TEACHERS AND PARENTS AWARENESS – A KEY FACTOR TO SUCCESS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract

In developing countries, as Albania is, the process of creating an inclusive education system is more difficult. Factors such as lack of available funding, administrative and policy level support, and properly trained personnel pose significant challenges that slow down the progress. Key factors influencing the success of inclusive education are, among others, education of student teachers and level of awareness among teachers and parents.

Keywords: Albania, inclusive education, success factors

Introduction

Considering Albania, although legislation and strategies are in place, in many cases implementation mechanisms are facing a number of obstacles. The focus of attention is gradually being shifted onto what actually happens in classroom interaction between pupils and teachers. This places the emphasis firmly upon the disposition, skills, knowledge and motivation of teachers in adopting new approaches to the education of children from various socioeconomic, cultural and experiential backgrounds. It is their input that is paramount in ensuring any real changes in practice, and hence impacts on the outcomes of learning. However, deeper understanding is needed of how the formulation of relevant competences actually translates into daily teaching practices and how present and future teachers can best be supported to develop those competences that best ensure and promote an inclusive society and education.

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Inclusive education is defined by UNESCO as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education. This denotes that all children have the right to receive quality education that

tailors, to the extent possible, to their individual needs. Many countries have been successful in promoting inclusive education practices and policies that remove barriers and create conditions which enable all children to learn. However, in poorer developing countries, as Albania is, the process of creating an inclusive system is more difficult. Factors such as lack of available funding, administrative and policy level support, and trained personnel pose challenges that slow down the progress. The UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (2009) set out the following justifications for working towards inclusive practices and educating all children together:

Educational justification: To the benefit all children, inclusive schools develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences.

Social justification: Inclusive schools change students' attitudes towards diversity and form the basis for a just, non-discriminatory society.

Economic justification: It costs less to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different schools 'specializing' in different groups of children.

There is a number of factors that affect directly or indirectly the success of inclusive education. Studies have shown it is normally a combination of all the factors or most thereof but their impact various from the influence of other issues, too. It is common knowledge that to treat a problem one has to know about it existence. Translated into the context: to implement inclusive education and be successful with it, there is a prerequisite: teachers and parents should have a certain level of knowledge about special needs in education, how to identify children with special needs and what to do.

Considering Albania, although legislation and strategies are in place, in many cases implementation mechanisms are facing a number of obstacles. The focus of attention is gradually being shifted onto what actually happens in classroom interaction between pupils and teachers. This places the emphasis firmly upon the disposition, skills, knowledge and motivation of teachers in adopting new approaches to the education of children from various socioeconomic, cultural and experiential backgrounds. It is their input that is paramount in ensuring any real changes in practice, and hence impacts on the outcomes of learning. However, deeper understanding is needed of how the formulation of relevant competences actually translates into daily teaching practices and how present and future teachers can best be supported to develop those competences that best ensure and promote an inclusive society and education.

One of the most important factors influencing the success of inclusive education is educators' training referring both to the university preparation and to the on-job-training. A number of authors including Michailakis and

Reich (2009) claim that there is a specific body of knowledge for working with 'special' children that needs to be adequately covered during teacher preparation. This may involve gaining an understanding of the socio-cultural factors that produce individual differences, or specialist knowledge about disability and children's learning needs, awareness of educational and social issues that can affect children's learning, and so on. Another distinct current stance, according to Florian and Rouse (2009), is that teacher competences for inclusive educational practices should include skills relevant to the improvement of teaching and learning for all, including the capacity to reduce barriers to learning and participation as inclusion is not only about 'special' children. According to this view, teacher competence on inclusion should involve a multifaceted pedagogy that recognises how teaching should take account of children's individual characteristics; the learning that takes place outside school; and learners' previous knowledge, individual and cultural experiences and interests (Florian and Rouse, 2009).

Following the collapse of the half-century long communist regime and ratification of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child by the Albanian parliament in 1992, the Government of Albania (GoA) gradually began to consider the rights of all children in terms of the most appropriate form of education. Changes in education led to improvement of the physical infrastructure and curricula, although the inclusion perspective is still lacking in the latter. The GoA pledged to make education a national priority in 2005 and reaffirmed this commitment following the general elections of 2009 and 2013. However, according to official data, total budget expenditure on education only increased slightly from 3.2% of GDP in 2004–2005 to 3.5 % of GDP in 2008 but evidenced a dramatic reduction in 2013 being only 2.72% of GDP - well below the world and European averages of 4.6% and 5.2% respectively.

