

Inclusive Education, Psychological Counseling and Students with Disabilities

Gordana Stankovska, Ruvejda Brahma & Zebide Ibraimi

Abstract

It is indeed a challenge to research otherness in the modern world, whereby “the other or the invisible one can be any one of us” (Petrov et al., 2004, p. 85). Only by seeing and discerning the other we can see and discern ourselves. Recognition, acceptance and inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular education system can only make us richer and more accomplished individuals. Inclusion is a process that is implemented in the Republic of North Macedonia, respecting the right of all children to equal inclusion in regular schools. It is a process of mutual respect for the diversity of each student and his needs, where the student is the center of attention, and the education system should cope with the challenges ahead of all students, in this context, ahead of students with special educational needs as well. They will need counseling in many areas of academic functioning compared to their non-disabled peers. Therefore, counseling interaction programs are a necessary part of inclusive education in supporting children with special educational needs and their families. Hence, the main aim of our paper is to represent the actual situation in Macedonian schools regarding the challenge of educational inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular school system. The research methods are based on document studies and case studies about changes in social and educational policies for students with disabilities and special educational needs who are included in primary and secondary education. Also presented are some psychological counseling programs and guidelines for teachers who work with these children and future directions for a proper inclusion system in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Keywords: disabled children, special educational needs, inclusion, psychological counseling, school counselors

Introduction

Human rights are rights or powers that belong to each person; they are universal moral rights that are to be distributed among all human beings. All human beings are entitled to their rights, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), and children need special and increased protection, care, safety, understanding and love in order to develop in a healthy way. Children have special rights, because of their vulnerability, such as the right to protection from exploitation and abuse, the right to be cared for and have a home, and the right to have a say in decisions which affect them.

In this regard, historically many children with disabilities were not visible. They lived in large institutions, away from their families and communities (Bulat et

al., 2017). Now, most children with disabilities live at home with their families in communities across the country. These children and their families are fully included in all aspects of the society and enjoy full citizenship (Nussbaum, 2007).

Approximately 10% of children in the Republic of North Macedonia face some kind of disability (UNICEF, 2019). Their equal functioning within the society requires elimination of all types of obstacles, including physical inaccessibility to institutions, greater inclusion in education, access to healthcare services, development and greater availability of appropriate support services and raising public awareness, which implies reducing discrimination and stigmatization. Acceptance and increased inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in the regular education system can only make us richer and more accomplished individuals (Ruijs & Peersma, 2009).

Children with developmental disabilities and special educational needs

Every child has his/her own characteristics, interests, abilities and needs. For this reason, we should always consider the different characteristics and pay special attention to each child. This particularly refers to children with developmental disabilities who have disorders of specific organ systems and/or reduction of specific functions, due to which they experience difficulties in the execution of certain activities. Usually, a disability is the result of complex interactions between the fundamental limitations that arise from the physical, intellectual and mental state of the person, as well as from the social and physical environment (Valentine, 2001).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities describes them as “persons who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (UN, 2006, p. 136).

Research and practice in special education show that children have special educational needs if they have a learning difficulty which calls for special provision to be made for them. Some children may have special educational needs for a relatively short time; they often have special educational needs directly through their education. So special educational needs mean, in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition (Bines & Lei, 2011).

Inclusive education – a possible solution

Inclusion is a process of coping and responding to the different needs of all students through the learning process, integration into the cultural environment and community and an increasingly reduced exclusion from the education system (Anaby

et al., 2013). It implies change and modification of the contents, approach, structure and strategy in the education system, with a common vision that includes all children of a certain age, and believes that the regular education system is responsible for educating all children equally.

Inclusive education implies that all children, regardless of their abilities, are included and accepted. Inclusive education pays special attention to the inclusion of children who may be marginalized, discriminated or excluded from the educational process (Efthymiou & Kington, 2017). Despite their potentials or weaknesses in some areas, they are included in the regular classes and are provided with appropriate conditions for learning, advancement and participation in school life.

Every child with special educational needs has the right to be educated with children of the same age, who have no difficulties, and to have access to the general educational program. Inclusive education allows children with special educational needs to attend the nearest schools just like other children, and live with their families, which is particularly important for their development (Punch, 2006).

The need of counseling students with special educational needs

School counselors encourage and support the academic, career, and social/emotional development of all students through school counseling programs (Baker & Gerler, 2008). They are committed to helping all students realize their potential and meet or exceed academic standards with consideration for both the strengths and challenges resulting from disabilities and their special needs. Also, they provide direct or indirect services to students in the least restrictive environment (as determined by each student's individualized education plan – IEP) and in an inclusive setting when possible (Hall, 2015).

