

Development of the inclusive approach towards persons with disabilities in the Republic of North Macedonia

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“There are many roads leading to Rome”

Formal education has always had a dual purpose. On the one hand, education should promote the development of children and adolescents in order of their growth into morally healthy and successful adults, and on the other hand, to contribute to the smooth functioning of the state and society. This is precisely why decisions regarding education have always been, more or less, politically motivated.

Modern educational systems are governed by numerous laws and regulations, international declarations, conventions and various other documents that arrange the content and methods of teaching, as well as the obligations, rights and responsibilities of teachers.

With the adoption of the Law on Primary Education in 2019, in R. North Macedonia started the process of total, or so-called full inclusion. Total inclusion refers to the inclusion of all students in regular schools, regardless of their functional abilities, prior knowledge, skills, type and degree of developmental disabilities. The existence of the legal regulation does not guarantee positive results in practice, although educational institutions strive to respect the Law since its introduction.

In the following, through a brief historical overview of inclusive education and what is meant by the term inclusion, we will try to present several facts that "justify" the existence of total inclusion in our country, but we will also state facts that challenge it.

Review of the historical development of inclusive education

Going back retrospectively throughout history, the change in perceptions and attitudes towards people with disabilities directly influenced and shaped the way of education. After determining the educational ability of a part of people with disabilities and their inclusion in a separate / segregated (specially created) educational system, special schools have been the pivot of the education of students with developmental disabilities for decades. All available expertise was concentrated in these schools to educate students with special needs in the best possible way. Due to the working method of the schools, in which teaching was carried out according to special and specific methods of work, according to special instructions, many of the schools functioned as separate, independent schools. This way of working underwent changes over time, so special education and rehabilitation gradually began to change as well. However, knowledge and expertise are still imperative for teaching students with disabilities, but their segregation is considered unacceptable. The prevailing view is that they should be educated together with their peers in regular educational settings. The concept of special education is changing; it is no longer understood the spatial separation of students with special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion in a special education system, but the provision of adequate conditions for equal access to education for students with disabilities so that they

can achieve academic success in accordance with their capabilities and abilities.

The consequence of the new currents is that regular and special education as separate systems are disappearing, being replaced by **a single system of education for all students.**

In that direction, the question arises: did these two parallel systems really disappear or did a third one appear (resource center and support centers) that tries to connect the previous two systems.

Inclusive education in our country is aimed mostly at people with disabilities and SEN, but, according to the majority of authors, inclusive education means real learning opportunities for groups that have traditionally been excluded - not only children with disabilities, but also speakers of minority languages and others. Starting from this interpretation, we notice a problem in the interpretation of the term from the very beginning, and thus also a problem in the implementation.

We ask: Can we talk about inclusion in our country when within the framework of regular schools we have two vertical independent educational systems in two different languages (Macedonian and Albanian)? **Is it inclusion?**

The way of organizing the educational system in different countries also depends on the understanding of the category of students with special educational needs, as well as on the way of determining their needs and the required level of additional support.

Attempts to realize more inclusive education have resulted in very different educational arrangements in different countries. Depending on the tradition of separate schooling, today in the countries of Europe we can meet different attitudes towards the form

of organization of the education of people with developmental disabilities. Countries that have had a separate education system for a long time, in accordance with the current inclusive policy, are not fully determined for this type of education, they still keep separate schools and allow parents and competent authorities to decide how their children will learn (Ilić-Stošović D, 2005).

On the other hand, countries like ours, which did not have a widely developed network of special schools and institutions, opted for inclusive education, and the separate form of education (in a distinctly sporadic form and for a limited period as a transitional provision until 2023) is reserved only for students with severe obstacles in development, which require adaptation not only to the program but also to the didactic-methodical procedure.

This is where we assume that the idea of total inclusion in our country originates. According to our country's policy makers, special education "represents an obstacle to the development of inclusion because it frees the rest of the education system from taking responsibility for the learning of all children" (Rouse, 2008). For these reasons, full inclusion as the most justified practice implies "transformation of schools to care for all children" in terms of spatial, functional and program adaptation - which takes a central place in the inclusive process (Mitchel, 2015).

However, very often, experts who deal with the problem of inclusive education in our practice, guided by the experiences of other more developed countries, repeat one thought: ***Inclusion yes, but not at any price and not for every student.***

- What is that price?
- Who will be included and who will not be?

- Where to draw the line?
- Can such a line be drawn at all?

The complexity of inclusion brings with it a series of dilemmas and doubts. In his paper *Confusion about Inclusion*, Weddel Klaus lists several dilemmas facing those trying to implement inclusion:

- ✓ ***The "identification" dilemma*** - whether (or not) and how to identify children with significant learning difficulties as children with special educational needs (SEN); the terms SEN and inclusion have become inextricably linked to policy interpretation, professional development, personal experience and public voice. Interestingly, inclusion was never intended to be only for students with SEN, so it has been argued that the term SEN in itself is incompatible with inclusion. Likewise, inclusion was never meant to be only about school accommodation. However, in the field of education, the public and professional interpretation of inclusion tends to focus on the placement of children with SEN in regular settings.
- ✓ ***Curriculum dilemma*** – whether students with SEN should study and learn the same common contents of the curriculum as other students or not; and
- ✓ ***Dilemma "location"*** - whether and to what extent students with more severe disabilities and combined disabilities should be included in regular classrooms.

