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PEDAGOŠKA
STVARNOST

NOVISAD 2023



PEDAGOŠKO DRUŠTVO VOJVODINE
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET UNIVERZITETA U NOVOM SADU
ODSEK ZA PEDAGOGIJU

PEDAGOŠKA STVARNOST
Časopis za školska i kulturno-prosvetna pitanja

UDK 37	ISSN 0553-4569	eISSN 2620-2700	Novi Sad
God. LXIX	Godišnji broj 1	Str. 1-144	2023.

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Na osnovu mišljenja Ministarstva za nauku, tehnologije i razvoj Republike Srbije, br. 413-00-413/2002-01 od 4. juna 2002. godine, časopis „PEDAGOŠKA STVARNOST” ima karakter publikacije od posebnog interesa za nauku, te se na ovaj časopis ne plaća opšti porez na promet. Izdavanje časopisa pomogao Pokrajinski sekretarijat za obrazovanje, propise, upravu i nacionalne manjine – nacionalne zajednice

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Received: 19.05.2023. godine
Accepted: 14.08.2023. godine
UDC: 371.13:376
DOI: 10.19090/ps.2023.1.108-119
Original scientific paper

STUDENTS' OPINIONS AND VIEWS ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Abstract

One of the largest changes that has affected education systems in the last few decades is inclusion. Inclusive education is a big and serious change that has happened to every educational system that has followed the path of its implementation. Inclusion in the educational process brings numerous challenges that all participants have to face. Transformation and adaptation to the new situation are needed, from the school infrastructure itself to the initial teacher education programs. In the paper, we wanted to see the opinions and views of the students from the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Shtip, Macedonia, regarding inclusive education. The students (future preschool educators, teachers, and pedagogues) are of equal importance as the already engaged educational staff because it will depend on them in which direction they will nurture the educational process and inclusion itself. Why should we investigate the students and their opinions regarding inclusion? Because during their initial education at university, they gain knowledge and develop skills to work in an inclusive environment, and also because they follow practical teaching and methodical practice during their studies, which gives them familiarity and contact with inclusion in kindergartens and primary schools. So, we wanted to see their views on what they actually feel they need and what they lack in an inclusive work environment. We examined the students' knowledge and views from several aspects: first, we surveyed the students' awareness of inclusive education, then we examined their opinions about inclusion in general and what conditions, according to them, an inclusive group or classroom needs to have. These results are just the beginning, which should be fulfilled with the views of students from other universities, and together with the already obtained results of long-term research on the views of preschool educators, teachers, and school counselors, we will try to give some serious directions in which fields we need to work

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and improve the current situation in order to create favorable conditions for successful inclusion that will benefit society as a whole.

Key words: teaching faculty, students, inclusion, strengthening of study programs

Introduction

Inclusive education has a core value in society. Inclusive education is the most effective way to give all children a fair chance to go to school, learn, and develop the skills they need to thrive (UNICEF, Inclusive Education).

Enrollment of children in preschool institutions is key to their successful social inclusion throughout life. Of course, it is of great importance to enable every child to actively participate in school activities and gain positive experiences through regular education. This gives the child the opportunity to prepare for life and realize the full potential that will enable the individual to fully participate in social flows as a full-fledged member of society. In such a regulated society, we have achieved the main goal of inclusive education (Hasipi et al. 2019).

The quality inclusion of children with special needs in the educational system primarily implies good awareness among the staff working in schools about the needs and possibilities of each child. Recognizing the potential of children, and especially of children with SEN (special educational needs), is the basis on which proper treatment and attitude will be possible towards their opportunities and potentials. At the same time, the correct and timely recognition and identification of these children is necessary in order to ensure a faster and more appropriate treatment in the kindergarten, which would enable their proper psycho-physical development and, furthermore, their inclusion in the school and the following levels of education. Well-informed and trained staff to work in an inclusive classroom or group is the basis for successful work with these children. Hence our motive to conduct research among students - future teachers and educators - to see their knowledge and awareness of working in an inclusive group or classroom.

UNICEF estimates that there are 240 million children with disabilities worldwide, and on the other hand,, disability is one of the most serious barriers to education across the globe (UNICEF, Inclusive Education). The needs of some disabled children are radically different from those of the average child. These different needs must be given proper status, according to Aird (as cited in Nind, Rix, Sheehy and Simmons, 2013).

Social awareness of the education of people with developmental disabilities has changed quite slowly, especially in the acceptance that their uniqueness resulting from disability is not an obstacle to their inclusion in education and society (Stepanović,2018).

