

Inclusive Education in Serbia

Legislation and Practice

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Introduction

This study is a contribution to the project *Comparative Classroom studies towards Inclusion*, which is a part of the international research cooperation project *Development towards the Inclusive School: Practices – Research – Capacity Building*. Universities of Belgrade, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Skopje, Tuzla, Zagreb & Oslo (WB 04/06). The objective of the comparative classroom studies is to examine teaching and learning processes in regular classes related to development of inclusive education (Johnsen, 2013).

Our study is a case study of an innovative programme of inclusive education, which is realised in twelve regular primary schools in cooperation with a special school in Serbia. In this programme, special educators from the special school provide support to pupils and teachers in regular schools in their development towards inclusive education (activities through which the support is provided are listed in Rapačić, Nedović, Stojković, & Ilić, 2014). From eight main curricular aspects which are defined by the Curriculum Relation Model, and which are investigated within the joint project of comparative classroom studies (Johnsen, 2013, 2014), our study focuses on the following two: the legislative context of inclusive education in Serbia, and communication in inclusive classrooms. The methods used in our study are legislative document analysis, interviews with teachers and school principals and non-participant observation of classroom processes. In the following, the results obtained by each of these methods are presented.

Legislative framework

Since 1994, when UNESCO adopted the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action which promotes the idea of the importance of the inclusive education in building an inclusive society (UNESCO, 1994), educational policy and practice in many countries has moved in a more inclusive direction (Mittler, 2000). In accordance with this international trend, Law on the Foundations of the System of Education of the Republic of Serbia (LFSES) established in 2009 has brought a range of formal opportunities concerning inclusion of children with disabilities into regular schools. We will shortly summarize these new formulations in the law: *Persons with developmental disabilities and other disabilities* have the right to education in accordance with their educational needs in the system of regular education, in the system of regular education with individual and/or group support, as well as in special preschool groups and schools, according to this law and the laws on preschool (The Law on the Preschool Education, 2010, Article 34), primary school (The Law on the Primary Education, 2013, Articles 56, 64) and secondary school education (The Law on the Secondary Education, 2013, Articles 4, 12).

Institutions and other organisations. LFSES regulates the following institutions in which education is realized: preschool education – preschool institutions; primary education – primary regular schools and schools for pupils with disabilities, secondary education – secondary regular schools and secondary schools for pupils with disabilities (LFSES, 2009, Article 27). Some of the special schools are boarding schools, providing accommodation and meals to pupils.

Schools for pupils with disabilities, may in addition to educational process within the institution, provide additional support to children and adults with special needs in preschool group, regular school and in family context (LFSES, 2009, Article 27).

Elementary school and secondary school may in addition to realisation of regular curriculum, realise individual educational plans for children and adults with disabilities (LFSES, 2009, Article 77). The innovation included in the present law is that elementary and secondary school curricula contain recommendations for the creation of individual educational plans for pupils who need additional educational support (LFSES, 2009, Article 74).

Individual educational plans. From the school year – 2010/2011, pupils with disabilities are not entitled to special curricula in accordance with the type and level of disability, but may be enrolled into the system of regular education. Related

to that is the new legislative regulation concerning individual educational plans. According to LFSES (2009, Article 77) an individual educational plan is created by a school for the child who needs additional educational support. An individual educational plan should be created for each pupil who needs additional support as a consequence of social deprivation, developmental or other disabilities, or due to other reasons. The law determines that educational support, besides the implementation of the individual educational plan, includes overcoming of physical and communicational barriers to inclusion. *The aim of the individual educational plan* for a pupil with disabilities is the achievement of his/her optimal inclusion into regular educational process and into peer group and development of his independent functioning. The individual educational plan determines a suitably adapted and enriched education, i.e. it determines means of adaptation of content and teaching methods and a schedule of daily activities within the preschool group or school class. The daily schedule is created so that it permits periods of additional individual or group support. The frequency of additional support is supposed to be predetermined by the individual educational plan.

