



Explorative Research Of Psycho-Pedagogical Challenges In Inclusive Education, Through The Perspective Of Support Teachers In Albania

DR. HALLUNI (BILALI) ERANDA, Department of Teaching, University “Luigj Gurakuqi”, Albania.

VJERDHA (SHLLAKU) MEGI, Department of Teaching, University “Luigj Gurakuqi”, Albania.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to identify psycho-pedagogical challenges and needs of support teachers in Northern Albania, considering three main aspects: challenges correlated with the Albanian educational inclusive system; needs of supportive teachers in dealing with children with special needs in a school context; and strategies that could be helpful to help them face these challenges.

The participants of this study are 10 support teachers from public and private schools in Northern Albania, of whom 3 have work experience in inclusive classrooms of 1-3 years, 4 have work experience in the field of 5 years, and 3 have work experience of more than 5 years. The sample is also composed of eight females and two males, of whom seven do not have an educational background related to child psychology, nor their development and disability. Considering the inclusive education system, children with special needs are part of public and private schools, in classrooms composed of mostly neuro-typical students, and each class has a support teacher. This is a qualitative study that combines data already present in the Albanian context with explorative techniques such as observation, semi-structured interviews, focus-groups, and document analysis. The study was conducted from October 2019 to March 2020.

Considering all the instruments, the study revealed three challenges correlated to the Albanian system in inclusive education; interpersonal challenges of teachers in dealing with children with different disabilities; and needs of supportive teachers. Awareness of these challenges cannot be limited to merely identifying problems, but also to discovering and developing strategies that may be useful in this context. Considering this approach, it could be very helpful for the supportive teachers to consider opening university programs in Northern Albania specifically for pedagogy of special needs, or at least to create an

opportunity for different courses or training that could help supportive teachers deal with different dynamics that are present in interacting with children with special needs.

Key words: psycho-pedagogical challenges, support teachers, inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Supportive teachers are an important part of the inclusive school system. According to UNICEF (2015) inclusive education is a responsive to student-needs and relevant to their life. Therefore, Inclusive Education is not just about teaching the students who can cope with an unresponsive educational system. Inclusive Education means using teaching methods, curriculum, staff and pedagogy support that are adapted to the learning of all students, including those students that the traditional systems were not able to reach.

Supportive teachers face important psycho-pedagogical challenges in the inclusive education classrooms. They are often called to manage different situations by developing their competences. The term competence has a polysemantic nature. There are different definitions (Boutin, 2004; Tardif, 2003; Potolea and Toma, 2010) that define competence as a proven capacity to combine and use knowledge, and to develop different abilities to solve situations, developing at the same time professional and personal abilities.

THE ALBANIAN CONTEXT CONCERNING THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The actual legislation in Albania has undergone some improvement and enhancement for what concerns the rights of persons with disabilities, in particular the right to inclusive education. This is reflected on the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2009); the Law 69/2012, On Pre-university Education; the Pre-university Education Strategy 2008-2013 (MoES, 2008); the MoES Integrated Plan 2010; the Action Plan for Children 2012-2015 (MoLSAEO). Despite the positive steps taken by the Albanian Government in improving the legislation, and its commitment in developing strategies and action plans addressing disability and inclusion issues, the examination of the existing legal system revealed a number of gaps and a necessity for improvement.

As a signatory of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations), signed by Albania on December 22nd 2009¹, the Albanian Government has committed in undertaking a number of reforms in the disability area, which include human rights, inclusion in education and in the society, and a better living for people with disabilities. The signing of the convention obliges states parties to improve their existing legislation in

accordance with the Convention and to embrace policies and initiatives for the creation of an inclusive society.

Based on the data received by the State Social Service, in Albania, the general number of children with disabilities reaches 17,786 and about 60 percent of them live in rural areas. Of these children, 4,776 are 0-6 years old, 8,845 are 6-15 years old and 4,165 are 15-18 years old. The number of children with disabilities who should attend preschool education is estimated to be 2,289, children who should attend the 9-year education system are estimated at 5,477, and those who should attend the upper secondary education estimated at 1,356.

