

## **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND CHALLENGES REGARDING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION**

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### **Abstract**

The inclusive education process is a priority for Albania, just like other developed countries. Teachers have an important role in the implementation of the inclusive education. A great impact on the success of this implementation have teachers acknowledges and attitudes. For this, it is needed that students that will be the prospective teachers have the basic information about diversity and about disability. The paper aims to reflect the great efforts regarding the improvement of the educational curricula of teacher preparation during the 1990', specifically in the University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi”, Albania. Nowadays our students that frequent the Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Class learn the module “Inclusive Education” in the first academic year. So, our teachers for primary classes, in general, have the proper training about inclusion, about abnormal behavior, about the main types of mental disorders, so they can identify them on pupils and are able to collaborate with the other teachers, with the parents, the psychologists and the other professionals of mental health in terms of prevention as identifying in time different cases, both in terms of careful treatment in their classes. The paper aims to collect opinions of students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, the Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes, first academic year, about the development of the module “inclusive education” in their educational curricula. For the realization of this study it is employed the surveying method and focus-group method. There are been developed semi structured interviews. The students participating in the survey are students of the Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes, first academic year. The contents of the interviews was thought in a way as to collect the opinions of these students concerning: a)students' perceptions about the importance of “Inclusive education” subject in general and their perceptions about the importance of this subject for their future profession, b)their information about inclusion and about inclusive education, c)the source of their information. There are given the appropriate conclusions.

**Key-words:** *inclusion, inclusive education, teacher preparation*

### **Introduction**

Globally as well as in Europe, there is a clear move towards inclusive practice and wide agreement on the key principles first encompassed in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO (1994)). Since that time, these principles have been reinforced by many conventions, declarations and recommendations at European and global levels including the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006) which makes explicit reference

to the importance of ensuring inclusive systems of education (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2010, pg.8).

Inclusive education refers to an academic system that allows special education students to become included in mainstream classes alongside their peers (cited from: [http://www.ehow.com/about\\_6803985\\_role-teachers-inclusive-classroom.html](http://www.ehow.com/about_6803985_role-teachers-inclusive-classroom.html)).

Inclusive education is not a static phenomenon. It has been developing in different ways and it continues to develop. The current tendency in the EU and the candidate countries is to develop a policy towards inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream schools, providing teachers with varying degrees of support in terms of supplementary staff, materials, in-service training and equipment (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2003, pg.7).

## **Theoretical Treatment**

The UNESCO (2008) definition states that inclusive education is: “an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination”(p. 3) (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2010, pg.8).

Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children (UNESCO, 2005, pg.13).

Teachers are the key to success in inclusion. Inclusion requires a large vision and specific competencies for all teachers. Now the teachers need to know that diversity is present in the classroom, and that they should attend to learners with a range of diverse needs (cited from <http://www.inclusive-education-in-action.org/iea/index.php?menuid=25&reporeid=247>).

Regarding the importance of the role of teachers, research indicates that teachers play a critical role in the implementation of inclusive education (e.g. European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2009; Engelbrecht, 2006; Savolainen, 2009 (cited from: <http://www.eera-ecer.de/ecer-programmes/conference/6/contribution/16816/>)).

Inclusion largely depends on teachers' attitudes towards pupils with special needs and on the resources available to them. In quite a number of studies, the attitude of teachers towards educating pupils with special needs has been put forward as a decisive factor in making schools more inclusive (Meijer C.J.W., 2001, *Inclusive Education and Effective Classroom Practices*, European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, Martin Noble Editorial/AESOP, pg.10).

The increasingly diverse mix of students in many schools and the need to pay more attention to the learning needs of individual pupils was noted in the European Parliament resolution on improving the quality of teacher education (23/09/2008) which stated that “the challenges faced by the teaching profession are increasing as educational environments become more complex and heterogeneous” (p. 2)” (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012, pg.13).

Studies in the social-cognitive field have shown that teacher's beliefs about, and the attitudes towards student diversity and heterogeneity play a major part when including all children into the regular education system (Semmel, Abernathy, Butera & Lesar, 1991 (cited from:

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Inclusive+education%3a+policies%2c+teachers%27+attitudes+and+perspectives.-a0179978526>).

More specifically, teachers' positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN could facilitate inclusion in a mainstream setting (e.g., Cook, 2001; Richards, 1999), since positive attitudes are closely related to motivation to work with and teach children with SEN. Teachers' motivation in this case is of utmost importance because inclusion demands time, organization, and cooperation with a pupil with SEN who is not customarily willing or able to participate in classroom activities (Avramidis et al., 2000). High motivation is, in turn, associated with better dynamics in the classroom, allowing thus both the child with SEN and other typically developing children in the classroom to adjust to each other's presence and to function more coherently (Efrosini K., Gojkovic D., Tsakiris V., 2007, pg.30).

