

World Declaration (1990). Education for all.

Siljanovska-Davkova, G. and Mitkov V. (2000). Local government. Skopje: Magor.

Spasov Lj. A. (2008). Decentralization in Macedonia (Balanced regional development and education) – Status and perspectives. Skopje: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

UNICEF Education Strategy (2019 – 2030).

Education strategy for 2018-2025.

Education decentralization strategy.

Regulations and protocols for setting up, organizing, and implementing the educational process adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science.

NIKOLOVSKI Damjan

Dyslexia Association EINSTEIN, Republic of N. Macedonia

IS MACEDONIAN SOCIETY READY TO MEET THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE WITH DYSLEXIA?

Abstract: This paper aims to investigate the problem of dyslexia in the Republic of N. Macedonia, in relation to the awareness of the population about this condition, the need for this condition to be treated from an educational point of view and the involvement of the state authorities in the creation of inclusive living conditions for persons with dyslexia, with special focus on education. People with dyslexia are invisible to the institutions in charge of education policy in our country. Evidence for this is the inadequate educational policies and the lack of a precise legal framework that will regulate dyslexia as a specific learning difficulty. There is a big lack of dyslexia professionals and experts in our country. In addition, we are faced with a lack of standardized instruments for the detection of dyslexia. The most devastating fact in our society is the treatment of dyslexia with medication, especially the one where antipsychotic medication is prescribed. Macedonian faculties offer “poor” study programs about dyslexia. The teachers do not study dyslexia during their studies and therefore they are facing problems in recognizing the students with dyslexia. The teaching staff constantly appeals to the institutions to provide quality training to enable them as teachers to know how to recognize and help students with dyslexia. The awareness of the population about this condition today is significantly higher than in 2013, when the term dyslexia was almost unknown. Our society may be slowly but surely moving up with world trends about this condition.

Keywords: Dyslexia, Inclusion, Law legislation, Education

Introduction

Dyslexia is a condition in which the brain processes written or spoken language differently. One in ten people on the planet has dyslexia, and the Republic of North Macedonia enters this average as well. Dyslexia can best be described as a combination of abilities and difficulties related to learning processes in several areas, such as reading, writing, spelling, and sometimes mathematics.

For the institutions in charge of creating educational policies in our country, people with dyslexia are invisible. Evidence of this is the unadjusted education policies and the lack of a precise legal framework that will regulate dyslexia as a specific condition that causes learning difficulties.

Dyslexia was the prerogative of medicine until the mid-20th century, but this concept began shifting and dyslexia was treated as an educational problem. Since North Macedonia is more than half a century behind other developed countries, this condition is still treated from a medical point of view, instead of as a learning difficulty.

There is a great lack of professionals for dyslexia in the Republic of North Macedonia, and in addition, we face a lack of standardized instruments for detecting dyslexia and other conditions that cause learning difficulties. The most devastating fact for our society is the treatment of dyslexia with drug therapy, especially therapy where antipsychotic drugs are prescribed.

In the world, there are a lot of specialized methods for working with students who face any of the learning difficulties that are practiced by licensed coaches or trainers. There are only three methods and five coaches/trainers on the territory of our country, and they use the methods of Ron Davis, the Orton Gillingham method, and the AFS method.

Macedonian faculties offer a “poor” study program in terms of dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and dyspraxia. Closely related faculties where these conditions should be studied are the Faculty of Pedagogy, the Faculty of Speech Therapy, the Institutes of Pedagogy, Psychology and Special Education and Rehabilitation. Of all the listed, only the Institute for Special Education and Rehabilitation has introduced a subject in its study program where the listed conditions are studied in detail. At other faculties and institutes for these conditions, there is very little teaching material that is included in other subjects or is not represented at all.

The current teaching staff had not studied dyslexia during their studies and therefore they face problems in recognizing the students who face this condition. The teaching staff constantly appeals to the institutions to provide quality training with which, they as teachers would gain knowledge on how to recognize learning disabilities and how to help students with dyslexia.

Research on the Prevalence of Signs of Dyslexia among Secondary School Students in the Republic of North Macedonia

The Association for Dyslexia – EINSTEIN within the project “Info-wall for dyslexia”, funded by the USAID Citizen Participation Project, conducted a study on the prevalence of signs of dyslexia among secondary school students in our country. The research was conducted in 8 planning regions of the Republic of North Macedonia in the period from September 2017 to January 2018.

