

DIAGNOSING, EVALUATING AND MONITORING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND LEARNING DISABILITIES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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ABSTRACT

According to Macedonian educational legislation, from the school year 2022/23, all children with disabilities must be included in regular schools. However, throughout the world, children with disabilities and their families constantly experience a barrier in regard to the enjoyment of their basic human rights and to their inclusion in society. Aim of this paper is to put emphasize on inclusive education of all students with disabilities. So according to this legislation teachers should accept the inclusion of children with some types of disabilities in the regular classrooms. Their capacities are underestimated and their needs are given low priority. The barriers they face are more frequently a result of the environment in which they live rather than a result of their impairment. In literature, the current debate is no longer about what inclusion, special needs and learning disability is and why it is needed. The key question is how it is to be achieved. Moreover, in our country currently, the debate focuses on “full inclusive education”. Namely, according to the new Macedonian educational legislation, all children with disabilities must be included in regular schools. Children's rights are equal for all children and this right should be preserved. When the goal is full inclusion, it is essential for teachers to be competent and willing to work with children with disabilities. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education of all students with disabilities, and also the factors they consider most important to the proper implementation of inclusive practices in regular schools.

Keywords: special needs, disability, diagnosis, inclusion, inclusive education, ICF

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INTRODUCTION

In North Macedonia, primary and secondary school of education is compulsory and free for all children between 6 and 18 years old. According to the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, all children have the right to education. Moreover, in the Constitution, in terms of economic, social and cultural rights governing the right to Education, and it is clearly indicated that “Everyone has the right for education”. The Education process and the activity of the primary education is regulated by the Law on Primary School. According to the Macedonian educational legislation, from the school year 2022/23, all children with disabilities must be included in regular schools.

The Primary education in the Republic of North Macedonia, for the time being, is the first compulsory level of education that includes students aged 5 years and 8 months, i.e. 6 years, up to 14 years and 5 months, i.e. 15 years, and is organized in three periods, namely: from I to 3rd grade, from 4th to 6th grade and from 7th to 8th grade (Useini, 2003).

The education and activities of primary education are governed by the Law on Primary Education. The current Law on Primary Education establishes the right to education of every child and establishes the principles on the basis of which primary education is developed: the best interest and full development of the student; equality, affordability, accessibility and inclusiveness; general educational character of primary education; ensuring quality education and international comparability of students' knowledge; active participation of students in the life of the school and the community preparing the student for lifelong learning; acceptance of diversity, multiculturalism and interculturalism; care for physical safety and health; autonomy, competence and responsibility and partnership between the school, parents, that is, guardians and local self-government units (Selimi, Saracevic & Useini, 2020). The law emphasizes the protection against discrimination and the promotion of equality, as well as the inclusive nature of primary education.

The Law regulates the organization and work of primary schools, the organization, planning and implementation of educational work, the rights and obligations of students, the provision and evaluation of the quality of educational work. Various aspects and segments of the

educational process in primary education are regulated by separate by-laws (regulations, guidelines, programs).

With the adoption of the Law of Education in 2019, the Republic of Macedonia begins the process of full inclusive education, which means that primary education is institutional, personal right, and content organized in a way that supports the inclusion of all students in regular primary education. Specific definition of the target groups are listed in the Law of Primary education (Article 35) and further elaborated within the Concept for inclusive education. The purpose of inclusive education is to create an educational system that values diversity, promotes equity, and prepares all students for active participation in society. According to this law, the students with special educational needs are as follows;

Students having long lasting physical, mental, intellectual or sensory disorders which in interaction with other societal barriers might hinder their effective inclusion in society on similar grounds as the rest of the population (Selimi & Useini, 2019).

Students with behavioral or emotional problems or specific learning problems.

Students that live in socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistically deprived environment.

The Law on primary education regulates full inclusion of students with special needs in Article 11. According to this article primary education is institutionally set, with adequate personnel and content organized, to support the inclusion of all children in regular primary education.

The inclusion of all children in regular primary education is defined by the Concept for Inclusive Education, which is adopted by the Minister at the proposal of the Bureau for the Development of Education and is published on the websites of the Ministry of Education and Science and the Bureau.