In Northern Albania, the data provided by Regional Educational Directory, show that there is a gap between human capacity in terms of supportive teachers and the children with disability. In Northern Albania (Shkoder, Malësi e Madhe, Pukë, Dibër, Vau i Dejës, Lezhë, Has, Kurbin, Tropojë, Mirditë, Kukës), considering the public and private schools, there are 45 supportive teachers and 65 children with special needs that are part of the inclusive classrooms. From 45 supportive teachers, 20 have a degree in Literature, Chemistry or Geography; 25 supportive teachers have a degree in Elementary Education and none of them has a specialization in Pedagogy for Special Need. Most of them are working with children with special needs from 3 to 8 years and during these years 23 supportive teachers have received 0 or 1 training regarding their work with disability; 20 supportive teachers have received 2 to 3 trainings and only 2 of them have received more than 7 training. Of the 65 children with special needs in Northern Albania, 32 are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders, 8 with Developmental Delay, 7 with ADHD, 3 with Down Syndrome and 3 with Epilepsy. From all of them, 7 are 3-5 years old, 26 are 6-11 years old, 16 are 12-15 years old and 4 are 16-18 years old. ²

METHODOLOGY OF THE EXPLORATIVE STUDY

Explorative research questions

- In the Albanian inclusive classrooms, which challenges are related to the inclusive educational Albanian system and which ones are related to interpersonal issues of support teachers?
- What do Albanian support teachers need to face these challenges?
- What psycho- pedagogical strategies can we use to help teachers deal with these challenges?

The study sample

The participants of this study are 10 support teachers from public and private schools in Northern Albania, from whom 3 have a work experience in inclusive classrooms from 1-3 years, 4 have a work experience in the field of 5 years, and 3 have a work experience of more than 5 years. The sample is also composed by 8 females and 2 males, from whom 7 have not an educational background related to child psychology nor their development and disability. Considering the inclusive education system, children with special needs are part of public and private schools, in classrooms composed by mostly neuro-typical students and each class has a support teacher.

Method

This is a qualitative study that combines data already present in the Albanian context, with explorative techniques such as observation, semi-structured interview, focus-group, document analysis. The study was conducted from October 2019 to March 2020.

Instruments

To acquire more explorative and meaningful results, we have used different instruments, as follows:

- Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview consisted in 5 questions that considered these areas: the challenges that support teachers face considering the Albanian inclusive system, the way they feel about everyday interaction with the special need child, the challenges they face in classroom context, the trainings and other specialization they need from universities or associations. The semi-structured interview was fulfilled and detailed considering the answers of support teachers.

- Indirect and direct observation

The indirect observation consisted in the observation of the following school documents: Individual Supporting Plan for every child with special needs, everyday diary of the supporting teacher, schedules for evaluation of children progress every three months, laws and school structure.

The direct observation consisted in the observation of 10 interactions of each supporting teacher with the child in the classroom, considering the following moments: during classwork, during an exam, at the first hour at school, at the last hour at school and during the break.

- Focus-group

The focus group was an activity used to obtain insights about perceptions, attitudes, opinions, believes and views regarding the challenges that support teacher face in the Albanian inclusive educational system. We did two sessions: the first was focused on the

external challenges of teachers (considering the Albanian educational system and the politics of the school) and the second was focused on internal challenges (considering the personal and interpersonal difficulties of the support teachers in dealing with children with special needs).

- Documents

The legislative framework of Albania concerning the politics of inclusive education (Law 69, On Pre-university Education, 2012; The Integrated Plan of the Ministry of Education, 2010) represents some important documents to be analyzed with the intention to identify strategies and challenges not only during the empirical implementation, but also in terms of conception of inclusive education and other elements that are considered/ not considered.