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs are known to influence their teaching practices and management strategies in the classroom, and therefore to directly influence students' learning (Garvar-Pinhas & Schmelkin, 1989; Nader, 1984; Smith, 2000; Winter, 1995). In particular, a teacher's beliefs about the learning capacity of a student with disability may determine the extent to which the teacher is willing to make adjustments to teaching method, curriculum, or classroom organization, or indeed whether he or she even recognizes that some students in the class do have special needs (Fields, 1995; Salili, 1999; Westwood, 1995). It is now generally accepted that teachers who are required to integrate students with disabilities into their classes must feel confident in their own ability to cope with the situation, and must have some positive expectations about the students' learning potential (Forlin, 1998; Webster, 1999) (Yuen M., Westwood P., 2001, pg.72).

Benefits of inclusive education include an opportunity for special-needs students to learn team work skills while heightening their sense of belonging in the school community (cited from: [http://www.ehow.com/about\\_6803985\\_role-teachers-inclusive-classroom.html](http://www.ehow.com/about_6803985_role-teachers-inclusive-classroom.html)).

One of the most obvious advantages of inclusion is the fact that students with disabilities can be integrated socially with their peers. They can create long-lasting friendships that would not be otherwise possible, and these friendships can give them the skills to navigate social relationships later on in life. Students with disabilities can also benefit academically in an inclusion setting. In a well-designed inclusion classroom, however, the teacher uses inclusion strategies to help students succeed academically. Therefore, students encounter higher expectations – both from their peers and their teachers, as well as the positive academic role models of their non-disabled classmates (Keren Perles, 2012, cited from: <http://www.brighthubeducation.com/special-ed-inclusion-strategies/66128-advantages-and-benefits-of-inclusion/>).

Inclusive education constitutes a priority for our country. Today are making great efforts to integrate disabled pupils on the mainstream schools, although in this respect there is more work to do for realizing the inclusive education. It is very important the fact that the teachers have got the appropriate preparation about this. This is made possible thanks to the improvement of the educational curricula during the 1990'.

The subject "The Fundamentals of educational work with handicapped children" (elective subject) is introduced for the first time in the educational curricula for the years 1992-1995 and 1993-1996 in the 3-st academic year of the Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes at the University of Shkodra, in Albania. In the educational curricula for the years 1996-1999 this subject was named "Special Psychology". In the educational curricula for the years 1998-2002 the subject "Special Psychology" became compulsory teaching subject in the Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes. In the academic year 1996-1997 was established the Section that Prepares Kindergarten Teachers an the University of Shkodra. In the educational curricula for the years 1996-1999 were included these subjects about

disability: “Neuropediatri” (the 2-nd year), “Logopedi” (the 3-st year) and “The Fundamentals of educational work with handicapped children”(the 3-st year) and were compulsory teaching subjects. In the curriculum of the years 1997-2000 and 1998-2001 the subject “The Fundamentals of educational work with handicapped children” was named “Special Psychology” (*20 vjet Fakultet 1981-2001 Universiteti i Shkodrës ‘Luigj Gurakuqi’ Fakulteti i Ciklit të Ulët*, 2001, pg.49-51).

Nowadays our students that frequent the Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes learn the module “Inclusive Education” in the first academic year. So, our teachers for primary classes, in general, have the proper training about inclusion, about diversity, about abnormal behavior, about the main types of mental disorders, so they can identify them on pupils and are able to collaborate with the other teachers, with the parents, the psychologists and the other professionals of mental health in terms of prevention as identifying in time different cases, both in terms of careful treatment in their classes.

### **Methodology of preparation and development of this paper**

**Aims and objectives of the paper.** The main aims and objectives are :

- Getting opinions of students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes, first academic year, about the development of the module “inclusive education” in their educational curricula.
- Highlighting of the relevant reasons in relation to their opinions.

The research question is : “Do the students of Faculty of Educational Sciences, Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes, first academic year, consider the development of the module “Inclusive education” in their educational curricula as indispensable for their professional preparation?”.

**Sampling.** In the study, we had the participation of 84 students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes, first academic year. 4 students (4,8%) are male, 78 students (92,9%) are female, while 2 students (2,4%) haven’t given their gender. The students participating in the study live in different areas of northern Albania, in Shkodra district, in Lezha district, in Malësia e Madhe district, in Tropoja district, in Puka district, in Kukës district, in Laç district, in Mat district. The students’ residence is the city (40 students (47,6%)), or the village (44 students (52,4%)). 21 students (25%) are 18 years old, 49 students (58,3%) are 19 years old, 8 students (9,5%) are 20 years old, 3 students (3,6%) are 21 years old, 2 students (2,4%) are 22 years old and 1 student (1,2%) is 25 years old.

