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INCLUSION IN THE KINDERGARTEN (SITUATION AND CHALLENGES)

Abstract

The paper researches the opinions and views of educators about the situation with inclusive education in kindergartens. Through online anonymous survey conducted in August 2022, we observed the opinions and views of the educators from kindergartens in Macedonia. We focused the research on the following three aspects: educators' awareness of children with special educational needs, cooperation and way of working, and attitudes and opinions of educators regarding inclusion in kindergartens. Since educators are the basis of the inclusive process in kindergartens, it was significant to study their views, which are important and a prerequisite for the realization of inclusion in preschool institutions. With the conducted research, we tried to see how much the educators' attitudes have changed towards the inclusion of children with SEN in kindergartens compared to the same research that was carried out in 2014

Keywords: *Inclusive groups, educators' preparedness, weaknesses, improvement of the situation.*

1. Introduction

Early childhood development is a critically important period for the formation of the child's personality. In the world, especially in recent years, a body of knowledge has been created in areas such as psychology, neuroscience, epigenetics and other disciplines, which highlights the essential importance of the period between three and five years of age for the overall development of the child. It is precisely this period, when the brain develops the most, that is crucial for the cognitive and non-cognitive abilities that the child will acquire (УНИЦЕФ, 2018). Preschool institutions, as part of the educational system, have the task of taking care of children of preschool age and educationally influencing the development of children. At the same time, they have the task of providing every child with an active and equal participation in the educational system. In order to participate equally in the educational process, children with disabilities have the right to individual support and an individualized approach. Preschool institutions are places that represent the basis for implementing inclusion, and educators are the key factors in implementing the inclusive process. In addition to their professional training, which they receive during their initial education, the knowledge, skills, competencies, empathy and feeling and love for working with children, the attitude towards inclusion is important for the quality performance of the inclusive process, which is also key to working with children. with SEN.

2. The role of the educator

Formal education is only the beginning of an educator's professional identity. The quality of the educator's professional actions is determined not only by the possession of professional knowledge and competencies, but also by the professional convictions that encourage or prevent the further development of the educator's competencies (Domović, 2011 prema Bouillet i sur., 2017, in Jerković, 2021).

Educators are only one of the participants in the inclusive process, but their role is of great importance in achieving it. The overall educational work relies on the ability and motivation of

educators who are highly sensitized to work with children. In order to be able to successfully perform their daily work, educators must be professionally prepared, possess pedagogical, psychological and didactic-methodical knowledge on how to design and implement educational work. At the same time, it is necessary for them to possess creativity, democracy, empathy, love and respect for children and children's rights. (Lučić, 2000, according to Jerković, 2021).

The quality of the inclusive process also depends on the competences of the educator. Competencies are the ability to put what has been learned into practice. Bouillet (2011 Kujundžić, 2021) according to the standards of Council for Exceptional Children (2000) states that there are 88 competencies of inclusive educators, from which it singles out 25 knowledge, skills and abilities that educators should use. For the successful implementation of the inclusion process, it is important for educators to see children's strengths. The role of the educator is to encourage children's development through play and activities, to prepare a stimulating environment using various means such as dolls, maps of feelings, music, literature.

Miloš (2015 according to Damjanić, 2018) states that the educator in objectively similar circumstances provides a different quality of upbringing and education. In that sense, it can be said that the very success of inclusion depends on the educator himself, and not only on the material and spatial conditions.

A prerequisite for implementing a quality inclusive process is the educator's positive attitude towards inclusion. The educators' attitudes are influenced by their age, the level of knowledge towards inclusion, the difficulties the child has, the type and severity of the child's difficulties, the support they receive from the professional service, as well as from the local community, the additional professional training they receive during their work (Sari, 2007, according to Sari i sur., 2009). Since attitudes are not innate, but acquired, it is important to work on developing positive attitudes by influencing the previously mentioned factors.