The introduction of the inclusive model of upbringing and education represents perhaps one of the most serious and comprehensive changes that have happened to the educational systems in the last twenty years because it assumes serious changes in the policies, culture, and practice of the traditional/typical model. Creating and implementing an inclusive model of education brings numerous challenges that all participants have to face. (Petrovska & Runceva, 2019). It is essential to form a partnership between key stakeholders who can support the change process. A partnership is needed at the institutional, regional, and national level between parents and guardians, teachers, preschool educators, professional associates, researchers, teacher trainers, and policymakers (UNESCO, 2017). In fact, all stakeholders in education should coordinate and actively participate in all phases of the implementation of education reform processes (from design through development and implementation) to ensure inclusive curricula, textbooks, assessment, and all necessary resources to achieve social inclusion (Trpevska et al, 2020).

In the Collection of views on school segregation and inclusive education, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe emphasizes twelve recommendations that should be respected and fulfilled in order to achieve the main goal, real inclusive education, which are: to ensure a comprehensive legal prohibition of discrimination; adopting a school desegregation strategy; spreading awareness about inclusive education; ensuring the quality of education in all schools; planning educational offer through an inclusive prism; editing and monitoring of enrollments in schools; prohibition of testing as a method of selection; assessment of students' needs; balancing the distribution of students from vulnerable groups; defining school districts with a mixed social composition; distribution of the best teachers in the schools where the challenges are greatest; encouraging parental involvement in schools (The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, 20-30 p).

Inclusive education in Macedonia

The beginnings of the process of inclusion in Macedonia date back to 1998, with the realization of a project activity (Ajdisnki & Rasic-Canevska, 2018). Inclusive education in Macedonia has been researched over the years from several different aspects. Numerous studies show that the desired level of inclusive culture and practice has not yet been reached (Stanojkovska – Trajkovska, 2020). In the Education Strategy of Macedonia for the period 2018-2025, one of the strategic priorities in education until 2025 is to improve inclusiveness in preschool, primary, and secondary education (Education Strategy for 2018-2025).

Teachers and school counselors carried out the research to understand the challenges faced when it comes to inclusive education in regular schools in Macedonia. The results showed that it is necessary to complete the professional team in each school and possibly enrich the team with one special educator and rehabilitator or use the

resources of special schools with the aim of timely inclusion of all included children with individual treatment and a better quality of inclusive education. Physical barriers, an insufficient number of materials for work, insufficient network connectivity, and the utilization of external resources and potentials are difficulties faced by Macedonian schools. (Ajdinski & Rasic-Canevska, 2018).

Another major study conducted in 2018 by the Education Development Bureau detected the current situation regarding inclusion in primary education in Macedonia (Hasipi et al. 2018). The research was carried out in 367 elementary schools in Macedonia, with 739 respondents - teachers as well as 335 school counselors in elementary schools in Macedonia (141 pedagogues, 130 psychologists and 64 special educators and rehabilitators) and it was determined that: the individual support that students with special educational needs receive from professional associates in all segments of the educational process (during class, the break, extracurricular activities, free student activities, additional teaching) quantitatively differs depending on the special competencies of the school counselors and in relation to teachers it has been observed that teachers in primary schools are largely untrained in preparation and monitoring of an individual educational plan, application of differentiation, adaptation of conditions, methods and activities to the needs of students with disabilities and monitoring of their achievements (Hasipi et al. 2018).

In continuation of our paper, we wanted to examine the students' views regarding inclusion. Students during their initial education at university gain knowledge and develop skills to work in an inclusive environment, and they follow practical teaching and methodical practice during their studies, which gives them theoretical and practical knowledge on inclusion in kindergartens and primary schools. Therefore, we wanted to see their views on what they actually feel they need and what they lack in an inclusive work environment. We examined the students' knowledge and views from several aspects: first, we surveyed the students' awareness of inclusive education, then we commented above on their opinions about inclusion in general and what conditions, according to them, an inclusive group or classroom needs to have.

Method of work

The subject of our research is aimed at determining the views and opinions of students about inclusive education. We determined this situation through the data obtained from the students who study at the Faculty of Educational Sciences. This institution prepares future teachers, preschool educators, and pedagogues for working in educational institutions with children or students who have SEN.

The purpose of the research is to examine the attitudes of the students from the teaching faculties about the knowledge they have about inclusive education and the need for their expansion and addition.

The research was carried out on a sample of 106 students at the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Stip, Macedonia, in the period April-May 2023. For the purposes of the research, we used an electronic questionnaire, which was created specifically for the purposes of the research. In addition to the basic data (gender, faculty, study program, year of study), the questionnaire contains 10 questions that are related to students' knowledge of working with children with SEN, the way the students acquire the necessary knowledge to work in an inclusive classroom or group, as well as the necessary working conditions in an inclusive group or classroom. The obtained data were analyzed and presented using descriptive statistics (frequencies (f), percentages (%)) and the non-parametric procedure of analysis of variance (ANOVA), using the statistical program SPSS 19.00.