According to LFSES (2009, Article 77) the individual educational plan should contain educational goals and standards which are defined in accordance with characteristics of the pupil. The individual educational standards may correspond to regular class standards, or may be individually developed for some or all academic subjects, in which case reasons for deviation from regular standards should be explained.

The individual educational plan is delivered by an educational collegium of the school, based on a proposal given by a team for inclusive education. The team consists of school teachers, school psychologist or pedagogue, a child's parent or a foster parent and pedagogical assistant if a child has one. Parents or foster parents have an additional role in the child's education according to the new law regulations, as he or she gives consent to the realization of the individual educational plan (LFSES, 2009, Article 77). According to the LFSES (2009, Article 77) the realization of an individual educational plan is supervised by the ministry of education. Individual educational plans should in accordance with the law (LFSES, 2009, Article 77) be created and assessed every three months during the first year of school attendance, and at the beginning of each semester.

Teachers, educators and professional services providers. According to the law, the process of education in primary and secondary schools is realised by teachers. School psychologist and school pedagogue are called professional service providers and schools employ either one of these professionals or both. The law

states that, depending on the school and curricula needs, professional work may also be performed by a social worker, defectologist, logopedist, or andragogue (LFSES, 2009, Article 116). The Law introduces, in addition to assistant teacher, the pedagogical assistant whose role is to provide help and additional support to pupils, teachers, educators, and professional service providers in the process of education of children with disabilities (LFSES, 2009, Article 117). In this way, they contribute to the advancement of inclusive education process.

Findings based on interview data

A semi-structured interview was developed for the purposes of this study. The interview questions cover the following topics: 1) support provided to pupils with special needs and teachers in the teaching-learning process; 2) challenges met by teachers in the development towards inclusive education; 3) regular school teachers' and principals' opinions on the effects of inclusive education in different areas of development of pupils with and without special needs; 4) their opinions on factors which contribute to successful implementation of inclusive practices.

We present some of the results obtained by interviewing twelve regular school teachers and twelve regular school principals who participated in the innovative programme of collaboration between regular schools and the mentioned special school. The complete findings of the study are published in Serbian language (Rapaić, Nedović, Ilić & Stojković, 2008).

One of the main principles of inclusive education is the principle of individually adapted teaching (Johnsen, 2008). For that reason, we investigated what kinds of curriculum and teaching methods adjustment are employed by regular teachers in the education of pupils with special needs. Teachers from our sample report that they use the following forms of adjustments: creation and implementation of individualized curriculum in cooperation with special educators from the special school "Milan Petrović" and school psychologists of the school adapted teaching methods and reduced achievement demands in certain subjects according to pupils' abilities. Frequencies of answers regarding are presented in Table 1.

Further, we investigated: What are the challenges, additional demands and responsibilities met by regular schools in the process towards inclusive education, according to the experience of teachers and school principals. Teachers

Table 1. Adjustments made for pupils with special needs in inclusive education process

Adjustment	Teachers (N=12)
Creation and implementation of individual curriculum	7
Adaptation of teaching methods	1
Reduction of achievement demands in certain subjects	4

and principals express that they face various challenges during the process of inclusive education. The most frequently reported challenges are 1) the inability of pupils with special needs to satisfy regular curriculum demands, 2) lack of defined achievement criteria for those pupils, 3) insufficient knowledge of appropriate teaching methods, and 4) problems of distribution of time for work with disabled and nondisabled pupils. They also report high demands toward teachers (e.g. preparation for lessons, need for additional education), large numbers of students in classes, challenges met in communication with pupils with special needs, too high expectations of parents of pupils with special needs in regard to their child's achievements and inadequate physical setting (Table 2.).