3. Situation in the Republic of North Macedonia

In the country, preschool education is carried out in preschool institutions, that is, kindergartens. Kindergartens during the reception, care and upbringing of children are obliged to provide a minimum standard for each child under equal conditions without the presence of any form of discrimination. The need in these institutions, and in the entire educational system in general, is to provide conditions to develop the maximum potential of each child. (УНИЦЕФ, 2018)

Respecting the principle of education for all, the Republic of North Macedonia is firmly determined to follow the recommendations of international factors to create a "world tailored to the child", with the intention of providing quality education for all children, including children with special educational needs. (Хасипи et al, 2019).

The Republic of North Macedonia is a signatory to the key international documents on which the concept of educational inclusion is based. Certain articles from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as from other documents and conventions that refer to the rights of children with special educational needs, have been integrated, i.e. translated into articles from the Law on Primary Education (RNM Official Gazette, 2019) and aim to regulate inclusive education (Бошковска и др., 2018).

The upbringing and education of children with developmental disabilities from pre-school age in our country is carried out through two programs that are interconnected and synchronized:

- educational program - the subject of which is the upbringing and education of children with developmental disabilities, and it is based on the program of regular pre-school education, but it is modified according to the possibilities and needs of children with developmental disabilities.
- rehabilitation programs - which are implemented to prevent, reduce or remove disabilities that limit the overall development of the personality. It is a system of procedures and special methods that influence personality development. This program affects, first of all, the psychomotor structure of these children and thus increases the possibility for their further development.

Educational and rehabilitation programs are implemented in parallel, synchronized and correlative through a single rehabilitation process. The rehabilitation program is most often implemented outside of kindergartens in the space and conditions that correspond to the needs and possibilities of the child, if there are no suitable conditions for implementing the same in kindergartens (Програма за рано учење и развој за деца со пречки во развојот, 2015).

At the same time, it is important to mention that the role of the professional service and the inclusive team must not be neglected, which are of particular importance for the development of inclusive education (in monitoring, progressing, adapting, learning and communication, as well as support for educators, children and parents. (Хасипи и др, 2019).

According to the Child Protection Act (2013) professionals who perform professional work in the care and education of children from pre-school age are: educators, caregivers, professional workers (pedagogue, psychologist, social worker, defectologist/special educator and rehabilitator, speech therapist, doctor of medicine and doctor dentistry) and professional collaborators (music pedagogue, art pedagogue, physical education pedagogue, foreign language and literature professor, senior nurse and social worker). The successful inclusion of children with special needs cannot be reduced only to the hard work and dedication of the educator. All the previously mentioned and engaged professionals in the kindergarten have an important role and a great meaning in the process of successful inclusion of children with special needs. In this process, continuous cooperation between all involved persons in the kindergarten is inevitable (Sivevska and Bocvarova, 2014)

4. Methodology

The subject of this research was to determine the attitudes and experiences of educators about working with children with SEN ¹. Since educators are the basis of the inclusive process in kindergartens, it was significant to study their views, which are important and a prerequisite for the realization of inclusion in preschool institutions.

We determined this situation through the data obtained from the educators in kindergartens in Macedonia. The research was conducted online in August/September 2022, on a sample of 98 educators from the kindergartens in Macedonia.

The purpose of the research derives from the previously defined subject, and refers to determining the state of inclusion of children with SEN in regular groups in preschool institutions.

For research purposes, we used an electronic questionnaire for educators. In addition to the basic data (age, work experience, educational group, number of children in the group), the questionnaire contains questions related to the awareness of educators about the characteristics of children with special educational needs, the level of cooperation of educators with professional services and with the parents of children with special educational needs, as well as the cooperation and attitude of other children towards these children.

The obtained data were analyzed and presented using descriptive statistics (frequencies (f), percentages (%)) using the statistical program SPSS 19.00.