Results and discussion

A total of 106 students from the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Goce Delcev (UGD) Stip were included in the sample. In doing so, students from the study programs of preschool education (49%), primary school education (19%), and pedagogy (31%) were included (chart no. 1). In terms of years of study, the sample included students from the first year (2%), second year (23%), third year (35%), fourth year (23%) and seniors (17%) (Chart 2). In terms of gender, female students dominate (90%).

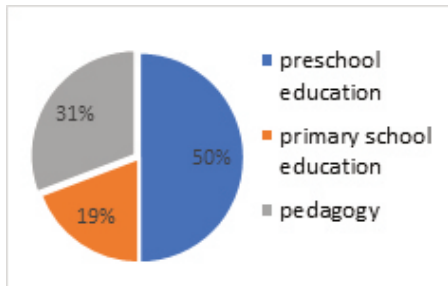


Chart 1. Sample of students according to field of study

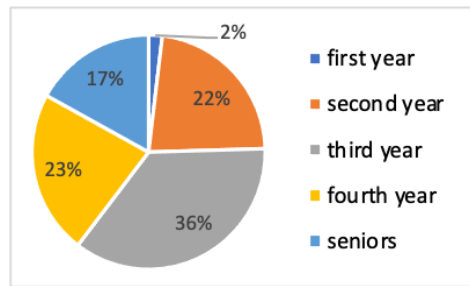


Chart 2. Sample of students according to year of study

Awareness of students about inclusive education

To the question, How do you rate your knowledge of working with children with special educational needs? Most of them answered that they need more knowledge about working with children with SEN (68%), 17% of them believe that they do not have enough knowledge, and a very small part (13%) answered that they have enough knowledge to work with these children .

Regarding the question of the origin of the knowledge about working with children with special educational needs, we obtained results that say that most of the information (46%) *was obtained by following lectures at university*, a smaller part (13%) *by following webinars*, 10% *from visiting lectures from organizations*, 4% *from visiting workshops*, and 27% of them answered that they *did not follow any of the above at all*.

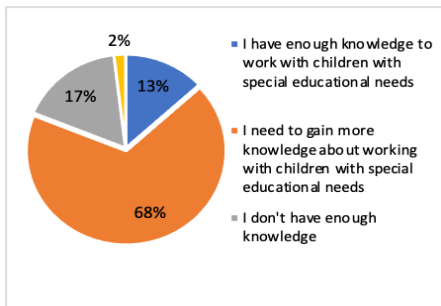


Chart 3. How do you rate your knowledge of working with children with special educational needs?

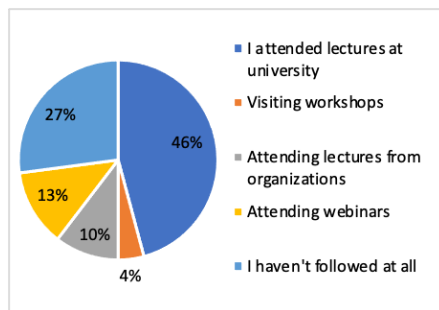


Chart 4. How did you acquire knowledge about working with children with special educational needs?

In accordance with the previously asked question, we asked them to list the subjects they had followed or listened to at university and through which they had acquired knowledge of working with children with SEN. Among the listed, the most numerous are the following: *inclusive education*, *teaching methods of working with children with special educational needs*, and the *practical teaching* that they carried out in schools and kindergartens within the subjects of the same name that they had in their study programs.

However, a large part of them (87%) believe that in addition to the above, they need to study additional subjects for working with children with special educational needs in their undergraduate studies..

The received answers pointed to the fact that the knowledge they have, acquired in a formal or informal way, is not enough to be able to successfully engage in work with children with SEN in regular education. The listed courses that students take within their study programs, both compulsory and optional, are not sufficient for them to be able to engage in quality work with children with SEN in regular groups or classrooms. Some authors (Runcheva & Sivevska, 2021) conducted an analysis of the study programs of the teacher education faculties, showing that the number of subjects and the lessons on inclusive education are not sufficient for the students - future teachers to cope with the challenges and problems that inclusion in the regular education system brings.

Inclusive education does not end with the completion of undergraduate studies. Inclusive education is a dynamic process that requires continuous support, upgrading of existing ones, and continuous acquisition of new knowledge for working with children with SEN.