Procedures

Indirect Observation

The indirect observation consisted in the observation of the following documents: Individual Supporting Plan for every child with special needs, everyday diary of the supporting teacher, schedules for evaluation of children progress every three months, laws and school structure. Considering privacy and other ethical elements, we observed the documents without names and other identifying data, through the help of school psychologists.

Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview consisted in 5 questions that considered these areas: the challenges that support teachers face considering the Albanian inclusive system, the way they feel about everyday interaction with the special need child, the challenges they face in classroom context, the trainings and other specialization they need from universities or associations. We did each interview separately in 10 days: one interview per day. Teachers were in different schools so they didn't have the possibility to talk with each other and everyone listened to these questions for the first time. Sometimes for them was difficult to think considering the division of the 5 areas, but we helped them focus on each of them, with examples and specific questions.

Direct Observation

The direct observation represents an important part of the study due to the possibility to make evidence of the challenges that support teachers face every day in the classroom. The direct observation consisted in the observation of 10 interactions of each supporting teacher with the child in the classroom, considering the following moments: during classwork, during an exam, at the first hour at school, at the last hour at school and during the break. We took all notes to a diary for each interaction and completed the ABC (Antecedent/Behavior/Consequence) for every difficult situation during the interaction.

Due to ethical and privacy reasons, we asked the parents of each child if we could do this observation (through a consent letter that explained the aim of this study and the procedures to be followed). We also asked the director of each school for allowing us to be part of the classroom during the observation procedures.

Focus group

We chose to do the focus group sessions at the end, to give space to support teachers in different schools to express themselves without being effected by each other during the use of the previous instruments. The focus group represents for the study, an opportunity to put all the information together. The focus group was used to obtain insights about perceptions, attitudes, opinions, believes and views regarding the challenges that support teacher face in the Albanian inclusive educational system. We did two sessions (one hour and a half /each session): the first was focused on the external challenges of teachers (considering the Albanian educational system and the politics of the school) and the second was focused on internal challenges (considering the personal and interpersonal difficulties of the support teachers in dealing with children with special needs). The second session was conducted five days after the first session. At the focus group sessions, participated all the support teachers that are part of the study and they were very willing to share their perceptions, beliefs and experiences.

Documents

The legislative framework of Albania concerning the politics of inclusive education was analyzed in terms of conception of inclusive education and other elements that are considered/ not considered.

Results

Considering the answers during interview, the information through indirect observation, the direct observation, the dynamics of the focus-group and the documents, the study revealed challenges that are quite universal for teaching learners with developmental disability. The results will be divided in three areas, considering the explorative research questions: challenges correlated to Albanian system in inclusive education/ interpersonal challenges of teachers in dealing with children with different disabilities/ needs of supportive teachers.

Considering the Albanian system in inclusive education, 7 from 10 supportive teachers that participated to the study, evidenced the neccessity of more sustain from the governement for the inclusive classrooms in public schools (in terms of strategies, human resources and modern teaching materials); 3 from 10 supportive teachers evidenced like the previous ones,

the importance of sustain from the government, while considering also factors correlated to private schools (the need for reduced class sizes and modern teaching materials).³

Considering the interpersonal difficulties correlated with everyday work, all the supportive teachers evidenced that they don't feel qualified to teach children with developmental disability. They don't feel qualified to interact with children with special needs in terms of managing their tantrums and other behavioral problems. They sometimes feel stucked in traditional methodology of teaching that is not functional for the improvement of children cognitive, emotional and social skills. Most of teachers don't have a degree in areas correlated with education (psychology, general pedagogy, special need pedagogy).⁴ Some of them have studied in other degrees like: biology, chemistry or litterature. All of them evidenced the fact that they lack motivation frequently and the often feel overwhelmed. They also experienced difficulties in dealing with the main class teacher and parents.