5. Results and discussion

The survey included 98 educators randomly selected. 5 (five) kindergartens located in Eastern Macedonia are covered. Educators who work with all age groups (small, medium and large) are equally covered in percentage. Regarding the age of the educators, it can be noted (Chart 1), that the kindergartens have hired a large percentage of older educators (60% educators aged 41-50), 17% aged 31-40, and the rest are over 51.

And as for work experience (Chart 2), the sample includes educators with 11-15 years of work experience (36%), 33% with 6-10 years of experience, 23% with up to 5 years of experience and the rest of educators with over 20 years of work experience in a children's institution.

¹ In this paper, we focused only on a part of children with SEN, and that on children with disabilities in physical or mental development, and it is precisely these children that we mean when we use the term "children with special educational needs".

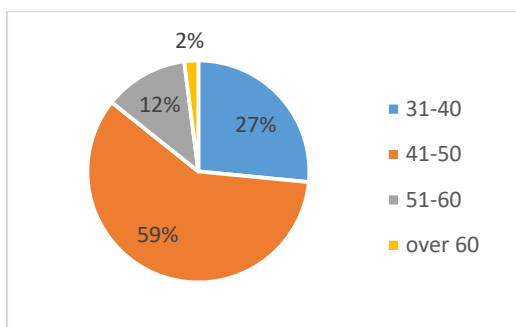


Chart no. 1: Sample of educators according to age

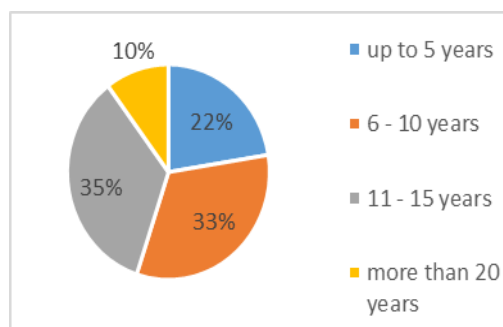


Chart no. 2: Sample of educators according to work experience

A large part (86%) of the surveyed educators stated that they have experience in working with children with SEN, which is a good basis for us to obtain valid data based on their knowledge and practice in working with this category of children in kindergartens. Compared to the 2014 survey, it is evident that there is an increase in the percentage (67.39%) of the surveyed educators who have experience working with children with special educational needs (Bocvarova, Sivevska, 2014).

For a better overview of the obtained results, the questions were structured in three units: 1) Information and awareness of the educators, 2) Cooperation and way of working; and 3) Attitudes and opinions of educators regarding inclusion in kindergartens

5.1 Educators' awareness and information of children with SEN

Recognizing children with SEN is one of the first steps for their further appropriate treatment, both by educators and other professional services working in the kindergarten. Parents and educators are usually the first to recognize symptoms in a child. The correct and timely recognition and identification of these children is necessary in order to ensure faster appropriate treatment in the kindergarten, which would enable their correct psycho-physical development, and further for their inclusion in the school and the following levels of education.

Kindergarten is the first stage of organized upbringing and education, a place where the process of inclusion of children in the educational system begins, and the quality of inclusion depends on the participants in the process of inclusion itself, where the main emphasis is placed on educators as the bearers of a quality inclusive process. The role of the educator in that inclusive process is crucial, and it depends on his professional personality, knowledge, skills, competencies he possesses, as well as on human qualities such as empathy, sensitivity in working with children and love for children. In their daily work and quality implementation of inclusion in practice, it is important that educators have a positive attitude towards inclusion.

