

Supporting Pupils with Language and Speech Difficulties in Regular Primary Schools

Comparative Research and Intervention in the Classroom towards Inclusion

Sadeta Zečić, Irma Čehić, Selma Džemidžić Kristiansen and Selmir Hadžić

Introduction

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) reforms in education are currently being implemented at all levels; in pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education. Since 2004, a new curriculum has been followed that extends regular education from eight to nine years (Law on Primary Education, Sarajevo Canton, 2004). Both the OSCE Mission and entity ministries of education in BiH are developing new programmes for pupils from grades four to nine. Concurrent to these reform processes, the principle of inclusion as an international social and educational movement has been introduced to the schools of BiH. However, achieving inclusion is a complex process that requires making changes in educational institutions at every level.

In BiH the principle of inclusion has not been systematically introduced for numerous socially justified reasons, one of them being that the educational

system in BiH is extremely fragmented.³⁰ The consequence of this fragmentation is that there are a certain number of well-educated schools prepared for inclusion and others that are completely unprepared. Nevertheless, Article 1 in the Law on Primary Education for Sarajevo Canton related to general provisions (2004) provides for the possibility of enrolling every child in their local school. The result of this provision is that there are a lot of children meeting various challenges and disabilities in regular primary schools.

Further, Article 72 of the Law (2004) clearly specifies that schools need to form expert teams that include both a speech therapist and special needs educator. However, these legal intentions have not been implemented for financial and material reasons. Teachers working in schools have different education and training, depending on whether their school has been lucky enough to participate in projects providing knowledge and skills concerning children with challenges and disabilities as well as methods of working with them.

We all know that children's capacities, interests and abilities vary, and all children have the right to attend their local school together with their friends. The process towards achieving inclusive education is on-going and complicated. It needs to provide several and different solutions for pupils, teachers and parents in addition to the educational system in the entire country. Unfortunately, while the resources in regular schools supporting the inclusion process remain at the same level, both teachers and school pedagogues are carrying a heavier educational burden than before.

In Sarajevo Canton there are two special education schools that are willing and ready to participate in the process of inclusion on any level by providing support, education and training for teachers and parents, development of individual educational plans and programmes (IEP), contributing to expert teams, pupil observation and counselling. Some steps have already been made in this direction, and both schools have provided support in the planning and implementation of solutions for pupils with special needs in regular schools and pre-schools. There are also a certain number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supporting persons with special needs. While these efforts are quite helpful, they also present some dilemmas and confusion for teachers, parents and experts, since the Ministry of Education does not involve these

30. It consists of 14 Ministries of Education, 12 Ministries of Education, two entity-level ministries in Republika Srpska and the Federation BiH, which covers 10 cantonal Ministries, Department for Education in the District Brčko and the Ministry of Civil Affairs at the state level with competences concerning education for an estimated population of 3,8 million people.

institutions as formal partners, and only a few of these NGOs are working in accordance with the intentions of inclusion. Contemporary humanistic inclinations in civilisation and culture aim at creating “possibilities for the capabilities and potentials of every individual to develop in such a way that every individual in society may become a useful member of that society within the limits of her/his abilities” (Nikotić-Simončić, 1994, in Zečić-Jeina, 2006). Currently, in the era of improving relations and respect for human rights, conditions are being created for more intensive development and implementation of the idea of inclusion in the mainstream of “normalised” or ordinary social life. Unusual or special needs present society with a challenge to respect the uniqueness of every individual and assure their belonging to the community. In our educational system, assessment of psycho-physical abilities of pupils before starting school is still done according to old standard rules and administered by medical doctors. This tradition applies to all children who enrol in a first grade of primary school, who after a long-term observation of the school’s pedagogue may be forwarded to an expert commission for a so-called categorization. Alternatively, if parents have worries they may also take their child to this commission for assessment, or they may enrol their daughter or son in an alternative educational institution, which in their opinion is more appropriate. Assessment procedures within the school have been through some changes according to this new law (2004), so that pupils now receive a descriptive evaluation report on their levels of accomplishment in the first three grades. Based on these first school years the educational staff carries out an official assessment concerning pupils who according to their performances may seem to have special educational needs and might therefore be transferred to a special education school. In grades four to nine the evaluation is still based on the traditional educational application of quantification without strict standards of knowledge. Individual qualitative and quantitative assessments are based on teachers’ assessment of the pupil’s level of knowledge within individual school subjects or subject areas. It is necessary to establish some defined standards of knowledge in future education policy in order to simplify assessment procedures of pupils’ level of accomplishment.

