TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PRACTICES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN – KOSOVO CASE

Tringa Azizi
European University of Tirana- UET
KOSOVO

ABSTRACT

The main goal of this study is to evaluate Kosovo teachers' perceptions and practices of their work with special needs students. 31 teachers (8 male and 23 female) participated voluntarily and responded to the structured questionnaire, the reliability value of which was.522. Teachers differed by education background, age, type of institution where they taught and number of students in their class. The study is descriptive with a quantitative approach. Chi-square goodness-of-fit test, chi-square of association, t-test for independent groups and one way ANOVA were used to identify potential variability in teachers' perceptions and practices. Teachers showed significant statistical differences in responses they provided, both with regard to their perceptions and their daily practices. However, no statistically significant correlations were found between the responses and the education background, the type of institution where they taught, their sex or the number of students in their class. Statistical difference was found between the teachers' age and the selection of textbooks ($F(3,27)=3.453$, $p=.030$), where younger teachers used modified textbooks and texts adapted to each student, while teachers of older age preferred textbooks that were more general for all students ($p=.004$). Significant differences were also found in setting the classroom climate among teachers of various ages (F $(3,27)= 3.093$, $p= .044$), with teachers of older age offering higher values for the classroom climate as suitable in comparison to younger teachers (p $=.031$). The findings indicate that ongoing professional training for teachers and increased cooperation and professional support from experts of respective fields are a necessary requirement for successful work with special needs children.

Keywords: Special needs student, teacher, perception, practice, variability.

INTRODUCTION

The right to education is a universal right of all children, youth and adults with disabilities. This right is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (2008). It is also addressed in a number of important international declarations, such as the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000).

Special needs students should be treated equally with all other students. Their education should begin in the family, with the view to their preparation for further education in educational institutions. If the family is reluctant with regard to the education of special needs students, it will be very difficult for the educational institutions to integrate these children into the community of other students.

Education for children with special educational needs has functioned in Kosovo since 1950 and up to the 80's through on-going capacity building special education schools operated providing primary and secondary education. During the 90's Kosovo's education found itself in extraordinary circumstances, operating in a parallel system, including special education.

During this period of time four special schools and four attached classes in regular schools operated. Only 400 children with various disabilities were included (FSDEK, 2003). Unlike other countries, the integration of special needs children into the regular education system in our country began around 2000-2001(Nano, Virxhil, 2001). The current education system for children with special educational needs is increasingly moving towards regular education, in order for children with special education needs to become increasingly more part of regular schools and classes. This has enabled a consistent yearly increase of the number of special needs children who are provided quality educations services. According to Statistics on Education in Kosovo 2013-2014 (p.43), 1239 special needs children are included in special schools or attached classes or are integrated into regular classes.

However, according to Bujari (2003), in order for special needs children to be integrated into the regular education system, certain conditions must be met, such as: preparation of parents, training of teachers, adaptation of school facilities, application of various methods and forms of working, preparation of other students for an appropriate treatment of special needs children, drafting and adaptation of curriculum contents to specific needs of the children and above all the willingness and readiness to work with special needs children. Among these conditions and factors, teachers can be considered as one of the most important factors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature indicates that the implementation of policies on inclusion has been unequal (Evans & Lunt, 2002). Whilst there are many success stories to be told about inclusion (Ainscow, 1997; Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2007), there have also been failures and difficulties. Such difficulties have been blamed on a variety of factors including, competing policies that stress competition and ever-higher standards, a lack of funding and resources and existing special education practices. The literature has also suggested that one of the greatest barriers to the development of inclusion is because most teachers do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to carry out this work (Forlin, 2001). The findings in the literature are now very consistent (Ware et al, 2009; OFSTED, 2006) in supporting the fact that the approach of experienced and qualified teachers is a key factor in student progress, including special needs students. In practice, inclusion means teaching a class with various students who have different individual needs (Forlin, Loreman, Sharma & Earle, 2009). In order for it to function well, inclusion needs to be promoted, and this can be carried out by adapting the instruction and the curriculum, and through the support given by the head teacher (Idol, 2006). OECD has suggested that the quality of teacher education and teaching itself are the most important factor in student outcomes (OECD, 2005: 12). In their study on teacher education and teaching in 25 countries, OECD suggested that the increase in the quality and standards of teaching is perhaps the policy that is most likely to lead to substantial gains in the work of the school (OECD, 2005: 23).

The principles of inclusion must be embedded in teacher training programs, which should develop attitudes and values, not just knowledge and skills (WHO, 2011). In this regard special importance is given to ongoing professional development of teachers, particularly to the interaction among them. Support, such as discussions with colleagues and consultations in addressing specific problems, has proved to be useful in many countries (Westling, Herzog, Cooper-Duffy, Prohn & Ray, 2006; Szwed, 2007). Sufficient time for cooperation during the working hours enables teachers to cooperate and share responsibilities with other teachers or special education teachers. This has influenced the reduction of the stress experienced by teachers and has promoted student learning (Pfeifer & Holtappels, 2008).

