly on their intuition and creativity that comes from teaching experience. Other barriers to individualized teaching are considered lack of time, large class sizes, lack of modified instructional materials, lack of teaching aids and technology and lack of support from a support teacher.

"...The large number of students in every class makes our individual work with students with special needs very difficult. We need information on how to address specific challenges. It might be easier if we had a support teacher."

The Relationship with Parents of Students with Special Needs

All the teachers acknowledge the importance of having good relations with the students' parents. Upon reflection, however, they report that the process is not always easy. Frequently, for students first identified as having special needs, parents refuse to accept that their child needs an IEP and individualized instruction. But the relationship improves over time when parents become partners in the educational process and they are asked to help. The parents are very appreciative of their relationship with the teachers and the dedication of the latter. These two comments express it best: *"I communicate almost daily with the teachers. They're tireless. They explain to me what happened in class and guide me how to help my child."* *"Without the close collaboration with the teachers we would not have these results with our child."*

Collaboration with Other Experts

All teachers participating in the study value the importance of collaboration with and support from other experts, but 50% of them (n=25) characterize the current relationship to be “limited” or “very limited”. Asked on the preference of expert support, 92% (n=46) stated the need for the psychologist, 48% (n=24) for the social worker, 34% (n=17) for speech therapist and 14% (n=7) for medical doctors. The teachers appreciated the collaboration with these experts not only during the formulation of the IEP but also for its implementation. But the current reality is not conducive to this cooperation. With the exception of psychologists, who work for the Korca school district but have a large case load in several schools, there are no school social workers or speech therapists in the system. Thanks to the model demonstration project, services of social workers and others have been contracted for short periods of time, but not always when needed.

Administrative, Material and Human Support

The participants in the study believe that the school administration has generally been supportive of their efforts by providing training opportunities (22%), helping with the implementation the IEP (16%), managing issues (12%), and facilitating communications with parents (10%). But, administration has generally failed to grant the incentives provided in the Normative Clause on pre-University Education. None of the teachers of the higher cycle has received the remuneration and class size reduction as required by law. Only some teachers in the lower cycle have had the number of students in their class decreased so that they could better serve the needs of students with special needs.

Thanks to the project support, teachers in two schools have been supplied with instructional resources such as teaching aids, informational packets, modified work sheets, etc. Those teachers are very appreciative of this support as something that makes their work easier and more effective, not only with the students with special needs but the others as well. The problem is that they were only 74% of the surveyed teachers (n=37). The rest stated strongly that they “...lack any teaching aids and very often have to take materials from home...” Also, they stated, “We need materials for ourselves, so that we can learn from and go to for answers on how to work with students with special needs. We do not have any publications from this field. Even a translated textbook would be of help.”

The Resource Room and the Resource Room Teacher

One of the schools has introduced the model of the resource room with a resource room teacher as a form of support for inclusive education. The resource room is a

better equipped classroom of a smaller size devoted to special education. It serves as the location for individualized work with the student with special needs by the support teacher, as a library of sorts with special education literature and a place where parents and other experts can meet. The support teacher is a teacher trained to work with students with special needs. Besides working with the students with special needs pulled out of regular classrooms, the support teacher provides some on-the-job training to inclusive education teachers who work with the same student. The teachers participating in the study from the same school praised the work of the support teacher with the students with special needs and considered her contribution essential in achieving the educational objectives for the students thanks to the use of special techniques and the didactic materials of the resource room: *"The students come back to class with the acquired knowledge of the topic covered and that makes the teacher's work easier to continue the work with him and the other students."* The school principal is also very appreciative of the resource room support teacher and the role of the resource room per se. The teachers of the other three schools noted they really felt the need for this service in their schools.

Inclusive Education Incentives for Teachers

The teachers participating in the study recognized four incentives/supports for inclusive education for students with special needs. Three of them are provided in Normative Clause: i.e., salary bonus, reduction of class size and reduction of teaching load. The fourth one came from the demonstration model project: assistance of the support teacher. As Table Two demonstrates, the presence of the support teacher was rated the highest, it received a total of 169 points as it was ranked first by 60% of the participants. It received more points than the salary bonus, which was ranked first by 24% of the participants.