Throughout the entire education process, attention should be paid to sensitizing inclusive attitudes towards all eight curricular aspects pointed out by Johnsen (2001; 2013). They are: pupil/s, assessment – evaluation, communication, care, educational intentions, content, methods and organisation, and frame factors or the context of learning in the school. If properly implemented, this

will provide us with a vision and evaluation of possible achievements of pupils, as well as information about which educational means will be supportive of further learning. When respecting the differences and different levels of learning possibilities, we also respect weaknesses and difficulties of pupils with special needs within the regular education system.

During recent decades, the number of pupils having evident language and speech difficulties has increased. This phenomenon has been a subject of interest among several authors, such as Meitus-Weinberg (1983), Bernstein (1988) and Bishop and Mogford (1994). Research conducted in BiH by Salihović (2005), Zečić (1998) and Zečić, Mrkonjić, Duranović and Matošević (2007) indicate that we also have a large number of children with language and speech difficulties. This research project focuses on these children.

Purpose and planned project activities

The focus of this study is on teaching pupils with language and speech difficulties enrolled in regular school. Two schools have been purposely selected as case schools; one which has taken part in several projects, including a long-term project on individually adapted education and development of inclusive practices (Johnsen, 2007; Pribanić, 2001; Smajić & Ibralić, 2004; SØE 06/02; Zečić, Babić, Čaušević, Džemidžić, Meštrić, & Hrga, in press), and another school currently participating in a special needs education upgrading project for the first time. The project's purpose is to study different kinds of support existing among teachers, parents, peers and local institutions with regard to children with special needs, focusing on pupils with language and speech difficulties. This is a research and innovation project consisting of a baseline study followed by intervention and, finally, a study of post-intervention changes. The following four aspects are targeted in the three phases of the study:

1. Pupils with language and speech difficulties in the two regular schools: Assessment, follow-up, professional special needs- and regular educational support and evaluation
2. Teachers: Comparison of teachers' education in both schools; readiness and capacity to support pupils with language and speech difficulties in the two regular schools

3. Parents and local community: Preparedness and education/training of parents and local community for cooperation with school, teachers and pupils towards the realisation of inclusion in their school
4. Peers: Readiness of pupils to help classmates with learning tasks

Planned activities in the first phase; baseline study:

- To identify children with special needs, particularly children with language and speech difficulties in both case schools: Since the above mentioned ordinary assessment which is completed before starting school, is not sufficient to obtain a realistic picture of possible target pupils, it is first necessary to observe the pupils in the classroom and then make individual special needs educational assessments of language and speech capabilities of those pupils who are observed having possible difficulties.
- To get information about and access to the parents, teachers and local community of these pupils in the two classes participating in the study
- To observe and assess attitudes and practices of teachers and parents related to pupils with language and speech difficulties in the class
- To compare the two schools: We assume that in the school where teachers have been previously trained, there should be more efficient cooperation and a certain number of more successful results than in the other school.

Planned activities in the second phase; intervention:

- To provide special needs education/logopedy support for the targeted pupils through employing various suitable methods and approaches in order to help them overcome language and speech difficulties
- To raise the competency level through upgrading the teaching staff, increasing their knowledge and skills in supporting pupils who have language and speech problems
- To inform parents and advise them how to help their children and encourage them to increase their communication with teachers
- To inform local institutions about the project, including its purpose and activities

Planned activities in the third phase; post-intervention study:

- Activities and level of mastery of all groups; pupils with language and speech difficulties, their classmates/peers, teachers, parents and local community, are observed, assessed, analysed and compared with findings in baseline studies.