Although it has been several years now that the Kosovo education has been trying to move towards inclusion, success stories or stories of difficulties have not been researched from the teachers' perspective. The main goal of this descriptive study, with a quantitative approach, is to draw the perspectives, perceptions and practices of teachers who work directly with special needs children on their work, and to identify the variability in these perceptions and practices depending on the characteristics of teachers.

METHODOLOGY

The study sample

31 teachers who work with special needs children voluntarily participated in this study. 8 or 26 % of the teachers were male and 23 or 74 % were female. 10 or 32.3 % of them work in resource schools, 16 or 51.6 % work in attached classes and only 5 or 16.1 % of them work in regular classrooms. Teachers differed by their education background, where 11 or 35.5 % of them completed Higher Pedagogical School, 14 or 45.2% of them completed university and 6 or 19.4 of them completed master studies. The age limit of teachers was between 26 years – over 54 years of age. The age is expressed in age groups, with 6 or 19.4 % of them between 26-34 years of age, 4 or 12.9 % of them between 35-44 years of age, 11 or 35.5 % between 45- 54 years of age and 10 or 32.3 % of them over the age of 54.
Table 1 shows the data on teacher participants.

		N	*%*
Sex	M	8	25.8
	F	23	74.2
Education	HPS	11	35.5
	University	14	45.2
	Master's studies	6	19.4
Type of Institution	Resource school	10	32.3
	Attached classes	16	51.6
	Regular classrooms	5	16.1
Age	26-34	6	19.4
	35-45	4	12.9
	45-54	11	35.5
	Over 54	10	32.3
Number of students in classroom	Over 25 students	3	9.7
	16.25	2	6.5
	Up to 15 students	26	83.9

Instruments and data collection

The data collection instrument we used was the structured questionnaire containing a part of questions related to general data on demographics, sex, age, education background, the form of education in which they provide the service and the number of students in the class, and 21 multiple choice questions. The analysis of the reliability of the questionnaire provided the Croanbach Alfa value.522. The evaluation of the internal consistency across the gender of the teachers found the values for male teachers at .600. Although those values were at the borderline level, the obtained values allow us to continue with the analysis of the data collected through this questionnaire.

The data were collected at direct meetings with teachers, who were previously informed about the purpose of the study and agreed to participate voluntarily in the research. The questionnaire was completed individually by each participant and returned to the author of the study within one week. On teachers' request the questionnaire was anonymous.

The procedure of data analysis

The statistical package SPSS for Windows, version 19 was used to analyse the quantitative data collected. Descriptive and interferential analysis were used to identify teachers' perceptions of their work with special needs children, expressed in percentages. During the analysis a specific code was used for the identification of information for each teacher. Chi-square goodness-of-fit test was used to identify the differences among the received responses, while in order to identify the potential correlation between demographic variables and responses we used the Pearson's chi-square of association. For the differences among the groups the t-test and one-way ANOVA were used.

RESULTS

In general the results have shown differences of statistical significance in teachers' responses both in questions that mainly revealed their perception, and in questions that were related to their practices. On the other side, these results have shown no correlations of statistical significance across teachers' characteristics in all questions. The questions related to teachers' perceptions included the quality of the services provided by the institutions that work with special needs children; the influence of the teacher's approach to those children on their integration into the society; setting the climate in the classroom as a very important factor in teaching and learning and their opinion on how children felt in the classroom.

The following are the perceptions on the question - What service does the institution where you work provide to special needs children?: 10 teachers or 32.3 % rated those services as somewhat good, 14 teachers (45.2%) rated them good and only 7 of them or 22.6 % rated those services as very good. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test analysis showed that there were no differences of statistical significance in responses provided by teachers $\chi^2(2,N=31)=2.387$, $p=.303$). In order to see potential correlations across demographic characteristics of teachers, we carried out the Pearson's chi-square test of association. The analysis found no correlation of statistical significance in this perception with teachers' education background shown at values ($\chi^2(4, N=31)=3.086$, $p=.544$). In addition, no statistical correlation was found across the gender of teachers ($\chi^2(2,N=31)=.260, p=.878$), and the institution where they work ($\chi^2(4,N=31)=4.423$, $p=.352$), and their age ($\chi^2(6,N=31)=5.866$, $p = .438$).