Table 2. Challenges in the development towards inclusive education

Challenges	Teachers (N=12)	Principals (N=12)	Total
Inability of students to accomplish regular curriculum demands	3	11	14
Lack of defined criteria for students' achievement	5	1	6
Insufficient knowledge of appropriate teaching methods	2	2	4
High demands toward teachers	1	4	5
Challenges related to communication	1		1
Large number of pupils per class	1		1
Too high parental expectations		1	1
Inadequate physical setting		1	1

Attitudes towards inclusive education of teachers and other persons working at school are an important factor, which influences the efficacy of the innovation process and the well-being of children involved (e.g. Lindsay, 2007). We asked teachers and principals to describe attitudes towards inclusive education of other

teachers and school staff. According to their opinion, attitudes are varied, and usually more positive among teachers who teach in lower grades (one to four) than in higher grades. Some of them suggest that this difference in attitudes may be related to lower capabilities of pupils to satisfy achievement demands, which are larger in higher grades. One school principal suggested: "Teachers who have negative attitudes probably need experience in working with pupils with special needs to realize that academic achievement is not the only aim of inclusive education".

Teachers and principals have also been asked about the attitudes of other pupils toward pupils with special needs. The majority of them (20, out of 24) state that these pupils are well accepted among peers. They report that other pupils often help them and give them praise and encouragement. They also mention that children with special needs socialize with schoolmates outside the school setting. According to them, workshops designed in cooperation with special educators with the aim to promote the acceptance of children with special needs among other children, have significantly contributed to pupils' positive attitudes. One of the school principals and two teachers say that although the majority of pupils accept well children with special needs, there is a small number of pupils who reject them and express hostility.

Interview questions were also related to teachers and principals' opinions on the effects of inclusive education in the areas of academic achievement and socio-emotional development of pupils with special needs and of other pupils. Concerning the academic achievement of pupils with special needs, all teachers and principals state that it is below the achievement of other children due to lower learning capabilities of these children. Two teachers suggest that their academic achievement would possibly be higher in a special education setting due to the smaller number of pupils per class and the fact that teaching staff in these schools possesses more knowledge and skills for teaching these children. All teachers and principals express the opinion that there is no influence of inclusive education on learning achievement of nondisabled pupils. However, two teachers add that although they have not noted problems in realization of regular curriculum, they question themselves whether other pupils are deprived in the teaching process: "I feel guilty that I haven't been able to give them enough attention because it took me a lot of time to work with the pupil with special needs" and: "I sometimes reflect on whether I provide enough support to other pupils".

With respect to the socio-emotional development of pupils, all teachers and principals consider that the effect of inclusive education on pupils' with special needs development is very positive. According to them, inclusive education

better enables pupils to develop communication and social skills than special education provisions. One of the teachers expresses the opinion that social development should be the primary goal of education for pupils with disabilities. Teachers and principals also think that nondisabled pupils' socio-emotional development is also positively affected by inclusive education, which promotes their tendencies toward empathic responding and altruistic values. In their words: "Children learn to respect differences and that every human being is of equal worth". Interview questions were also related to teachers and principals' suggestions regarding possibilities for further development of the process of inclusive education. Their recommendations are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Recommendations for the promotion of the process of inclusive education

Recommendations	Teachers (N=12)	Principals (N=12)	Total
Cooperation with special schools	5	7	12
Additional teachers' education	7	4	11
Special educators' employment in regular schools	1	3	4
Promotion of nondisabled pupils acceptance of pupils with special needs	2		2
Promotion of positive attitudes of school staff	1		1
Cooperation between teachers	1		1
Cooperation with school psychologists and pedagogues	1		1

The majority of informants assume that in order to promote the process towards inclusive education, cooperation between regular and special schools should be strengthened, and special educators employed in regular schools. They also suggest additional education of regular teachers for work with pupils with special needs. In their opinion, further development of programmes aimed to promote positive attitudes toward pupils with special needs among peers and regular school staff would be beneficial. Further, they think that inclusive education may be improved by developing closer collaboration between all persons who take part in it, i.e. teachers, special educators, school psychologists, pedagogues and parents.