The school counselor takes an active role in student achievement and postsecondary planning by providing school counseling programs for all students. As a part of this program, school counselors advocate for students with special needs, encourage family involvement in their child's education and collaborate with other educational professionals to promote academic achievement, social/emotional wellness and college/career readiness for all (UNICEF, 2017).

Teachers and counselors need to use a variety of strategies during lessons and counseling sessions. The implementation of inclusive education requires innovating strategies by which students are evaluated. It will be necessary to adapt testing educational instruments to accommodate the special needs of students with disabilities (Singhal, 2015). This will need to be done without lowering the quality of the assessment. Hence the primary function of the school counselors is to assess referred students to determine their personal and academic problems.

Furthermore, counselors can help teachers promote social adjustment for these students by providing guidance in incorporating peer modeling, self-resilience, age-appropriate social behavior and friendship-making skills into classroom activities

(Raby, 2008). They can promote tolerance of differences in peers without disabilities through social skill programs, integrated counseling groups, and classroom modeling and discussion (Council of Europe, 2006). Counselors can offer individual and group counseling focusing on self-esteem, self-expression and behavioral problems. In addition, counselors can help parents understand and encourage their child's or adolescent's abilities. Parents may require to be taught how to assist their child's basic academic skills. Parent training is a necessary part of programs for families with children with special educational needs (Ainscow, 2013).

The right of children with disabilities to inclusive education in the Republic of North Macedonia

The changes in the education of children with developmental disabilities are an integral part of the reforms of the education system in our country implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia. Thereby, vast support to the reforms in the education of children with developmental disabilities is provided by pilot projects of inclusive education in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science, which are implemented with the assistance of domestic and foreign non-governmental organizations (UNICEF, UNESCO, Save the Children, etc.). The mentioned pilot projects cover a number of kindergartens and primary schools with the main goal of developing and testing innovative models of education and protection of children with disabilities. The experiences gained during their implementation play a role when considering the advantages and disadvantages of the tested models; therefore they are guidelines for undertaking further activities and larger projects in the field of inclusive education. Of the numerous pilot projects of exclusive education that have been implemented in our country, we will mention the following:

- *Inclusion of children with special needs in regular schools* (implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science in the period 2000-2006) (OECD, 2006).
- *Cooperation to Inclusion* (implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science and UNICEF in the period 2010/11 to 2016/17) (UNICEF, 2017).
- *Education for All* (implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science and UNESCO in the period 2017/18 to 2019/22) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017).

Although the indicated pilot projects do not have the same contents and activities, they are very similar in terms of the general principle and the initial goals. The point of departure of all pilot projects is the right of every child to a quality education in accordance with the child's abilities and capabilities, therefore the focus is on changing the school, rather than changing the child. In all projects, the emphasis is put on the application of the individual approach to teaching, discovering the preserved potentials of the child and making individual educational plans for children with developmental disabilities. The evaluation of the mentioned pilot

projects in North Macedonia shows encouraging results. The data show that the organized activities, by providing the necessary support in kindergartens and schools, create conditions for quality inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular groups in kindergarten and in regular schools. Hence, inclusive education is gradually being introduced in certain primary schools throughout the country. In addition, training on inclusive education has also been introduced in all schools throughout the country, and investments are constantly being made in creating resources, manuals and guidelines for inclusive education, which will be used for improving the access and participation of all children in the teaching and learning process, and will increase their success.

Also, inclusion was an integral part of the development of the Education Strategy 2018-2025 in the context of lifelong learning and the Action Plan, which had been adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science and the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (Ministry of Education and Science, 2018).

Our experience

This study is a part of a project called *Inclusive education and support of children with developmental disabilities* implemented by the expert team of the Association of Citizens for Psychological and Speech Therapy “Center Savant” Skopje with the support of the Municipality of the City of Skopje. The main goal of this study was to explore the reality of inclusive education of students with disabilities in mainstream secondary schools in Skopje, from the perspectives of secondary school teachers, students without disabilities and parents of children with disabilities. As an outcome of the completed project activities in 2019, significant effects were concluded which created the base for exploration of possibilities to extend the network with new project schools. To that end, in order to determine the attitudes, knowledge and experience of teachers, peers and parents, in the first four project schools in regard to the inclusive practice, research was carried out in the period from September to December 2019. A total number of 246 respondents were included in the research, of which: 40 parents, 89 teachers, professionals and counselors from secondary schools and 117 students from first to fourth year of secondary education within the same schools.