Equality of opportunities for people with disabilities in Albanian society is guaranteed by the Constitution: Articles 18 and 25 guarantee the right of all citizens, including people with disabilities, to freedom from discrimination and Article 57 guarantees the right to compulsory education for all.

The National Education Strategy 2004-2015 concentrates on pre-university education and recognises the rigidity and high degree of centralised management in this sector. It sets ambitious, short and long term, targets aiming to reform the education system by decentralising governance and increasing the autonomy of schools. It also aims to improve the quality of teaching and learning through the development of quality assurance instruments and a National Curriculum Framework, ensuring provision of teacher development and addressing the issues of funding and VET.

My recent research in Albania, encouraged teachers to reflect upon and discuss their understanding of the competences needed for inclusive education. Based on their experience, they identified a number of skills they considered of vital importance in modifying their teaching methods, classroom management and relationship with students and parents in order to accommodate the demands of an increasingly diverse group of students. These skills include the ability to: develop an understanding of diversity and the right of every child to learn and develop in the school nearest to their home; gain knowledge about various disabilities and how they influence the learning processes of a child; develop empathy and patience in dealing with both students with SEN and their parents; be open and actively seek knowledge on student-centred teaching methodologies and individualised; planning and teaching in order to meet the demands of students with SEN; develop and implement IEPs; based on the specific learning ability of the pupil and create specific instructions for students with learning difficulties.

Parents of (predominantly) SEN and Roma students were asked to identify practices they have witnessed and those they would have liked to see in making teaching better tailored to their children. They identified the following: Teachers must pay special attention to the specific needs of the students when teaching them or overseeing aspects of their social life and development; Teachers of lower grades (primary school, grades 1-4) should make the students feel appreciated and worthwhile and encourage the other students to be positive; Not all teachers show a genuine level of interest and commitment toward students with disabilities, especially in the upper grades (primary school, grades 5-9); Many teachers develop Individual Educational Plans for students but they do not always consult with parents in doing so; Teachers should be more patient with students with disabilities as they are aware that they require more support than most other students; Teachers need to be patient with parents as well as students because many parents are in difficult situations and they have the right to demand the best for their children. Teachers also need to communicate better with parents and not neglect or underestimate them simply because some parents are not well-educated. Teachers need to be supported and trained by the authorities. It is not always their fault that they do not know how to work with students with additional support needs as they have not received adequate training. They need to know how to work with students with specific disabilities and they also need to know how to handle the difficult behaviour many pupils display in school these days.

There are also negative perceptions of children with disabilities. Many parents feel so embarrassed that they keep them at home (Closs et al, 2003) thus depriving them of an education and valuable social experiences. There is limited professional expertise to provide specialised care and to

assess disability in order for children with minor disabilities to be included in mainstream classrooms (Albanian Disability Rights Foundation, 2005).

Teachers, parents of disadvantaged students and DPO/NGO workers participating in this research identified a number of additional barriers to inclusive education, the majority of which were also recognised by local and central education authorities. As was reported in previous research (Closs et al, 2003), these barriers include: the long distances children must travel to school, especially in the distant rural and mountainous parts of the country; the poor road infrastructure in these areas that are especially unfavourable to children with physical disabilities; the lack of openness of schools and communities towards the diversity of pupils; and, perhaps most importantly, the lack of teacher expertise in planning and providing for students with SEN, including the gifted and talented.

As part of my preparations for the PhD, I conducted a second survey on the inclusive education in Albania. I am not going to expand on the results of the survey and my findings in general but relevant to this article I would mention a key indicator which led to this paper: about 80% of interviewed educators declare they have no students with special needs in their classrooms although 40% of educators interviewed stated to have receive specific training on inclusive education, either during their studies or through in-service training. When asked about how much knowledge they had been given on the development of skills in inclusive education during their pre-service training, most teachers, not surprisingly, simply smiled or shrugged in disbelief. On reflection, however, some later mentioned a 'Child Development Psychology' unit. This element was also identified in the on-line survey responses as the single most relevant kind of knowledge provided to teachers, increasing their awareness of how children may mature and develop at different rates. However, many teachers were also taught that there are 'mentally incapable' or 'handicapped' children who are uneducable, while a small number of exceptions can 'get something' out of schooling and should therefore be educated in separate schools with special means.