Findings based on observational data

In studying the innovative programme towards inclusive education, our main focus is on communication within inclusive classroom. We were guided in this

choice by the cultural-historical approach to learning in context which was pioneered by Vygotsky and which presents a theoretical framework of the overall project of comparative classroom studies (Johnsen, 2013, 2014). According to cultural-historical approach, social interaction has a major formative influence on child-development. Following this approach, Ivić (2014) develops the idea that three components of didactic interaction within inclusive classroom have significance for understanding and promoting inclusive education: interaction between teachers and pupils; interaction between pupils themselves; and interaction between the knowledge to be acquired by pupils and the pupils who adopt the knowledge. In the observational part of the study, our focus was on the interaction between teachers and pupils and between pupils themselves.

According to observational data, the type of organizational structure mostly used in inclusive classrooms is whole class instruction (70.01% of the time). It is followed by individual work (21.43%) and group work, which occupies a small proportion of time (5.80%).

Following categories of interaction patterns are prevalent during whole class instruction: teacher's monologue, pupils' presentation and questions/answers. Teacher's monologue (e.g. lecturing, storytelling, reading aloud) occupies most of the observed time (23.50%). Pupils' presentations occur on average 17.31% of the time. Question/answer sequences between teacher and pupils aimed to check pupils' knowledge and insight take place during 12.18% of the time.

Teachers give individualised guidance and supervision during 19.97% of the time, and group guidance during 0.85% of the time. They involve the whole class in individual pupils' questions for 2.56% of the time.

When we look at the activities of pupils with disabilities, the following pattern occurs: they are engaged in presentation (e.g. reading aloud, presenting assignments) during 2.14% of the time, they take part in question/answer sequences for 0.85% of the time and they receive individual guidance from teachers for 9.50% of the observed time. These data suggest that pupils with disabilities take an active role in classroom. They also show that teachers devote a large proportion of time to give individually adapted guidance to pupils with disabilities (9.50% of time to them and 10.47% to other pupils).

With respect to different types of tasks pupils with disabilities are supposed to be engaged in, they spend approximately half of the time on the same tasks as other pupils (52.55%), and a quarter of the time on tasks related to individual curriculum (24.66%). On average, they spend small proportions of time on tasks related to a grade lower than their current grade, and on tasks related to general

educational curriculum, but which are different from other pupils' tasks (6.46% and 1.70% respectively). These results are similar to the results obtained by Soukup et al. (2007) who reported that pupils with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities worked on grade level standards during 60% of observed intervals and on individualized education plan objectives during 23% of intervals.

We were interested to investigate the level of pupils' engagement in learning tasks. The level of engagement was operationalized as the ratio between the time in which a pupil is working on a task and of the time planned for that task. The data show that pupils with disabilities are actively engaged in the same tasks as other pupils for 88% of the planned time, whereas they work on tasks related to individual curriculum for 62% of the planned time. These data may indicate that tasks related to general curriculum in which pupils with disabilities are involved are suitably chosen in a sense that pupils are motivated to work on them. On the other side, the level of engagement of pupils on tasks related to individual curriculum is lower than it would be expected based on the premise that these tasks are individually adapted to their learning abilities and educational needs. One possible explanation is that motivation for learning of these pupils is lowered due to their perception that they are working on tasks different from other pupils. Further, closer examination is needed on contextual factors which possibly interfere with their engagement on individual curriculum tasks, such as what type of activities other pupils are engaged in during the time in which they are working on tasks related to individual curriculum. The inspection of the collected data shows the following pattern: pupils with special needs are actively engaged in these tasks in the context of classroom organisation for working with individual tasks. This engagement is additionally strengthened by teachers' individual guidance provided to the pupil and during time periods immediately following that guidance. On the other side, pupils show lower levels of engagement in tasks related to individual curriculum in the context of the whole class instruction, i.e. during teacher's lecturing, other students' presentations and question/answer sequences between teacher and other students. In such contexts, pupils' work often shows an intermittent character: short periods of engagement and non-engagement frequently follow one another.