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research design was chosen. In fact, a qualitative approach was adopted since it provides the best support aimed at gaining greater understanding of inclusive education (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010), from the perspectives and experiences of those involved, namely teachers, peers and parents of children with disabilities. A combination of sampling techniques was used for this study as advised by Cologon (2016). Convenience sampling was used as the researchers selected four local schools together with the representative from the Department for Education from the City of Skopje. Purposive technique was also employed since the researchers wanted to gain insights from teachers who were in mainstream secondary schools and had experience in working with children with

special needs within their mainstream class groups. The study also required insights from parents who had a child with special educational needs who was attending a mainstream school setting. The third groups were the students without disabilities who learned together with their peers who had developmental difficulties such as autistic spectrum disorder, Downs syndrome, learning difficulties, cerebral palsy.

In order to invite candidates to take part in the study, contact was established initially with the principal or the vice principal of the school. By using a network sampling technique, they were asked to convey the information and the invitation to participate to the members of the teaching staff, peers and parents of students with special educational needs attending the school. The parents were contacted by the school principals and teachers. Confidentiality and anonymity of children, family and school was reiterated to all participants at this point. The contact with participants was held at the school premises during school hours. At this time the ethical status of the study was explained to the participants, plus clear information about the study was given. The researchers communicated openly and honestly with all participants in this study. All information – written and recorded – was stored securely, whereby access was available only to the researchers. Contact details for the researchers were also included for any resulting queries.

The research included three modules of work.

Module 1. Workshops with students without disabilities

The main purpose of these workshops was to educate students on accepting and supporting their peers with some form of disabilities, but at the same time to teach them how to reduce their prejudice towards their peers. During the workshops, different forms of activities involving the students were organized: role plays, discussions, films and competitions. For example, secondary school students from 16 to 18 years of age spent 5 days undertaking photography activities with a camera. Students with disabilities were paired with their non-disabled peers. Together they shared the photos and conversed. This type of activity provided them with the opportunity to learn or develop their educational skills, but above all, it contributed to breaking down barriers between children with and without disabilities. The results demonstrated how positive attitudes and friendships can grow within a short time by using a very simple, but a powerful tool – a camera. The research has very effectively promoted a message that all children can and must be educated together.

Module 2. Work with parents

The work with parents was focused on training, support, knowledge, communication skills and legal advice. After this activity, the parents acquire a positive experience of the abilities of their child and develop a partnership which provides support and encouragement to parents in their effort to do as much as possible for their children. We found that the parents were very satisfied with their children's experience of mainstream education, for example:

We always considered the other children as well ... so we had to learn how to adjust over the years and think about what was best, not just what we wanted for her, but what was best for everybody. I really wanted my girl to go to a mainstream school. I think we all have the idea of the school we would like our kids to attend. (Parent of an autistic child)

Also, the participants identified social learning and social awareness as positive aspects of inclusive education settings. It is not only children with disabilities who have a social benefit, this applies for all children at school.

Since he started school, he has been spending more time with his peers than with his family. So, they are his educators; they are his everything; they are his world, and he is not the only child with a disability in the school, so he himself would be helping them. (Parent of a child with cerebral palsy)

Regarding the inclusive processes, the views of the parents are divided, depending on their personal experiences, the degree of disability their child has and whether the society has accepted their child or not. Still, some parents are not satisfied with the inclusive education and they believe that there is not any real inclusion in the country and that it all depends on the parents and their means.

Module 3. Training and support for teachers

No single change in the educational process can become embedded in practice without the teacher, because the teacher is and remains the key factor in the implementation of the educational process. Teachers are the ones who observe progress. According to this, the researchers organize training for teachers, psychologists and officials about inclusive education issues. Participants were invited to share their views and experiences on various themes, related to inclusion in education. During these activities teachers and parents should share the same view of what the term inclusive means, express positive attitudes concerning the acceptance of children with special educational needs in regular school by their schoolmates and positive attitudes concerning the need of additional assistance by a special needs assistant within the framework of inclusive practice. Also, most teachers were determined to design an individual educational program (IEP) as one of the forms for additional necessary assistance. From the discussion on children's social interaction, an emphasis on the caring nature exhibited by secondary school students towards pupils with special educational needs became evident.