Ways of working in an inclusive group or classroom

Group/classroom inclusion means an environment in which diverse students are equally included, from the gifted to those with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, ADHD, or some form of autism, and children with typical development. Numerous studies (Gupta, 2014; Henninger & Turnbull, 2010; Stoa, 2016) show that inclusive education can be a positive experience, both for the included child and for all the other children in the group in general. Our respondents also agree on this, which is a large percentage (77%) who have answered that they agree that children with special educational needs should be included in regular groups in kindergartens and primary schools.

Of course, working in such conditions assumes certain challenges for teachers as well as for students, future participants in the teaching process, and leaders of an inclusive group or classroom.

Our motivation is to hear the opinions of our students, future teachers, and preschool educators about what conditions they think an inclusive group or classroom needs to have. In doing so, several statements were offered to this question in which they expressed their degree of agreement (from positive to negative).

Among all the statements offered, the highest percentage of students agree that it is necessary: *a smaller number of children in the group* (60%), *a larger number of psychologists and pedagogues in the school* (84%), *improvement of the equipment of the classrooms or group with appropriate materials and means for work according to the needs of all children* (90%), *school facilities did not provide easy access for every child (school buildings have no elevator, no ramp at the entrance, etc.)* (74%), as well as *greater preparation of future teachers and educators during college for working with children with SEN* (78%) (Chart 5).

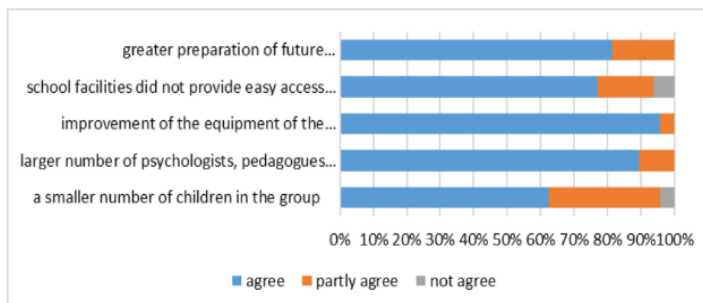


Chart 5. Students' opinion about what conditions an inclusive group or classroom needs

Adapting to new situations is not a simple step at all, but it is of great importance to have the desire and motivation for change and to be ready to improve. Of course, equally important is the provision of adequate material support, which would enable quality staffing, as well as the provision of adequate working conditions. All those factors are important so that the processes can develop in a quality direction and we will have a quality development of the individual, which will bring a quality development of society.

Differences in opinions and attitudes of students with different years of study regarding inclusive education

Differences in responses among the students were analyzed with an F-test (ANOVA). Obtained results show significant differences in part of analyzed responses that leads to conclusion that the type of year of study of the students have some significant role regarded their opinion for inclusive education. Statistically significant differences at the 0.01 level of significance are obtained only for a few items. (table no.1).

In the first question, *How do you evaluate your knowledge of working with children with special educational needs?*, statistically significant differences were observed at the 0.01 level. The differences are observed in the answers of students who are in their first year of studies, who claim that they *do not have much knowledge*, and students who are in their third year, who believe that they *need to gain more knowledge about working with children with special educational needs*.

Statistically significant differences in the answers to the questions were also observed in relation to the question where we asked them to state: *What conditions do you think an inclusive group or classroom needs to have?* For the same question, several statements were offered, and for each, they gave their opinion.

On the statement about the *smaller number of children in the group*, differences are observed between second-year students who *partially agree with this* and fourth-year students who *agree* with this statement.

There are also statistically significant differences in the statement of a *larger number of psychologists and pedagogues in the school* among the second-year students, who *partially agree with this*, and the fourth-year students, who *agree* that successful work in the inclusive classroom or group requires a greater number of professional services in the institution, which will offer the necessary help and support to children with SEN.

And for the statement that the *school facilities did not provide easy access for every child (the school buildings do not have an elevator; they do not have a ramp at the entrance...)*, differences were recorded between the answers of the third year students, who *partly agree* with this, and the seniors who *agree* with this claim.