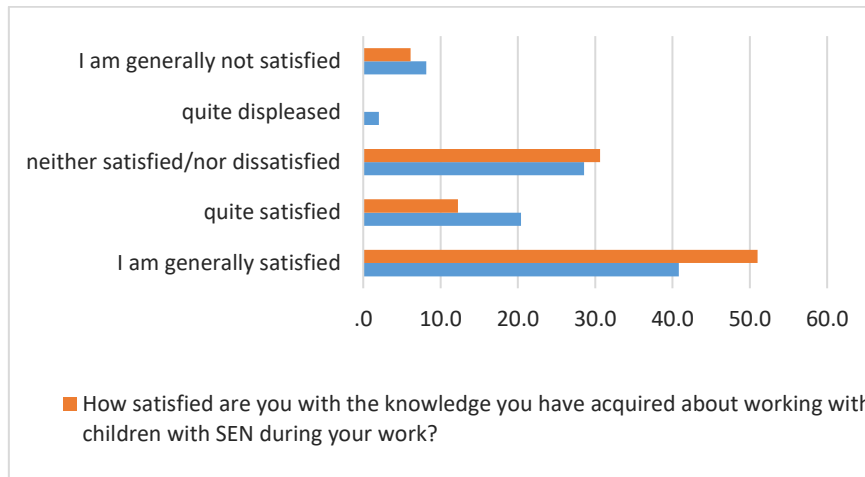
Over time, public awareness of the importance and need for the inclusion of children with SEN in regular education grows, and with that changes the attitudes and competencies that educators acquire during their initial education and, of course, supplement and improve through their daily practice. Hence the purpose of our research. Namely, with the conducted research, we tried to see how much the educators' attitudes have changed towards the inclusion of children with SEN in kindergartens compared to the same research that was carried out in 2014 (Bocvarova, Sivevska, 2014).

In recent years, significant changes have been made in the study programs of the faculties that train educational staff, with a change in the curriculum that includes knowledge and skills that strengthen the involvement of inclusive teaching. We tried to check the opinion of educators about: How satisfied are you with the knowledge you have acquired about working with children with SEN during your studies? The answers show that a large part of the educators (41%) are generally satisfied, and 21% are quite satisfied with the acquired knowledge during their initial education. Given that a larger percentage are older educators, we do not have the opportunity to see the impact of the new faculty programs on educators.

In addition to theoretical knowledge, the knowledge and skills gained through practical teaching are also important, so next the educators were asked: How satisfied are you with the knowledge you have acquired about working with children with SEN during your work? And to this question, a large

percentage (51%) answered that they are mostly satisfied, and there is also a part of 31% who answered that they are neither satisfied/nor dissatisfied (Chart 3).

Compared to the results of the previous research, we notice progress regarding this issue. Namely, earlier the answers of the educators showed their weak readiness to work with these children, due to the fact that half of the educators did not give an answer to this question, and the rest of the educators who gave an answer point out that some of their knowledge comes from a seminar or lecture that they have attended , and for others, their knowledge is from one or two subjects that they have studied at university.



Graph no. 3: *Educators' opinion about the knowledge they have acquired for working with children with SEN during their studies and during their work*

Regarding the source of knowledge from which they obtained information about children with SEN, educators were offered several statements with the possibility of multiple answers between them. The results we obtained show that the educators receive most of the information through seminars, lectures, workshops, then the professional collaborators in the kindergarten, then the electronic media, and of course the children's parents themselves are listed as a valuable source. Almost the same answers were received from the sample of respondents who were included in the survey conducted in 2014.

From the results, it can be easily seen that nowadays a powerful medium from which information is drawn on every topic, and in this particular case, awareness of the problems of children with SEN and work with them, is the electronic medium, where, in addition to the parties offering expert advice help, there are also pages, forums where information is exchanged about the problems faced by these people and their families. In addition to the electronic medium, there are also lectures and seminars organized with this goal, informing and bringing knowledge about children with special educational needs to the educators themselves.

While the fact that a smaller part of them read professional literature about this problem is worrying. And this is correlated to the previous one, to the power and availability of information through electronic media to everyone and at any time, as well as the possibility to quickly exchange information about the relevant issue.