In order to adequately promote the idea of inclusive education, a great number of foreign humanitarian organizations (i.e. UNESCO, UNICEF, Save the Children UK), in the last 20 years, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science of Macedonia, have organized numerous educational and training programs for teachers, professionals

and parents of children with disabilities with a main goal to find solutions and ways to satisfy the child's needs (Ministry of Education and Science, 2002)

Activities of Inclusive teams at schools

Inclusive education in mainstream schools is secured through 2 types of inclusive teams: School Inclusive Team (SIT) and Inclusive Team for a Student (ITS).

The SIT is formed by the school director and is comprised of 7 members such as: the director, the pedagogue or psychologist, that is to say the social worker, 2 teachers employed in the school, 2 parents/guardians, special educator and a rehabilitator. In cases when the school doesn't have employed some of the professional associates, they are recruited from the resource school or centers for learning support. This team is responsible for all inclusive policies and practices on the school level, plans and implements activities that is required to be utilized in the educational work.

According to student's individual potential and needs, an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is developed and followed throughout the school year.

IEP is developed in the first 30 days after the enrolment of the student and start of the school year. It includes adaptations in the results from learning, introduction of specific activities and teaching methods that will enable reaching the results (Selim & Ali, 2022).

Assessment of students in the first period (first to third grade) according to the developed Individual Education Plan - IEP is descriptive, while in the second (fourth to sixth grade) and third period (seventh to ninth grade) can be either descriptive either numeric assessment considering the engagement of the student and the results achieved according to the IEP.

Ways of supporting students with disabilities (Article 19)

To support learning for students with disabilities, the primary schools provide: educational assistances, a personal assistant, appropriate professional support from the Learning Support Center, an inclusive team, and assistive technology as recommended by the assessment expert body

and in accordance with the individual educational plan or modified program.

The public call for the selection and recruitment of an educational/personal assistant, as well as the training of an educational/personal assistant, are conducted by the school with a resource center.

Educational and personal assistants are hired on a temporary basis by schools with resource centers. The funds for educational and personal assistants are provided from the budget of the Ministry.

Diagnosis, evaluation and monitoring

In North Macedonia, diagnosing, evaluating, and monitoring students with special needs and learning disabilities involves collaboration among various professionals in healthcare, education, and social services. These processes are conducted with a comprehensive and holistic approach to meet students' individual needs and provide optimal support for their educational, social, and emotional development.

Healthcare Institutions: Pediatricians, general practitioners, or child psychiatrists may identify developmental issues in children at an early age and refer them to suitable assessment centers.

Educational Institutions: Teachers, school psychologists, and guidance counselors may be the first to notice students' special needs or learning difficulties. They refer students to appropriate specialists for further assessment.

Early Detection and Interventions

In the early detection of children with special educational needs, in addition to their parents, healthcare institutions and educational institutions expert bodies for functional assessment also play a key role.

International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, known as ICF

These expert bodies conduct functional assessment in accordance with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF), applied by the World Health Organization in 2001.

The ICF is based on the integration of the medical and social models of disability and functioning.

Disability in this context is seen as dynamic interaction of the person and the environmental factors and the assessment is made with an aim to integrate different perspectives of functionality through application of the biopsychological model.

ICF sees functioning as a dynamic interaction between a person's health condition, environmental factors and personal factors. It recognizes the role of the environment in the creation and worsened impact of disability, as well as the role of health conditions.

The ICF gives us a new view of people with disability – focused on ability rather than the barrier of disability alone.

The ICF allows understanding of what a person can do – and can be helped to do better.

Based on the functional assessment, the possibilities and needs of the child or youth for inclusion in preschool institutions, in the regular educational system, as well as the realization of rights regarding social, health care, and employment, are determined in accordance with legal regulations.

Improvement of collaboration between the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Ministry of Health is necessary to create a mechanism for early detection, prevention, and timely identification of every need for additional support for children from zero to six years of age, as well as to provide timely information on support to parents/guardians of children.

In the Republic of North Macedonia in the period from 01.04.2019 to 31.03.2020, the new model of assessment is being piloted for additional educational, health and social support for children and youth with disabilities.

The model is based on the International Classification of Functioning (ICF), as a world classification standard, approved by the World Health Organization in 2001. For the needs of piloting, one national and two regional professional bodies have been established based in Skopje, which assess children from all cities in the country.