Table 1: Difference between attitudes of students with different years of study regarding inclusive education (ANOVA)

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
How do you rate your knowledge of working with children with special educational needs?	Between Groups	6303	4	1.576	4.809	.001**
	Within Groups	33.094	101	.328		
	Total	39.396	105			
What conditions do you think an inclusive group/classroom needs to have (give your opinion for each statement)						
smaller number of children in the group	Between Groups	7.042	3	2.347	8.890	.000**
	Within Groups	24.292	92	.264		
	Total	31.333	95			
greater number of psychologists, pedagogues in the school	Between Groups	1.375	3	.458	4.234	.008**
	Within Groups	9.958	92	.108		
	Total	11.333	95			
school facilities did not provide easy access for every child (school buildings have no elevator, no ramp at the entrance...)	Between Groups	3.458	3	1.153	3.738	.014**
	Within Groups	28.375	92	.308		
	Total	31.833	95			

*p< 0.05**p<0.01

The obtained results show that the knowledge and skills acquired by the students during their studies change, expand, and deepen, and their attitudes regarding inclusion and inclusive education change accordingly. It can be another confirmation of the previously noted that it is necessary to invest in the education of the staff working in education, as well as raise awareness both at the local and national level for investing in the implementation of inclusion in our educational system (by providing appropriate conditions in schools, a greater number of professionals who will work with these children, greater accessibility of resources to children with SEN, greater readiness of future teachers and educators during studies to work with children with SEN, etc.).

Conclusion

Life and work in contemporary and modern society require tolerance, acceptance, and inclusion of every person, as well as opportunities for everyone to develop their potential according to their wishes and needs. Every child, student, and person is different, with their own special affinities, needs, and problems. That's why, from the earliest age and with the very entry into the education system, everyone should be enabled to feel safe, accepted, and actively participate in the classroom and the school.

The inclusion of children with special needs in regular groups requires changing the conditions in regular educational institutions, which were adapted only to children with typical development. That process of adaptation and change takes a long time and is conditioned by numerous factors. The students agree that children with special needs should be included in the regular educational system, but at the same time they emphasize that certain changes should be made in the institutions, including increasing the number of professionals and reducing the number of children in kindergartens by groups, to strengthen the preparation of future teachers and educators in the field of working with children with special educational needs. The students point out that they need to acquire more knowledge about working with children with special educational needs in inclusive environments. A large part of the students point out that they need, in addition to the existing ones, several other courses where they can learn about working with children with special educational needs.

The initial preparation of future teachers is of great importance when we talk about teachers' readiness to work with children with special educational needs. It is true that teacher development does not end with the completion of university education, but it is necessary to strengthen the initial preparation of teachers in the area of work with children with special educational needs in inclusive groups.

MIŠLJENJA I STAVOVI STUDENATA O INKLUZIVNOM OBRAZOVANJU

Apstrakt

Jedna od najvećih promena koja je uticala na obrazovne sisteme u poslednjih nekoliko decenija je inkluzija. Inkluzivno obrazovanje je velika i ozbiljna promena koja se desila svakom obrazovnom sistemu koji je krenuo putem njegove implementacije. Uključivanje u obrazovni proces donosi brojne izazove sa kojima se svi učesnici moraju suočiti. Potrebna je transformacija, prilagođavanje novoj situaciji od same školske infrastrukture do programa inicijalnog obrazovanja nastavnika. U radu smo želeli da vidimo mišljenja i stavove studenata Fakulteta obrazovnih nauka u Štipu u Makedoniji u vezi sa inkluzivnim obrazovanjem. Oni, studente (budući vaspitači, nastavnici, pedagozi) su od ključnog i jednakog značaja kao i već angažovani vaspitni

kadrovi jer će od njih zavisiti u kom pravcu će negovati vaspitno-obrazovni proces, a i samu inkluziju. Zašto studente i njihova mišljenja o inkluziji? Zato što tokom inicijalnog školovanja na fakultetu stiču znanja i razvijaju veštine za rad u inkluzivnom okruženju, a i zato što tokom studija prate praktičnu nastavu i metodičku praksu koja im omogućava upoznavanje i kontakt sa inkluzijom u vrtićima i osnovnim školama. Dakle, želeli smo da vidimo njihove stavove o tome šta oni zapravo osećaju da im treba i šta im nedostaje u inkluzivnom radnom okruženju. Ispitali smo znanje i stavove studente sa više aspekata: prvo smo videli svest studentima o inkluzivnom obrazovanju, zatim smo sagledali njihovo mišljenje o inkluziji uopšte i kakve uslove, po njima, treba da ima inkluzivna grupa/učionica. Ovi rezultati su samo početak, koji treba da bude ispunjen stavovima studenata sa drugih univerziteta, a zajedno sa već dobijenim rezultatima višegodišnjeg istraživanja stavova vaspitača, vaspitača i stručnih saradnika, pokušaćemo da damo neke ozbiljnim pravcima na kojim poljima treba raditi i unaprediti postojeće stanje kako bismo stvorili realne uslove za uspešno uključivanje koje će koristiti društvu u celini.

Ključne reči: nastavni fakultet, studenti, inkluzija, obrazovne institucije, jačanje studijskih programa

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