5.2 Cooperation and way of work

Recognition and identification of children with SEN is the first step in working with them, but it is often difficult due to the lack of unified system procedures for early detection and intervention. On the other hand, the process is made more difficult by the lack of education of the parents and the lack of support from appropriate services, and the direction of action that they need to accept and adequately react to the information that their child has a disability, as well as the incompleteness of the professional services and the unpreparedness of the educational and nursing staff for working with children with disabilities.

At the moment, when the research was carried out, 55% of the educators stated that they currently have children with SEN in their group. This large percentage of educators who have work experience

with children with special educational needs, allows us to discover numerous other issues, including the cooperation of educator - professional services; educator – parent; child by child and to see the good and weak sides in the previous work and experience of the educators with these children.

Regarding the question How were children with SEN recognized and identified in your group? We got equal answers (33%) to the statements that *they recognized and identified them* by themselves and that it was done *together with the professional services*. 25% answered that *they were already recognized and identified when enrolling in kindergarten*. This lead us to the conclusion that the competencies they receive during their studies are the basis for being able to successfully recognize these children, and of course we must emphasize the importance of the mutual cooperation that exists with the professional services in relation to this issue. The obtained data are almost the same as those from the previous research, where the educators point out that children with SEN in their groups were recognized and identified already at the enrollment in the kindergarten. The remaining percentage of educators emphasize that the recognition and identification of this group of children was carried out later by the educator and in cooperation with professional services.

The educators, independently or together with the professional team in the kindergarten, know how to recognize these children upon entering the kindergarten, but the problem arises when the parents (and there are a large number) deny that the children had difficulties and do not bring documentation about the difficulties the child has . Hence, the opportunity to objectively see the situation regarding the presence of children with SEN in preschool institutions is reduced, because the official data of the institutions that monitor the work in kindergartens is based only on figures for children who have documentation of disability.

This is also confirmed by the following question: *In the process of working with these children, have you independently asked for help from the professional services (pedagogue, psychologist, special education teacher, social worker?)*, where a high 94% of the educators answered in the affirmative.

Regarding the satisfaction with the help they have received from the professional services (pedagogue, psychologist, special education teacher, speech therapist) in the kindergarten in relation to children with SEN? most of them have a positive attitude, 49% answered that they are *mostly satisfied*, while 36% have an uncertain attitude: *neither satisfied/ nor dissatisfied*.

For successful recognition, identification and further treatment of children with SEN in kindergartens, a team of professional collaborators is necessary, where each of them will help the process with their professionalism. For this purpose, we asked the educators for their opinion: *In your opinion, which of the team of professional collaborators is needed to strengthen the work with children with SEN in your kindergarten?* The received answers indicate that most of them answered that they need a special education teacher, then a speech therapist, and then the rest of the professional associates: a teacher and a psychologist. The answers are expected because most of the kindergartens in our country do not have the entire team of professional services in the kindergartens, there is a special lack of speech therapists and educational rehabilitators, as professionals who are most closely related to working with children with SEN. in kindergartens

As for the cooperation of other children in the group with children with special needs, more than half of the educators (63%) have experience of *self-initiated cooperation, acceptance and helping*. In the remaining percentage (29%) of educators, children with SEN are accepted by other children in the group only on the *initiative and effort of the educator*, a small percentage (2%) *do not even accept these children at all*, mock and ridicule them . Compared to the previous research, we have a slight improvement in this question. Which leads us to the conclusion that the awareness of inclusion and acceptance of these children among their peers is not yet sufficiently developed.

A large part of educators who have work experience with children with special needs (78%) are of the opinion that the inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular groups *makes it difficult for them to carry out daily educational activities* (Chart 5). Probably because of this, a large part of educators (86%) do not create a separate individual educational plan for each child with SEN, but work according to the same plan and program as with the other children in the group (Chart no. 4).