In order to build an inclusive school, it is necessary for the educational process to be based on the multi-tiered intervention

model. This model includes transformations/interventions in the curriculum and teaching plans, in teaching strategies, activities and materials, as well as continuous monitoring of the process of implementing the interventions at at least four levels of learning support (Basic level, Level I - General support, Level II – Intensified support and Level III – Special support) (Boškovska R. et al, 2020). The question arises whether Level III – Special support provided on the basis of a modified curriculum (the emphasis is placed on the acquisition of functional skills) can be implemented in conditions of total inclusion, i.e. whether academic knowledge is more important than functional skills for people with severe disabilities.

In correlation with the model for multi-level interventions, other essential dilemmas arise, which the educator himself has for the students for whom special support is provided, and which are elaborated in different ways in the previously indicated examples from other countries:

- How important are academic skills to this population?
- Will the time spent teaching academic skills significantly reduce the time spent on acquiring functional skills?
- How can the acquisition of academic and functional skills be incorporated into teaching?

The appearing questions are: how to strike the right balance in terms of academic and functional skills, ie. how to make decisions about how much learning time will be devoted to academic and how much to functional activities that are important in the future life of these students. Some academic and functional skills fit well and can be learned simultaneously (eg cooking, shopping). However, other functional skills do not always fit well with academic ones (eg feeding,

toileting), and are extremely important for fostering independence (Courtade & Ludlow, 2008).

Article 18 of the Law on Primary Education paragraph (3) reads: *The teaching staff from the support center also participates in the realization of a part of the modified program for students with complex needs, for whom it is in the best interest to attend part of the teaching in the support center, and in accordance with the recommendation of the expert commission for assessment, based on ICF.* Here the questions are: the student who needs intensive support, how many hours a day or how many times a week will attend part of the teaching at the support center; what will happen to those students who do not have support centers or resource centers in the schools where they study; will the functional skills be taught only in the regular classroom and the resource center/support center or will personal/educational assistants take care of their acquisition (according to competencies).

For example, can a student who needs to learn to tie his/her shoelaces, and his/her classmates have already mastered this task, do so in the context of getting dressed before and after class, but also before and after physical education (PE) class with assistance of the personal/educational assistant.

In addition to these dilemmas, we would add some more, which in our opinion derive from the Law on Primary Education, the rules and manuals for inclusive education:

- the dilemma "the work tasks of the educational and personal assistant" - there is no clear distinction, i.e. there is an overlap in the work tasks of these profiles. Did the student who received an educational assistant also receive a personal

assistant? The dilemma of whether the educational assistant is support for the student or support for the teacher? If the educational assistant is assigned personally to the student, then how, according to Article 7 (Regulations on the standard, description of competences and work tasks for the educational and personal assistant) does the educational assistant support one to three students with disabilities in the same class?

Internationally, the service of educational assistants (also known as paraeducators, learning supporters, etc.) to support the education of students with disabilities has reportedly increased in several Western countries. Relying on educational assistants is considered by many to be a necessary mechanism for supporting inclusive education, but it is problematic that assistants gradually become almost the only way of support for students with disabilities and the realization of inclusive education in regular classrooms, that is, they gradually take over the teaching role for students with disabilities, instead of being optional and in line with the initially indicated wide range of duties assigned to them (social support, behavior control, administrative support, etc.) (Giangreco, 2013). Isn't the educational assistant another form of absolving the teachers, special educators and rehabilitators and even the parents from responsibility for the learning of the child with SEN (and special schools are therefore closing).

A longitudinal study in the United Kingdom highlighted consistently negative relationships between the amount of support provided by educational assistants and students' academic progress (ie English, maths, science), for which the assistants should not be blamed, given that they are not trained teachers or special educators

and should not be expected to function as such. And another reason why special schools are closed is economics, considering special education and rehabilitation as quite expensive. So We ask: How much does inclusion cost the state, considering that + 720 educational assistants were employed in the special schools - primary schools with a resource center at the last job competition?? Can we bear that burden?

The system of inclusion has different positive and negative impacts on students of both categories: with typical development and with SEN, as well as on teachers. Each educational authority must weigh the pros and cons of inclusion to make a decision tailored to its student population. Although inclusion has undeniably positive aspects, it should not always be considered the best choice for every child. With total inclusion, the right to choose is violated, i.e. the parent is not given the opportunity to choose.

Conclusion

Inclusion is a very controversial and highly emotional topic in the field of education. The fact that "inclusion" has been the center of attention for a long period of time is only a direct indication of the complexity and confusion of the problem. The concept of inclusive practices is based on the belief or philosophy that students with disabilities should be fully integrated into their school communities, usually mainstream classrooms, and that their instruction should be based on their abilities, not their disabilities.

We would also like to emphasize that we prefer the phrase inclusive practices to the term inclusion, because the second one can

imply that there is only one model or program that can provide for all students' needs, while the first one accurately conveys that inclusion is composed from multiple strategies and options.

By advocating for inclusive practices, students with disabilities should receive related services. When it comes to related services, we mean: speech-language therapy, transportation to and from school by specialized van or school bus, physical therapy, etc. In addition, students with disabilities are entitled to additional assistance and services. This means that they must be given access to computer technology, instructional accommodations must be made (eg, more time to complete the test, simplified assignments, adapted schedule) that will allow them to be educated with their typically developing peers. Special education, related services, and supplemental assistance should be provided to students by public schools at no cost to parents.

Before starting any changes and implementing new educational programs, it is necessary to do more research to get a complete picture of the current situation and needs of people with disabilities, in order to find solutions to improve their quality of life.

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