Wehmeyer et al. (2003) define accommodation provided to pupils as any support that may help pupils accomplish the task, but does not change or modify curriculum itself. Our data show that accommodations for pupils in the form of peer support and the use of assistive technology occur during 14.45% of the observed time. Adaptations were coded in accordance with Wehmeyer et al.

(2003), focusing on when the pupil was involved in an activity that was similar to the rest of the class, but was adapted in a way that made presentation or representation of the content different from that of the other pupils' activities. Adaptations were made during 9.4% of the observed time. The levels of adaptation and accommodation are relatively low compared to results obtained by Soukup et al. (2007) who reported accommodations during about 67% of observed intervals and adaptations during 17.63% of intervals.

Engagement of special educators in the learning process of pupils with disabilities was coded independently of other types of accommodations in our study. It took place on average during 10.62 % of the time. Special educators engaged predominantly when pupils with disabilities were involved in the same tasks as other pupils, i.e. in tasks related to general curriculum. The data show that the level of pupils' engagement in such tasks is the highest possible (100%) when special educators' support is provided to them.

The data obtained concerning communication of pupils with disabilities with teachers and other pupils show a picture of positive relationships and acceptance. In their communication with teachers, pupils with disabilities take an active role: they often initiate conversation, ask teachers to help them and to check whether they have accomplished tasks correctly. Teachers frequently praise pupils with disabilities for their achievements and encourage them verbally to work on tasks. Furthermore, as shown in relation to coded data, they devote much of the time to individual guidance of these pupils. For example, as one of the observers has noted "the pupil is working only when the teacher stands next to him and helps him to concentrate on the task". Together with teachers, other pupils often praise their classmates with disabilities for their presentations. Interaction unrelated to learning is also present among pupils (e.g. chatting). No instances of negative relations such as quarrels or ridicules have been noted by the observers.

Observation has yielded evidence that other pupils provide help to pupils with special needs to accomplish learning tasks when asked by teachers or spontaneously. According to Vygotsky (1983), asymmetric didactic interaction is a formative factor of cognitive development. Ivić (2014) suggests that this type of interaction occurs within the class, both between teacher and pupils and between pupils who are on different levels of cognitive development and/or who possess different levels of knowledge of a certain subject. Our data on support given to one another to accomplish learning tasks show that asymmetric didactic interaction between pupils, in comparison to whole class instruction and individual work is relatively infrequent in the observed classes.

Conclusion

The aim of our study was to analyse the possibilities for inclusive education of children with special needs prescribed in the legislation of the Republic of Serbia, and to investigate an innovative programme of inclusive education, which is realised in cooperation between regular and special schools.

We used interview and observational method to obtain data on the programme of inclusive education, following the principle of triangulation (Robson, 2002). The picture of the programme that emerged through data analysis shows that pupils with special needs are supported within regular schools embraced by the programme in varied ways. Individual curricula have been created and implemented for some of the pupils with special needs and adaptations and accommodations have been used in the teaching process. Engagement in learning tasks of pupils with special needs, as our data show, varies as a function of organisational classroom structure and teaching methods. Their level of engagement is high when they work on the same tasks as other children and when they work on tasks related to individual curricula in the context of individual work and under the close supervision of regular teacher and special educator. With respect to social relations between pupils with special needs and their peers, positive attitudes and acceptance are predominant. However, as teachers and school principals pointed out, further developments are needed in order to promote the process of inclusive education. They have suggested numerous aspects of the process that may be improved. Most important, teachers should be better supported in the process of creation and implementation of individual curricula. This could be realized through the engagement of special educators in regular schools and through additional education of regular teachers in the field of special education.

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