He would be very well looked after in the class and they would include him as much as possible... But for him, you know, whether he would consider any of them as his 'real' friends, I do not know if he would. But yet he really enjoys being with them... (Teacher of a student with Downs syndrome)

Although teacher training courses have more recently incorporated modules on inclusion in education and students can avail placement practice in special needs settings, we found that teachers feel it is not enough to prepare them for the needs of all children attending mainstream education. The results indicated that 60% of the

teachers from the secondary schools had no training or experience in working with students with special educational needs, but 90% of them believed that every teacher would receive training in order to work better with these children. It was the same with the school counselors who were part of this project. School counselors need to use individual approaches to meet the individual learning needs of each student.

Teachers and counselors need confirming education (training, access to literature, workshops, and instruments). This helps them overcome negative, individual medical model-based perceptions and attitudes. Thus, they need to acquire skills for supporting students and establishing collaboration with parents. In this regard, training content related to human rights, the social model of inclusion, defining inclusive education, the twin-track approach, learning styles and individual planning really help. The school inclusion team uses this training content adapted to our context.

The participation in this inclusive education project encouraged us to reconsider school challenges in our country. Our participation in the last training module was a new stimulus to focus on the current inclusive processes and the school's future potential. According to this, we share this case study as an example of good practice for creating conditions that enable students with disabilities to enroll and successfully progress in an inclusive school.

Case study: A 16-year-old girl with Down syndrome

The student Lilly had intellectual impairments. The girl had developed during her first year of life, but problems emerged (when she was at the age of 17 months). The parents noticed an attention deficit; she did not respond to her name and had speech difficulties. During her early childhood, the girl received speech therapy three times a week and worked individually with a special educator. Her parents followed her progress, because at the age of 7 the little girl could count to 10, she knew relations, colors, shapes and letters. The speech therapist and the special educator together decided that she had abilities, needs and potentials to be in educational settings together with her peers in a local mainstream primary school. Here her teachers helped and encouraged her to play with other children. An education inclusion team together with the teacher and the parents made an individual educational plan (IEP). An IEP was developed, which specified learning goals for Lilly that matched her abilities and identified needs. The following instructional methods/strategies have been used with Lilly:

- Individualized approach;
- Working in pairs and a small group;
- Play, observation, showing images, applications, objects, toys, illustrative method, dialogue, practical work;
- Development of individual instructional booklets for educational purpose;
- Use of teaching aids, educational software, practical didactical tools;
- Psychological support and counseling.

Apart from having a good achievement level according to her abilities and the educational goals set out in the IEP, Lilly was included in all activities of the school community (school performances, exhibitions, after-school activities, etc.).

Now Lilly is in first grade of secondary school and she still needs support, because the new environment and greater mobility in the classroom still upset her, but her new teachers helped and encouraged her to feel better amongst between her new peers. In fact, the teachers were a part of Module 3 and they explained to us their plan of Lilly's future education. A new action plan would be made for her, by the school inclusion teams and counselor. This includes organizing meetings to exchange views and experiences among teachers who teach such those students, providing individual support, understanding her socio/emotional status, because she is in period of adolescence and taking action for improvement, etc. The monitoring of the implementation of the IEP shows that she is mostly achieving her goals, although if her parents were more fully engaged in the process, the results could be even better. Lilly has an opportunity to further develop as a result the implementation requirements of inclusive education. She hopes to go to college and study art.

Up until now, her inclusion in mainstream school has been extremely positive, for all concerned. Lilly is happy. Her parents are happy. The school team is happy.

Conclusion and recommendations

Every child is special, talented and prone to success in some field. Every child needs to play, learn and socialize with the children. Every child has a right to participate in a regular kindergarten or school according to their pace (Milsom, 2007; Subramanian, 2003). This is especially important to children with disabilities, because school settings can help them learn more about themselves, the others and the world. The world is a big place with lots of opportunities!

On the basis of our findings and lessons learned from all of the training modules on inclusive education, we would give the following recommendations:

- providing school counseling curriculum lessons, individual and/or group counseling to students with special needs within the scope of the school counseling program;
- encouraging family involvement in the educational process;
- consulting and collaborating with staff and families to understand the special needs of a student and understanding the adaptations and modifications needed to assist the student;
- advocating for students with special needs in the school and in the community;
- getting the necessary training and supervision needed to effectively counsel persons with disabilities.

Finally, continuous inclusive process across the whole school, through connecting and networking activities based on the principle: “you can teach and you can learn”.

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Corresponding author affiliation

Prof. Dr. Gordana Stankovska, University of Tetova, Republic of North Macedonia

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