In evaluating to what extent teachers' approach to special needs children affects their integration in the society, the analysis of the chi-square goodness-of-fit test showed that there were differences of statistical significance in responses provided by teachers $\chi^2(1,N=31)=3.9.3$, $p=.048$), where 10 of them (32.3 %) responded 'to some extent' and 21 or 67.7% responded 'a lot'. While the analysis of the Pearson's chi-square of association test showed no statistical correlation between responses and their education background with values $\chi^2(2,N=31)=3.810, p=.149$; the gender $\chi^2(1,N=31)=.260, p=.610$; the institutions where they work $\chi^2(2,N=31)=1.026, p=.599$; and their age $\chi^2(3,N=31)=2.329, p=.507$.

Teachers' perception of the classroom climate through the analysis of the chi-square goodness-of-fit test showed valid statistical differences in the responses provided by the teachers and expressed in values $\chi^2(2,N=31)=24.065$, $p=.000$. Namely, 2 teachers (6.5%) stated that the climate was not good; 23 of them (74.2%) stated that the climate was suitable and 6 teachers (19.4) qualified the climate as very good. Meanwhile, the analysis of the Pearson's chi-square of association test of the responses to this question, showed statistical

correlation neither with education background of the teachers $\chi^2(4,N=31)=2.091$, $p=.719$; nor with the gender $\chi^2(2,N=31)=2.956$, $p=.228$; nor with the type of institution where they work $\chi^2(4,N=31)=2.288$, $p=.683$ nor with the age of teachers $\chi^2(6,N=31)=9.183$, $p=.164$.

The questions related to daily practices in working with special needs children included questions about the forms of work, provision of professional support to teachers and textbooks used by the teachers. According to teachers, the form of work that was most used during the school year was the combination of forms, with 22 responses (71%). Group work was used by only teacher, frontal teaching was used by 2 teachers and individual work form was used by 6 teachers (19.4%). The analysis of the chi-square goodness-of-fit test showed differences of statistical significance among responses at values $\chi^2(3,N=31)=36.742$, $p=.000$. Meanwhile, the analysis of the Pearson's chi-square of association test showed no statistical correlation between the responses and the teachers' education background, at values $\chi^2(6,N=31)=5.973$, $p=.426$; the gender $\chi^2(3,N=31)=1.246$, $p=.742$; the institution where they work $\chi^2(6,N=31)=9.705$, $p=.138$; and the age $\chi^2(9,N=31)=14.791$, $p=.097$.

When asked about their methods of work, teachers provided responses which differed statistically among them, $\chi^2(3,N=31)=14.226$, $p=.000$. Their responses showed that only 5 teachers (16.1 %) used traditional methods of work, while 26 of them (83.9%) used modern methods of work. However, in these responses, too, the analysis of the Pearson's chi-square of association test showed no statistical correlation with their education background, at values $\chi^2(2,N=31)=5.319$, $p=.070$; with their gender $\chi^2(1,N=31)=.105$, $p=.746$; with the institution where they work $\chi^2(2,N=31)= 2.632$, $p=.268$; and their age $\chi^2(3,N=31)=3.380$, $p=.337$.

With regard to the provision of professional support by relevant specialists, which was considered by the teachers as a necessity, the responses received in this study showed that in their daily practice 25 of the teachers (80.6%) were not assisted by anyone, two teachers (6.5%) stated they were supported by an expert of the special education field, and in only one case (3.2 %) a teacher was assisted by a special pedagogue, and also in only three other cases (9.7 %) teachers were assisted by an assistant teacher. As expected, the differences in the responses were of statistical significance $\chi^2(3,N=31)=51.452$, $p=.000$, while the chi-square of association test showed no statistical correlation of these responses with their education background, at values $\chi^2(6,N=31)=2.870$, $p=.825$; with the gender $\chi^2(3,N=31)=4.015$, $p=.260$; with the institution where they work $\chi^2(6,N=31)= 5.448$, $p=.488$; and with their age $\chi^2(9,N=31)=8.028$, $p=.531$.

With regard to the selection of textbooks which teachers used in their classrooms, teachers gave different responses at the statistical value of $\chi^2(2,N=31)= 6.258$, $p=.044$. 15 of the teachers (48.4%) used general textbooks for all students, 12 or 38.7 % of teachers used modified textbooks, while textbooks adapted to each individual student were used by only 4 teachers (12.9 %). Chi-square of association test, in this case, as well, showed no statistical correlation of these responses with teachers' education background, at values $\chi^2(4,N=31)=1.424$, $p=.840$; with gender $\chi^2(2,N=31)=1.491$, $p=.474$; with the institution where they work $\chi^2(4,N=31)= 6.794$, $p=.147$; and with their age $\chi^2(6,N=31)=9.383$, $p=.153$.
The t-test for individual groups and one way ANOVA were carried out with all the variables included in this study, in order to find potential differences across demographic characteristics such as gender, education background, type of institution where they work, the number of students in the classroom, and their age. Of all analysis, only through one way ANOVA ($F(3,27)=3.453$, $p=.030$) were differences of statistical importance found in selecting textbooks between teachers of younger age (26-34 years of age), as opposed to

teachers of older age 45.54 years (p =.021) and over 54 years of age (p =.004). The Tykey test showed that younger teachers selected modified textbooks and textbooks that were suitable for each student, as opposed to teachers of older age who preferred textbooks that were general for all students. Also, significant differences were found in setting the classroom climate between teachers of different age ($F(3,27)= 3.093$, $p= .044$). The Tykey test found that younger teachers (26-34 years of age) provided lower values for classroom climate as suitable in comparison to teachers of age over 54 years (p =.031).