Many teachers described studies in teacher-training faculties that followed a rigid pattern and some of the younger teachers confirmed this is still widely the case. Didactics and Pedagogy were also taught as specific subjects to enhance knowledge and develop teacher skills on transmitting knowledge to students and assessing pupil achievement. The classes they attended and those they taught were divided in two sections. In the first section, the students listened to the teacher and occasionally took notes, and in the second, students were required to reproduce the lesson they had been taught in the previous class. This system left little or no room for them to adjust their teaching to the specific needs of any students unable to grasp the

meaning of the concepts being delivered. These students would inevitably fall behind, and in addition to their failure, being marked accordingly, they would become the objects of ridicule and scorn for other students and often suffer disciplinary action from both teachers and parents.

The remarks made by teachers fall into two sets broad categories: those provided by teachers trained before the late 1990s and from those who graduated within the last decade. During the nineties the curricula of pre-service teacher education in almost all higher education institutions in Albania started to include Special Educational Needs (SEN) as a separate subject or set of modules within a broader discipline, on an obligatory or optional basis. Although inclusive education is still a new concept, even for some of the teacher educators who were interviewed during this research, teachers graduating since the late nineties reported some level of input on the issue. This included knowledge of disabilities and how some pupils with SEN can be educated in mainstream schools while others, whose needs cannot be met by the school, can be educated in special schools. According to these teachers, this approach emphasises the need for all mainstream students including those with SEN to be able to absorb the lesson content and reproduce it to a satisfactory level.

Teaching staff at teacher training institutions interviewed during this research are aware of the need for a different approach to integrate students with SEN to the mainstream. The mainstreaming of students with a disability is already supported by the Normative Clause on the 9-year compulsory education system, and, if there is to be any possibility of success, Albanian higher education institutions must be obliged to equip student teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills. Teacher educators stated that most of the aspects of teaching and values presented to focus groups in the list of teacher competences had already been approved by them and were already included in their teacher training programmes, although not specifically with an inclusion perspective. Responses to the survey questions supported this statement as 11 of the 17 teacher educators stated these items were covered in their courses. However, only 6 of the 16 respondent student teachers agreed, and most were unable to state with certainty whether their programme had included such aspects and aims.

While the teacher educators tended to claim that a variety of learning opportunities for inclusive education were provided to students, most of the student teachers stated this consisted merely of discussion on the issue. Meanwhile, learning opportunities such as: participation in group projects; response to teacher requests for critical feedback; feedback on teaching practice performance; collaborative group work; opportunities to challenge assumptions and preconceptions; and networking opportunities, seem to be extremely rare in all teacher education programmes in Albanian universities.

This situation was recognised by both teacher educators and student teachers, but especially by the latter.

Both teacher educators and student teachers agree on the importance of work with support staff to ensure inclusion. They also have high regard for: teacher competences for interpersonal relationships with students and their families; recognizing and respecting cultural and individual differences; understanding different values held by students and their families; awareness of their own preconceptions and value stances; ability to recognise the specific needs of students; encouraging intercultural respect and understanding among pupils; and maintaining high expectations regardless of student background. However, while teacher educators see these competences being acquired at an average or above average level in teacher education programmes, student teachers tend to respond less positively, indicating that their grasp of the competences is not secure.

School teachers also strongly asserted that existing curricula for student teachers fall far short of preparing them for inclusive schools. In their view, the curricula concentrate on content rather than skills and values. The courses are very intensive and rigid, and do not allow the prospective teachers to reach their full potential. The mentoring system established during student teaching practices does not seem to work well either.

The view of parents of students with disabilities seems to differ from that of other parents with regard to extracurricular activities organised at school. According to these parents, their children start hating school when they attend mainstream schools because 'it is not fun' for them. They have noticed that the children cheer up and are happy for many days after school excursions and that they learn a lot of other interesting on these outings that they are not taught in school. Other parents have expectations more in terms of academic knowledge. Nonetheless, teachers recognise that the planning and implementation of extracurricular activities is not given due weight in either pre-service or in-service training; an element also reflected in schools. Some sessions on the planning of extracurricular activities have been delivered through a combination of NGO and ICT provision, but these activities are often pushed out by regular classes in order to accommodate the densely packed compulsory teaching programme.

Conclusion

In Albania, although favourable legislation is generally in place, understanding of inclusive education tends to be polarised and perceived either in very broadest terms of access and quality, or the narrowest understanding in terms of provision for the individual participation of students with disabilities. The responses provided in this paper clearly demonstrate that while inclusive education is not an unknown concept to

most teachers, it is not properly addressed in pre-service teacher education programmes or sufficiently implemented and coordinated in in-service teacher education.

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