Table 2. Ranking of Incentives

Ranking Order	Salary Bonus		Support Teacher		Reduced Class Size		Reduced Teaching Load	
	n	%	n	%	N	%	n	%
First	12	24%	30	60%	4	8%	7	14%
Second	21	42%	12	24%	5	10%	12	29%
Third	11	22%	5	10%	10	20%	24	48%
Fourth	6	12%	3	6%	31	62%	7	14%
Total number of points*	139		169		82		119	

* Note: To calculate points for every category, n was multiplied by the ranking order.

Discussion and Implications for Educational Policies

The results of the study with teachers participating in an inclusive education model demonstration project in southeastern Albania show two important things. The participating teachers believe in the message of inclusive education and have embraced it. The teachers see themselves as agents of change in the society and are willing to commit the hard work required to make it happen. But, to be implemented successfully, even in a small scale project covering only four schools, inclusive education presents formidable challenges which were expressed through the teachers' concerns. Grouped into themes, the concerns are related to (a) lack of adequate professional preparation to work with students with special needs in general and in inclusive settings, in particular; (b) lack of administrative support such as reduced class size and teaching load, so that more time may be devoted to the individualized needs of students with special needs; (c) lack of support by other professionals and special education teachers; and (d) lack of any supportive resources such as special equipment and modified didactic materials. The presence of these concerns in a demonstration model project carried out by a reputable international organization such as Save the Children in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Sciences and the Regional Department of Education may be explained in several ways. The data indicate that the demonstration project might have not carefully planned and funded all the interrelated elements that account for a successful inclusive education experience. Another additional explanation might be the lack of meaningful support by the Ministry of Education and Sciences and the Regional Department of Education. Yet, another explanation, which seems the most plausible, comes from the systemic nature of inclusive education, which requires concurrent intervention, response and interaction of all subsystems of the educational system. In order for education for the student with special needs to be beneficial, it needs to encompass all students' ecological systems at the micro, meso, exo and macro levels (Bronffebrenner 1979). However, whichever the explanation, teachers' concerns point to the need to address the areas carefully and take them into consideration while planning future policies for the national expansion of inclusive education for students with special needs. The following analysis serves this purpose.

Professional preparation to work with students with special needs in inclusive settings entails knowledge, competencies and values in several areas. To better respond to the needs of the special needs students, the teachers need to be able to identify and evaluate those students, help design an appropriate IEP, use effective and student-centered methodologies and instructional strategies that include modifications and adaptations in the curriculum, class materials and assignments, assess students' progress, and work with their families. In addition, they need to have an understanding of the various disability categories, and a belief in the potential of every student to

succeed in an inclusive classroom setting. Such a professional preparation requires a systematic approach that coordinates pre-service education (both content and practical experiences) with on the job-training. The systematic approach demands good coordination of pre-service curriculum content and practicum experiences with continuing education in the form of on-the-job training. For planning and coordination to occur, a multi-partnership collaboration amongst institutes of higher learning and training entities, such as the Institute of Curricula and Training and Regional Departments of Education must be facilitated by the Ministry of Education and Sciences. Such a process may require an overhaul of the existing training system, especially that of in-service. To ensure the success of inclusive education, in-service teacher training needs to become mandatory, linked to salary and promotion. In addition, to ensure high quality, training agencies need to be accredited. Although the overhaul of the pre-service and in-service training system may seem like a daunting proposition, it can be achieved through careful planning.

Use of incentives to encourage teachers' participation in inclusive education programs as provided in the Normative Clause is a good idea, which has been discredited by the lack of implementation. Hence, there are no data to account for their effectiveness in promoting education of students with special needs in inclusive settings. However, it is reasonable to believe that under the present circumstances, which require teachers to put in a lot of effort without adequate preparation, the new legislation needs to provide incentives for teachers. The incentives could come in the form of support with resources and teaching aids. Another form of support could be the provision of specialized teacher assistants, who can help with the modification and adaptation of course content and individualized instruction and assessment.

Conclusion

This paper presented the findings of a recent study conducted with the teachers who work with students with special needs in inclusive settings in a demonstration model. The data from surveys and focus groups with 50 teachers indicated that, to be successful, inclusive education needs more than teachers' positive attitudes, enthusiasm and high motivation for success. Inclusive education presents a paradigm shift that involves structural changes in teacher education and training, and support with incentives, and material and human resources. New educational policies that will aim to spread inclusive practices on a national level need to be aware of these prerequisites.

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