Concerning the area of supportive teacher's needs, they need most of all a special need education in term of university programs or at least university trainings in order to create motivating learning environment for special needs children and for teachers as part of this environment. They also need resources: both human and materials. All of them evidenced the importance of supervision from the schools psychologist in order to continue their work in a productive way.

Concerning the analysis of the legislative framework and inclusive policies in Albania, we evidenced the following problems :

- The vagueness in the definition of the term Inclusive Education as part of Quality Education and the adopting of the Medical Model rather than of the Social and Biopsychosocial ones;
- The lack of direct investments from the government for the implementation of strategies on inclusive education for children with disabilities;
- The ambiguous data provided by the responsible institutions in relation to the total number of children with disabilities: The State Social Service only provides the total number of people with disabilities: referring to people receiving monthly disability payments and, in addition, accurate data on the various categories of disability are missing.
- The lack of capacity building and training for teachers on inclusive education, needed to make inclusive education become the norm of education: seems that teachers' training on supporting children with disabilities during the learning process does not occupy an important place within this reform.

- The lack of flexible curricula adapted to the needs of children with disabilities: The existing curricula do not contain the necessary information on the skill building of children with disabilities and the teaching for these children is based on the core curriculum which has no provision for their special needs

3. ANALYSIS OF PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES OF A SUPPORTIVE TEACHER AND A CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS THROUGH A CASE STUDY

The challenges that supportive teachers face in the Albanian educational system are easily noticed during the everyday direct observation. Considering the results of all instruments, but specifically the direct observation, we notice that these challenges get bigger over time, as the developmental issues of children with special need continue to become more challenging while they grow up. Through the following case, we will analyze some psycho-pedagogical difficulties that supportive teachers face in interacting with children with special needs.

Case study

Andi⁵ is a boy that frequents the elementary school. He is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder at the age of three. During our observation sessions, he was very collaborative with his supportive teacher. However, during the interactions we noticed the following elements:

- Challenges related to pedagogical method of teaching

During the observation sessions we noticed that some challenges were related to a traditional method of teaching. The supportive teachers tried to adapt Andi with the method of teaching correlated to the neuro-typical development. In other words, the supportive teacher explained the exercise to Andi using only the verbal explanation (without using images that could be very helpful for children with ASD). The supportive teacher asked the child to complete the exercise and when the Andi didn't want to do the classwork, they told him that if he don't do this, he will be punished to not eat chocolates for three days. Andi tried to avoid the punishment but he still couldn't understand the request of the exercise. He started to write other things not correlated to the real request of the exercise. Through this example, it's clear that the supportive teacher, due to difficulties to identify the pedagogical method that would be functional and effective for ASD children, can't help the child to learn informations and to develop skills.

- Challenges related to tantrums

Sometimes children with ASD experience very violent emotional reactions correlated to different factors such as: sensorial overstimulation, behavioral difficulties and interpersonal issues. It's important for the supportive teacher to use some strategies to help the child

regulate his emotions. One important model of the regulation of emotions (Gross, 1998a), evidence the different strategies that can be used to help children regulate their emotions (strategies based on the antecedent and strategies based in the response). Studies show that in children with autism spectrum disorder, the primary deficit is located in the affective area before the cognitive one (Di Renzo, Petrillo and Bianchi di Castelbianco, 2011; Di Renzo, Bianchi di Castelbianco, Vanadia, Petrillo, Racinaro and Rea, 2016). Emotional dysregulation is the result of an overload of the emotional component of empathy, in the absence of mentalization skills that can regulate the intensity of these emotional experiences. Children with autism perceive intense emotionality, without actually being able to understand and manage it (Marcelli, 1983). During the observation sessions, Andi had frequent tantrums. While Andi was having a tantrum, the supportive teacher tried to calm him down. She repeated frequently: “Andi, calm down!” At some point that he still couldn’t become calm, the teacher while trying to calm him down, felt overwhelmed and started to ask him with a raised voice to stop and to sit down. In this moment, Andi became less manageable. He started throwing objects in the classroom and screaming.