**Apparatus/Materials.** It is employed surveying method and focus-group method. There are been developed semi structured interviews and focus-groups. The students participating in the study are students of the Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes, first academic year. The contents of the interviews and focus-groups was thought in a way as to collect the opinions of these students concerning: a) students’ perceptions about the importance of “Inclusive education” subject in general, b) students’ perceptions about the importance of “Inclusive education” subject for their future profession, c) students’ knowledge about inclusion and about inclusive education, d) the source of students’ knowledge.

### **Findings of the study**

All the students appreciate the development of “Inclusive education” module. They appreciate the development of this subject because it contributes to their general culture and to their professional formation.

Regarding to their general formation, the students think that the development of this module is very important, because: a )it provides them with more knowledge, b)it impact the improvement of their attitude toward marginalized people, c)it provides them with indispensable knowledge for their role as future mothers.

*The illustration of students opinions about the importance of the development of “Inclusive education” module regarding to their general formation:*

We have more knowledge after the development of this subject (female, 19 years old, city residence).

This module treats topics that are very important for humanity and for social welfare (female, 19 years old, city residence).

As an individual I have more knowledge that previously I didn't know (female, 19 years old, city residence).

The development of this module helps us to be more sensitive toward marginalized people, helps us to understand them better and to support more them (female, 19 years old, city residence).

This module teaches us and helps us to eliminate all the forms of discrimination (female, 19 years old, city residence).

The development of this module is very important for me, as a future mother, because I will take care of my kids in order to prevent the possible problems of them and in order to impact on positive attitudes of my children toward the marginalized people (female, 19 years old, city residence).

*The illustration of students' opinions about the importance of the development of “Inclusive education” module regarding to their professional formation:*

This module is important because it helps us to know the pupils and their problems. This helps us to be more useful in teaching these pupils (18 years, female, village residence).

It is a very important subject because in the future, as a teacher, I will teach students with disabilities. So, I can teach them appropriately (19 years old, female, city residence).

Our profession as future teachers wouldn't be completed without this subject (19 years, female, village residence).

It contributes to my preparation as future teachers (19 years, female, village residence).

This module helps me to understand the pupils and to behave with them (19 years, female, village residence).

20 students (23, 8%) had knowledge about disability and about inclusion prior to the development of “Inclusive education” module, whereas 64 students (76, 2%) hadn't knowledge of this kind.

The students that assert that they had knowledge about diversity argue that they have received them from their high school schooling, from the books that they have read, from their parents, from the media (mainly from the television). The students, also, appreciate the internet as a potential source of obtaining their information. Some students have cousins with different kind of disabilities.

The students assert that it is necessary that knowledge about diversity should be taken prior to the university schooling. The students' opinions are that such knowledge should be taken gradually, in all the cycles of children schooling.

## **Conclusions**

Inclusive education constitutes a process that is present throughout the world. Its implementation depends very much on teachers' attitudes towards this process. These attitudes are influenced by the knowledge that teachers have with regard to inclusion and inclusive education. Inclusive education constitutes a priority for Albanian education system. In Albania, more specifically, in Shkodra University, as a result of the democratic changes of years 90' was enriched the educational curricula of Section that Prepares Teachers for Primary Classes. It was involved a new subject in order to give to the students information about diversity and about abnormal behavior. All the students appreciate the development of "Inclusive education" module. They appreciate the development of this subject because it contributes to their general culture and to their professional formation. They consider it as indispensable for their work in the future as teachers. The students assert that it is necessary that knowledge about diversity should be taken gradually, in all the cycles of children schooling.

## **Recommendations**

It is very important that the notions about inclusion process should be given prior to the university schooling, in the previous cycles of schooling. Likewise, it is necessary that the notions about disability should be given prior to the university schooling. So, all the adolescents will have more knowledge about inclusion process, about disability. On the other hand, their knowledge will affect their attitudes toward the inclusion process.

It is very important to be cited Wright's opinion, "The manner in which disability information is presented influences whether it promotes favorable or unfavorable attitudes. For example, information that highlights inadequacies or problems with coping tends to produce negative attitudes, while individualizing information reduces the effects of stereotypes and can promote more positive attitudes (Wright, 1988, cited from McCaughey T. (2009), pg.16-17).

So, our society will have more positive attitude toward people that were perceived as "diverse" and this will ameliorate the living without barriers of these people.

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