These pilot bodies employ professionals who have been temporarily taken over by health and social institutions and who have completed education to use the new assessment model in accordance with the International Classification of Functioning. The entire piloting process is led by an international expert for functional assessment (Selimi, Saracevic & Useini, 2020). These pilot bodies employ professionals who have been temporarily taken over by health and social institutions and who have completed education to use the new assessment model in accordance with the International Classification of Functioning.

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The pilot process was coordinated by the National Coordinating Body for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, due to the need for better inter-ministerial coordination and cooperation between all stakeholders in this process. During this period, as of December 30, 2019, a total of 356 functional assessments of children and youth were made, of which 152 assessments in the Centers for functional assessment, 10 assessments at home and 194 assessments in schools. The parents / guardians of the child had to participate in the assessment and they were occasional members of the professional assessment bodies. In general, all parents expressed satisfaction with the new assessment method, mainly because the assessment takes place in natural conditions, while the child plays or learns and also because they have the opportunity together with the members of the expert body to define the needs for supporting their child with aiming for easier involvement in daily life activities.

The process of piloting the new assessment model for additional educational, health and social support for children and youth at the same pace continues in 2020 until the final systemic solution and implementation of the ICF in the existing system (Selimi, Saracevic, & Useini, 2020).

Upon the completion of the pilot phase on December 26, 2020, a Service for Functional Assessment of Children and Youth was established within the Public Health Institution Health Center Skopje. This service

includes 9 expert teams for functional assessment of children and youth and one expert coordination team.

On January 17, 2023, a new Rulebook for Functional Assessment (Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 9 of January 17, 2023) was adopted, which serves as the basis for the work of the expert teams for functional assessment. The following expert teams have been formed:

- Professional team Skopje-1
- Professional team Skopje-2
- Professional team Strumica
- Professional team Bitola
- Professional team Ohrid
- Professional team Gostivar
- Professional team Kumanova
- Professional team Veles

Ensuring inclusiveness

The inclusiveness of primary education is a basic assumption for realizing the children's right to education according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the constitutional right and obligation for primary education for everyone guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia. In order to make education accessible to everyone under equal conditions, primary education is designed and organized to ensure enrollment, inclusion and completion of primary education for all children (Useini,2020).

Essential inclusiveness is ensured through the involvement of all students in all school activities according to their abilities, needs and interests. It is made possible by offering different optional subjects and by adapting the extracurricular activities to the possibilities of all the children of the school (Useini, 2003).

Inclusion is also ensured by adapting the space and ensuring accessibility to the premises (removal of physical barriers, adaptation of toilets, lifts,

signs) and to the teaching aids (enough space to move, easy access to books and learning materials, visible and legible exposures) and by adapting teaching aids and materials to students with special educational needs and providing assistive technology. For students who for certain reasons (chronic or long-term illness) cannot be physically present at school, the school organizes distance learning and provides classmate support (Rizvance-Masan, 2020).

Conclusion

The school contributes to providing an encouraging climate by sharing and supporting its vision of the goals of education, of the school's role in achieving those goals, and of the shared values that the school seeks to promote in its work. Also, the school is engaged in constant improvement of physical conditions, supply of resources, improvement of security and creation of an overall atmosphere free from discrimination and violence.

The schools also cooperate with the local community from which they provide support for regular and additional school and extracurricular activities. In principle, this cooperation is two-way - the local community invests in the school and provides it with space for its own promotion, and the school reciprocates by participating in humanitarian, environmental and other types of actions in which, in addition to the teachers, the students are also involved. In addition, schools have the opportunity to connect with other schools in their municipality, in the country and abroad, all in order to exchange experiences and draw ideas for improving the overall working conditions. Through such cooperation, schools enrich the quality of their own development processes, provide additional support for teachers and students, and promote their achievements outside of the school itself. The implementation of full inclusive education is a complex process. It requires proper legislation, and serious educational reforms. Article 24 promotes inclusion as being a basic human right of children with disabilities (UNCRPD, 2016) but this standpoint appears to be somewhat idealistic, with opponents arguing that inclusive education may not be the most appropriate option for all students with disabilities (Hornby, 2015). Namely, some of them would benefit from inclusive education and others may only be able to have their needs met in a special school, therefore they should be allowed the opportunity to attend a special school.

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