- Challenges related to the Individual Program for Special Need

We observed the Individual Program for Special Need of Andi. Most of the areas concerning the academic goals were filled but their division in time and space was not conducted considering the abilities of Andi to learn them. For example, the teacher wants to teach him the concept of subtraction of numbers. While showing him some examples, she noticed that her plan for today was to teach him subtraction of numbers and then to give him immediately the homework, in order to start with another concept tomorrow. Andi could not learn that concept in that specific moment and he needed more time.

During the observation of the Individual Program for Special Need we also noticed something that was then confirmed by the supportive teacher: it was very difficult for her to integrate different parts of the individual plan during an intervention with him. For example, she could focus on the academic skills to be improved but could not teach him at the same time how to behave, if a problematic behavior was present during that moment.

- Challenges related to the classroom dynamics and role of main teacher

The classroom can be a place with different stimulus that elicit a sensory or behavioral response in the child with ASD due to sensory challenges that he faces. During our observation sessions, we noticed these challenges. The pupils were very loud and the main teacher had difficulties to make them calm down. Andi was very overstimulated and putted his hands near his ears to interrupt the noises. The supportive teacher didn’t understand that Andi was having a sensory challenge. She interpreted this behavior as a stereotypical one and not as a need of Andi to stay calm. The main teacher intervened to make Andi stay

without moving, after the tentatives of the supportive teacher to calm him down. He couldn't afford that level of noise and he ran out of the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Through this explorative research we identified the challenges that supportive teachers face in the Albanian inclusive system with consequences in them, in children with ASD and in families. Considering the answers during interview, the information through indirect observation, the direct observation, the dynamics of the focus-group and the documents, the study revealed challenges that are divided in three areas: challenges correlated to Albanian system in inclusive education/ interpersonal challenges of teachers in dealing with children with different disabilities/ needs of supportive teachers

The awareness of these challenges, cannot be reductive in only identifying problems, but also in discovering and creating strategies that could be helpful in this context. Considering this approach, it could be very helpful for the supportive teachers to consider opening University Programs in Northern Albania specifically for Pedagogy of Special Need or at least to create opportunity for different courses or trainings that could help supportive teachers deal with different dynamics that are present in interacting with children with special needs.

REFERENCE

1. Boutin, G. (2004). L'approche par compétences en éducation : un amalgame paradigmatique. *Connexions*, 81 (1), 25-41.
2. Di Renzo M., Bianchi di Castelbianco F., Vanadia E., Petrillo M., Racinaro L., e Rea M. (2016a). From the Emotional Integration to the Cognitive Construction: The Developmental Approach of Turtle Project in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Autism-Open Access*, 6, 160.
3. Di Renzo, M., Petrillo, M. e Bianchi di Castelbianco, F. (2011). Le potenzialità intellettive nel bambino autistico. Nuove prospettive attraverso l'interpretazione del Test Leiter-R. Rome: Magi.
4. Gross, J. (1998a). The emerging field of emotion regulation: an integrative review. *Review of General Psychology*, 3, 271-299.
5. Law 69 (2012) On Pre-university Education, Ministry of Education, Albania.
6. Marcelli, D. (1983) La position autistique. Hypotheses psychopathologiques et ontogenethiques. *Psychiatrie Enfant*, 24, 5-55.
7. MoES. "The National Strategy on Pre-university Education 2008-2013" (2004)
8. Potolea, D and Toma, S. (2010). Competence: the concept and implications for the trainings programmes of adults. The Third National Conference on Adult Education, 19-21 March 2010, Timisoara.

9. Tardif, J. (2003). Développer un programme par compétences : de l'intention a la mise en aeeuvre. *Pédagogie Collégiale*, 16 (3), 36-44.
10. The Integrated Plan of the Ministry of Education, 2010 In Save the Children (2012), *Inclusive Education in Albania-analytic study*, Tiranë.