Methodology

As mentioned above, this is a case study that includes two schools representing two cases. They have the typical traits as partners in a case study, since they have been purposefully selected because they are as different as possible within the area, or “population” of schools, in the Canton of Sarajevo. The study also shares characteristics with a research and innovation project, consisting of pre- and post-studies, and an intermediate intervention or innovation project. The combined case and intervention study design may also be seen as an action research project with a circle of actions; starting with selecting a focus of study (teaching children with language and speech difficulties in regular schools), collecting data in order to describe and analyse the cases (the baseline study), introducing a specific educational activity or action (the innovation project), describing, analysing and reflecting on the changes of the cases (post-intervention study), possibly continuing the circle by repeating or adding to the new activity, etc. in a spiral-formed process. An additional characteristic of action research in this study is that researchers and participants – teachers, parents, pupils and peers – are involved in the cyclical nature of actions and reflections together with the partly external research and innovation team. In this way the study has an insider’s perspective of the phenomenon in focus of the study (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). The research and innovation group consists of a Master of Education, a Master of Special Needs Education and two logopedes (speech therapists) whereof the senior researcher is a professor in logopedy.

Another important aspect of this research design is the three levels of comparison; 1) between the two different cases 2) between pre- and post-innovation, and 3) with studies of inclusive practices in six other universities in five European countries (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007; Johnsen, 2013).

The study contains a combination of qualitative and quantitative elements; mixed methods. The qualitative part is based on multiple sources of information providing the researcher with the possibility to discover the methods, mechanisms and strategies needed in order to change and improve support provided to children with speech and language difficulties. Multiple sources of information are also used, since single source in isolation are not assumed to be trusted in providing comprehensive information (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990).

The phenomenon in focus of the study, teaching pupils with language and speech difficulties in regular school, involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter, studying the phenomenon in its natural settings, the case schools, and attempting to make sense of or interpret it in terms of the

meaning people bring to them (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007; Creswell, 2007). Analysis will take into consideration several different characteristics of the participants, such as the different local context where the schools are situated, gender of pupils, socio-economic status of parents as well as qualification and training of teachers. A similar research approach was conducted with 13-year-olds on their education at the UNESCO Institute in Hamburg by using the so-called *transversal approach*, where

in a longitudinal approach, certain events are followed during a period of time. This is what we are doing in our research project by following the progress of pupils with language and speech difficulties through different time phases. In the UNESCO research project mentioned above, similar tests were applied using similar measuring instruments, and pupils from comparable schools were examined in the same time frame between 1965 and 1970 (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Hitchcock & Hughes, 2001; Mandić, 2004; Mužić, 1963).

The selected cases: We envisage carrying out our research work in two purposefully selected regular primary schools. As mentioned, the criterion for selecting these two schools is that they are very different and therefore, when combined, they are expected to reveal a larger spectre of nuances than if only one of them had been selected.

Primary School A is in Sarajevo. It is a city school where several projects have been implemented, and teachers have participated in previous innovation projects towards inclusion, as documented above.

Primary School B is a suburban school with a very large number of pupils, which has not had the opportunity to take part either in innovation projects towards inclusion or any other projects.

The second grade classes from both schools have been selected because this is assumed to be the optimal period for assessing pupils' language and speech difficulties. Through observations made in the classrooms followed by the use of selected instruments for assessing linguistic competencies and abilities, it has been established whom of the pupils in the classes have special educational needs due to language and speech difficulties. Six pupils were found. These actions have already been taken in preparation for further study.

Research and intervention activities consist of the following steps

- Screening of the situation in the schools

- Survey regarding the pupils:
 - What are their interests, needs and abilities?
 - What is their current level of achievement?
 - Are the pupils active partners?
 - Is there any cooperation (partnership) among parents, teachers and pupil in addressing the special needs of pupils?
 - Are pupils monitored in all contexts?
 - How does a pupil see her/himself?
 - How do the others in the class and community see the pupil?
 - To what extent do the children feel safe and accepted, and how may this be detected?
 - Which learning strategies do pupils apply?
 - What is the level of content that pupils manage to learn?
 - Are there any individual plans and programmes for pupils with special needs?
- Survey for teachers containing questions concerning school openness, teacher education, their proposals for further in-service education and other activities, cooperation with parents and the local community.
 - Are pupils comprehended as being active partners?
 - How well do teachers know their pupils?
 - What are the teachers' resources in adapting their teaching to the individual needs of pupils?
 - What is the involvement of professional services (team work) in school?
 - Who provides support and cooperation with the research & innovation team and parents?
 - How is care and support of children addressed?
 - How does a teacher harmonise “protection” and “support” with individual pupil needs?
 - Are there individual plans for pupils with special needs?
 - Are there any technical means for the improvement and advancement of communication?
- Survey for parents of the selected classes on similar issues; inclusion, their vision of success for pupils with disabilities and their proposals concerning how to support such pupils. Survey of a sociological character concerning opinions of pupils, creativity, ideas on how to support their classmates, and work in peer-support groups (Džemidžić, 2007).