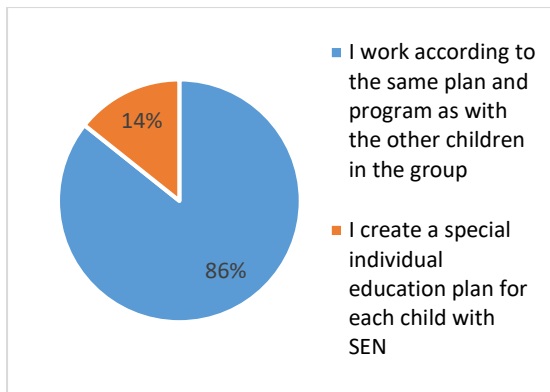


Chart no. 4: In working with these children:

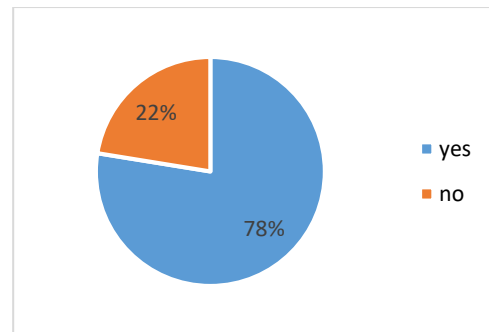


Chart no.5: Does working with these children make it difficult for you to carry out your daily educational activity?

5.3 Attitudes and opinions of educators regarding inclusion in kindergartens

Attitudes are learned, acquired through learning and represent a basic thought and foundation for understanding human behavior (Sunko, 2008: 384). Educators have a great responsibility when it comes to working with children with SEN, so their views are important for a quality inclusive process. Of course, for successful inclusion, an important prerequisite is not only the positive attitudes of the educators, but also of the other participants in the inclusive process.. Since they are not innate, but acquired, it is important to work on the development of positive attitudes influencing all the mentioned factors in this process.

A large part of the educators, in our sample, to the question *State, which, in your opinion, are the most adequate opportunities for upbringing and education of children with SEN?* in the largest percentage (52) answered that it should be *in special groups in regular kindergartens*, for a smaller part (33%) that it should be *in regular groups*. And there are also (15%) who think that these children should be in *special specialized facilities just for them* (Chart no 6).

Regarding their views on the benefits of the inclusion of these children in regular groups, they state: a child with SEN is involved in social life (37%), the child with SEN develops his potentials (23%) and equally each 20% stated that: a humane and empathic attitude towards other children develops and the attitudes of the environment change towards children with SEN (Chart no. 7).

Chart no. 6: Indicate what, in your opinion, are the most adequate opportunities for upbringing and education of children with SEN?

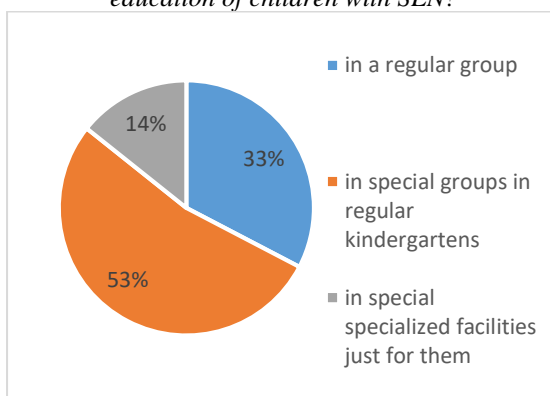
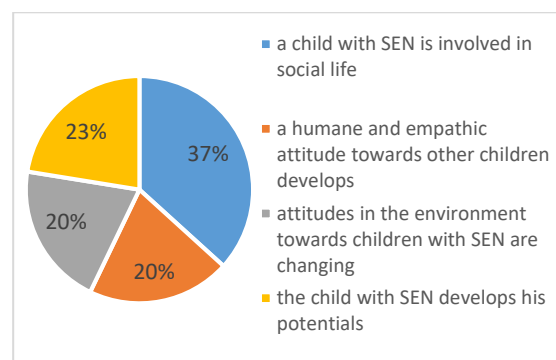


Chart no. 7: In your opinion, what is the biggest benefit of including children with SEN in the regular group of the kindergarten?