DISCUSSION

The results presented above showed the perceptions and some of the practices of teachers who work directly with special needs children. It is evident from the results that teachers have a rather positive perception of the inclusion of special needs children and of the importance of their work and their approach not only for the teaching process, but also for the integration of these children into the society. This perception was quite evident in teachers' responses regarding the classroom climate, where most of them stated that they tried to create a climate suitable for all the children in the classroom, regardless of the variety of children's demands, needs, interests and capabilities. And this climate cannot be achieved if teachers do not possess positive attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion.

From the teachers' perspective the quality of services provided needs visible improvements, and this perception is supported by a series of studies (Ware et al, 2009; Ofsted, 2006). Along the same line and equally supported by literature is the need teachers expressed for an increase in cooperation among teachers who work with special needs children and experts of professional services and teachers (Szwed, 2007; Pfeifer & Holtappels, 2008).

Meanwhile, the results show a variety of daily teaching practices, which sometimes are adapted and at other times not adapted to students' demands and needs. Such results indicate a need for developing broader research with teachers, ensuring the inclusion of a larger number of variables affecting the overall teaching process.

CONCLUSIONS

The work with special needs children is a challenge in itself. Dealing with a host of difficulties and specific situations, depending on equally specific needs of students in the classroom, requires teachers to have an oriented training in order for them to manage such situations in the best possible ways and to contribute to optimal learning and development of the students in the classroom. This study showed that our teachers are willing to work and enjoy working with special needs children in their classrooms, and that they are very aware of the fact that their approach towards these children positively affects not only their learning, but their social integration, as well.

However, it is worthwhile stating that not only teacher training enables efficient learning. Institutional support and professional support, in particular, represent a necessary requirement as stated by teachers. Careful organization of the needed quality trainings, both at local and central education level, would increase the opportunities for teachers to develop their capacities for working with these children. Also, the cooperation with experts of various fields and the sharing of materials, advice, practices and models of working with special needs children would have a positive influence on the quality of the educational work of teachers and would affect even more the learning process of special needs children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author gratefully acknowledges the participants in the study.

REFERENCES

Ainscow, M. (1997) Towards inclusive schooling. *British Journal of Special Education, 24* (1), 3-6.

Black-Hawkins, K., Florian, L.& Rouse, M. (2007) *Achievement and inclusion in schools. London*: Routledge.

Evans J. & Lunt I. (2002) Inclusive education: Are there limits? *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 17 (1), 1-14.

Forlin, C. (2001). Inclusion: Identifying potential stressors for regular class teachers. *Educational Research, 43* (3), 235-245.

Forlin, C., Loreman, T., Sharma, U. & Earle, C. (2009) 'Demographic differences in changing pre-service teachers' attitudes, sentiments and concerns about inclusive education', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13 (2), 195–209.

Idol, L. (2006) 'Toward inclusion of special education students in general education', *Remedial and Special Education, 27* (2), 77–94.

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) (2006). Inclusion: Does it Matter Where Pupils are Taught? (accessed on March 21st, 2013 at http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/ Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-allby/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Inclusion-does-it-matter-where-pupils-are-taught

Pfeifer, M. & Holtappels, H. G. (2008) 'Improving learning in all-day schools: results of a new teaching time model', *European Educational Research Journal*, 7 (2), 232–242.

Szwed, C. (2007) 'Reconsidering the role of the primary special educational needs co-ordinator: policy, practice and future priorities', *British Journal of Special Education*, 34 (2), 96–104.

UNESCO (2005) *Children out of school: Measuring exclusion from primary education*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

UNICEF (2000) Dakar Framework for Action: *Education for all: Meeting our collective commitments*. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf

Ware, J., Balfe, T., Butler, C., Day, T., Dupont, M., Harten, C., Farrell, A.M., McDaid R., O'Riordan, M., Prunty, M., Travers, J. (2009). *Research Report on the Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland*. Trim: NCSE.

Westling, D. L., Herzog, M. J., Cooper-Duffy, K., Prohn, K. & Ray, M. (2006) 'The teacher support program: a proposed resource for the special education profession and an initial validation', *Remedial and Special Education*, 27 (3), 136–147

World Health Organisation (2011). *World Report on Disability*. Malta: WHO