- Speech therapist observations of teaching, classes, teaching preparation, approaches to and communication with pupils, activating pupils with language and speech problems; teacher's questionnaire (open ended – closed). With the participation of the classroom teacher and their approval, the speech therapists implement class testing of linguistic modalities. The speech therapists also implement assessment and identification of the six above mentioned pupils with language and speech difficulties, who will be monitored and educated throughout the longitudinal project.

Research instruments and materials

Bjelica and Posokohova's (2000) evaluation program is applied to assess the pupils with assumed language and speech difficulties. Abilities, interests and capacities are systematically assessed with focus on the following aspects: spontaneous conversation – naming of pictures – picture-creation of sentence – discrimination of similar phonemes – rewriting text – completing the word – completing the sentence – dictation – procedures of assessment.

Technical support in research and innovation consists of dictaphones for recording pupils' reading and speech patterns; cameras for recording different teaching-learning sequences, working premises, classrooms, laboratories, family environment of pupils, public performances of pupils, workshops, etc., as well as speech therapy devices for the training of articulation, stuttering and other speech modalities.

Didactic materials include textbooks, teaching hand-outs, pictures, cards, recordings of proper speech patterns, cassettes or CDs containing correct speech patterns, dictation of poems, songs, etc.

Instruments for the continuous monitoring of the teachers' work consist of an evidence list for analysis of follow-up segments/activities (Bjelica & Posokohova, 2000):

- feelings of teacher – emotions
- ways of commenting with pupils
- what kind of communication s/he has with pupils
- how many communication skills s/he uses at work
- how s/he conveys information
- how s/he obtains information from pupils
- how harmonious are verbal and non-verbal communication

Teacher training is a very important segment of the innovation part of our project.

Timetable for implementation of the baseline study

Month	School	Teachers	Pupils	Year
II	B	survey	observ.	2007
III	A	survey	observ.	2007

IV in both schools survey for parents of II graders 2007

After conducting classroom observations and identifying the pupils with language and speech difficulties, the plan is to make an analytical report of the existing conditions in these schools and classes. This report will provide us with more systematic information about the six identified pupils with language and speech problems in both case schools, which will in turn create a further dynamic for our work. After having conducted a survey among teachers from both schools, it will be possible to make a comparison of the level of education of the teaching staff in both schools, and innovation workshops can be planned. Information obtained from parent surveys may also contain indicators of different school and classroom conditions, which may in turn influence the preparation and scope of the innovation project.

It is well-known that cooperation between teachers and special needs educators is among the most important indicators for achieving successful inclusion (Zečić, Babić, Čaušević, Džemidžić, Meštrić, & Hrga, in press). Therefore, special needs educators and teachers are amongst the members of the expert team of this research and innovation project, as are parents of pupils with special needs. In this sense, we are planning at least two workshops for parents as part of the project. We will also organise workshops for all the parents from the classes in which the children with special educational needs are pupils. These workshops are planned to be training sessions that will support parents to develop their children's self-esteem and self-confidence, recognise their needs and provide adequate responses to their concerns. A special form of cooperation and partnership with parents consists of follow-up on the progress of children by creating a portfolio for every child. Using the method of content analysis, we are going to determine whether there is a significant difference in the organisation and content of portfolios of children with and without special needs. Regarding each class, two portfolios will be randomly selected in order to compare them with portfolios of the pupils with speech and language difficulties. The role of educational and psychological services in working with children with language and speech difficulties and their parents will also be examined in order to establish how to improve and enrich this cooperation.

Before the second joint international project workshop in Belgrade in spring 2007 (WB 04/06), the plan is to have decided a number of indicators for screening the situation in schools and selected cases from classes. In the second semester of the school year, we plan to implement the following steps and prepare for professional work with pupils selected for our project.