Regarding the question: Do you justify the inclusion of children with SEN in kindergartens? Most of the educators (49%) *do not have an opinion*, while 47% *justify the inclusion of these children in kindergartens*.

Accordingly, the educators were asked: In your opinion, do you think that the *real inclusion of children with SEN in regular groups in children's groups has been done*? The majority of them (37%) believe *that real inclusion has not been done* (in fact, this is also related to the previous answers where they declared that they do not prepare individual educational plans for these children). The remaining 34% *have no opinion* and 28% that *there is real inclusion* of these children in kindergartens.

Finally, we asked the educators for their opinion on what changes are needed in working with children with SEN. One of the comments made by the educators is to have a smaller number of children in the group, which would certainly lead to better work by the educators themselves and the achievement of the goals set in the program. Furthermore, they emphasize the *need for help from the professional team* in the institution, with whose help and cooperation the inclusive process in the kindergarten would be facilitated. *Additional training for working with children with SEN* is the next thing that educators responded to, and of course it is inevitable to *improve the cooperation with the parents* in order to improve the adaptation and acceptance of these children, first of all by the children in the kindergarten, and further by the wider community.

6. Conclusion

Every child has an equal right to be included in the regular educational system, according to his needs and possibilities. Children with SEN should be seen as equal participants in the educational process, which requires the engagement of all professional and competent persons and from whom they can be provided with individualized help.

For successful work in an inclusive group, educators, in addition to their initial education, also need additional training in various forms of knowledge and skills, which will enable them to work successfully and qualitatively with children. The more they improve, the more self-sufficiency they will have in working with children with SEN by satisfying their basic needs, which ultimately leads to quality inclusive practice. (Miloš, 2015 according to Damjanić, 2018).

At the same time, it is important that there is cooperation between educators and professional services in kindergartens, and especially with educational rehabilitators, to jointly solve problems, to find concrete solutions for them, as well as to cooperate with all the remaining affected foreigners in these areas. Of particular importance is to follow the needs, possibilities and interests of every child and to offer support to parents in all segments of the child's inclusion in the inclusive process (Damjanić, 2018).

In order to monitor the situation of children with disabilities in kindergartens, it is necessary to establish a mechanism for the systematic identification, recording and monitoring of children with disabilities in kindergartens.

The general conclusion from the research is that pre-school education does not offer the necessary conditions and opportunities for optimal development of every child. In the absence of a mechanism for the systematic identification, recording and tracking of children with disabilities from an early age, the possibilities for early stimulation are greatly reduced, which makes it difficult for children with disabilities to stay in kindergarten, which is often reduced to caregiving, but not on the educational component and early stimulating development (УНИЦЕФ, 2018).

What we can conclude from the recorded situation in our country is that there is a integration of children with SEN in the regular group, but not their inclusion. Findings from the research show that we have a shortage of staff (especially educational rehabilitators-defectologist), the absence or incompleteness of professional services that are crucial in the implementation of the inclusive process in kindergartens. A large part of the teachers have experience in working with children with SEN, but in the course of their educational work they do not apply special methods, techniques, approaches in working with these children, they do not prepare special educational plans adapted to the possibilities of each child.

In the future, work should be done on the involvement of educators in additional training, workshops, as well as the exchange of experiences and good practices for implementing the inclusive process in kindergartens. Improvement of the material and technical equipment in kindergartens: didactic aids and other visual aids, technology and resources for working with children with disabilities, as well as

adaptation to the space in kindergartens (inaccessible entrances, small rooms against a large number of children and toilets adapted for children with disabilities) . increase the participation and support of the local self-government for children as its smallest citizens, and in this context to find ways and mechanisms to increase the awareness of the local self-government, families, parents and the entire local community for the meaning of pre-school education as a key period for personality development of the child (УНИЦЕФ..., 2018, p. 70.).

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