Timetable for further baseline studies and beginning of innovation

Month	School	Teacher activities	Pupil activities	Year
IX and X	A and B	workshop	work w/ speech therapist	2007
XI and XII	meeting in Sar.	worksh. I. E.	SNE* in class	2007

*SNE: special needs educator, defectologist

In this part of the first project year, there will be one workshop in each school with teachers organised in the area of planning how to work with pupils with special educational needs and cooperate with parents. In the following two months, meetings of the teachers from grades one to three in both schools will be organised in School A in order to coordinate the preparation of individual educational programmes and prepare for actually working with the selected pupils. Pupils in both schools will be visited by a speech therapist that will both start working with them and provide training for their parents and classroom teachers related to their relevant language and speech development. A speech therapist or special needs educator/defectologist will teach children with language and speech difficulties for one hour each week in both schools. The speech therapist will start by providing needed didactical materials as well as screening for certain details related to pupils and teachers.

During 2008 the speech therapist will continue this work as well as systematically cooperate with teachers, provide support planning the methodology needed for working with dyslexia and dysgraphia or any other language and speech-related impediments with pupils in both schools. This teacher training will continue in cooperation between the two case schools and the Educational Centre in Sarajevo³¹.

Post-intervention studies are planned from the beginning of 2009 in order to analyse different segments which have been monitored during the intervention and innovation period. Our plan is to apply the same or equivalent methods

31. The Educational Centre in Sarajevo has participated with the Faculty of Education, University of Sarajevo, in this project. The Educational Centre was established by the Italian government in cooperation with the Institute for Education of Children with Special Needs, Mjedenica, as a resource centre.

and instruments as in the baseline studies with possible additional activities related to new aspects which may be revealed over the course of the project. Focus will again centre on the following assumed changes:

- Concerning pupils: Achievements, success-results, changes in relation to a number of operationalized aspects – communication with teacher, peers and parents, as well as self-esteem and attitudes towards school and teaching
- Concerning teachers: Mastery of new teaching programmes – altered and increased confidence towards work – increased self-esteem and social contacts – communication on several levels and in different ways – changes in care for children – increased positive cooperation with parents: partnership

The eight curricular/didactic main aspects mentioned above (Johnsen, 2001; 2007; 2013) guide the choices of focal points throughout the project, providing grounds for the international comparative analysis of inclusive practices (Johnsen, 2013). In this study the main aspects care and communication are given special attention. Care is understood as something which is reciprocal. Hence focus is on resource-based care for pupils and parents, and on parents' care for their own as well as other children. Focus is also on the care practiced on institutional level, such as how the schools provide care for teachers, pupils and parents. On a more general or principle level attention is also directed towards the care which is implicit in the schools' development of new lines of thought, such as how the principle of inclusion is developed and transferred to practices. Communication is seen as a related central aspect in the project. Care and communication are, as noted above, in focus in all three parts of the project, baseline studies, innovation and post-intervention studies. They are central to the interactional analysis of the study's main participants: teacher – pupil, pupil – teacher, parent – teacher, pupil- teacher – parent, etc.

As mentioned, comparison is an important part of the analysis and will continuously take place throughout the project. A comparative analysis will be performed between the two case schools and between baseline and post-innovation findings. Related to the international comparison, relevant aspects of our project will be included in the international comparison between the seven project universities (WB 04/06). The joint goal is to explore the existence and development of inclusive practices in various European countries and regions.

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Comments regarding modifications to the initial project plan

Sadeta Zečić and Selma Džemidžić Kristiansen

Project activities described in the main project plan have been modified in accordance with the two project schools' needs for mediation by the research team in order to support inclusive practices in thematic workshops and other kinds of consultations with teachers and parents. Thus, action research³² has played a more prominent role than described in the project plan as a consequence of concrete consultation needs in different situations, especially in the case school, which had not taken part in innovation projects before joining this particular one. More in-service education and workshops about inclusive education have been arranged in this school.

32. According to Gall, Gall & Borg (2007) action research in education is a form of applied research whose main purpose is improvement of an educational professional practice. Action research done for personal purposes is generally intended to promote greater self-knowledge and personal fulfilment in addition to raising professional awareness among other practitioners.