Research Method

In the conducted research, a descriptive method was used, i.e. a description of the situation for the prevalence of dyslexia in secondary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Instrument

For the purpose of the research, a questionnaire for assessment of dyslexia was prepared – “Dyslexia assessment test” by a licensed dyslexia trainer – Slavica Tasevska-Nikolovska and prof. Dr. Orhideja Surbanovska from the Institute of Psychology at the University Ss. Cyril and Methodius. The test contained 30 questions related to the indicators of dyslexia. Students answered a 4-point Likert scale from 1 – does not apply to me at all, to 4- often refers to me. Cronbach’s Alpha 0.85 was obtained by statistical processing of the tests given to 2328 respondents for the reliability of the test. This shows that the test is consistent in measuring the degree of dyslexia in students. An item analysis was also performed which showed that all the claims in the questionnaire were consistent in assessing dyslexia.

To test the validity of the instrument, an online testing of two dyslexia tests was performed. The first of these tests was by the author’s Smith and Everett (Smythe & Everatt, 2001), which is used in the Republic of Serbia as a valid dyslexia assessment test. The second test was made by Tasevska-Nikolovska and Surbanovska (2017) for the purposes of this research. A correlation analysis was performed which showed a statistically significant correlation between the two tests ($r = 0.72$), which is additional proof of the validity of the test. The test was translated and adapted into Albanian and applied to the Albanian student population as well.

Respondents in the Research

The research included students from the first year of secondary school education (15/16 years old) from 8 planning regions in the Republic of North Macedonia. A total of 2328 students were tested, of which 1178 male students and 1150 female students. Of the tested students, 1757 were Macedonians, 571 students were Albanians. The research covers a total of 15 secondary schools, of which 5 gymnasiums, 4 secondary schools that offer both gymnasium and vocational education and 6 vocational secondary schools.

From table number one it can be seen that the signs of dyslexia in students in the surveyed secondary schools are represented by 12.2%, which confirms hypothesis number one* It is expected that dyslexia in secondary schools will be expressed in about 10 to 15% of students, and the pronounced form of dyslexia to be present in about 2 to 4% of students.

Dyslexia in the Republic of North Macedonia

Unlike Western countries, and even some Balkan countries, in North Macedonia dyslexia is still a distant topic. Dyslexia is not included in the North Macedonian legal system on any grounds. State institutions have not adopted guidelines for working with people with dyslexia, nor have they adopted a definition of this specific difficulty.

The lack of staff that specializes in specific learning difficulties also prevents the existence of an institution that will diagnose dyslexia and offer support to those who face this condition. The Law on Primary Education regulates the inclusion of children with special needs, but in the by-laws, dyslexia and other specific difficulties such as dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and dyspraxia, are not included in any category

The Ministry of Education and Science in the Strategic Plan 2018-2020 among the first priorities envisages the establishment of a system to support inclusive education. Students with dyslexia should find a mandatory place in this section. It is necessary to define the situation as a specific difficulty in learning, as well as to establish precise bylaws that will regulate the obligations of educational institutions and other institutions.

The commitment of the Dyslexia Association is clear: students with dyslexia are not students with special needs, but students with specific educational needs. In the state institutions in charge of creating educational policies, there is a tendency for dyslexia to be included in the category of “special needs”, but such a classification must not be allowed, because in this way we are taking steps backward instead of going forwards.

State institutions involved in the process of creating educational programs and policies make efforts to create an inclusive society for students with dyslexia. But such efforts create additional chaos in the education of dyslexics, primarily due to the unprofessional staff for this condition in our country.

Medical Treatment for Dyslexia

There are two “specialized” institutions in our country where detection and treatment for people with dyslexia are performed. These are the Institute for Mental Health of Children and Youth and the Institute for Rehabilitation of Hearing, Speech and Voice. Parents of children with dyslexia, for the problem that their children face, turn to these two institutions where they receive some help and support. In these two institutions, parents can also receive confirmation that the child is experiencing dyslexia, although in North Macedonia there are no professionals in charge of detecting dyslexia unlike in other developed societies. From this it can be concluded that dyslexia is treated from a medical point of view in our country, unlike all developed countries where the medical aspect of dyslexia has been abandoned for years. However, the positive step is that the

awareness of parents and their will to seek help in institutions under the state cap has been raised. Although these institutions do not have a narrowly specialized staff for such conditions, still, in the absence of a special center, parents can turn for help, advice or support for their children.

According to the analyses conducted by the EINSTEIN Association in these two institutions, the lack of narrowly specialized expert staff for work and diagnosis of people with dyslexia was identified. Speech therapists, special educators, psychiatrists, pediatricians, psychologists, and pedagogues work in these institutions, but there is a lack of trainers who are skilled in specific methods for treatment of people with dyslexia. This is followed by another problem, i.e. the general lack of such expert staff in our country. At the same time on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, there are only four people who are trained in one of the world-recognized methods for treatment of people with dyslexia. Therefore, we cannot say that we have reached the level of a serious approach in the treatment of people with dyslexia until modern methods and instruments are introduced to diagnose and help children with dyslexia.

According to the representatives of the two institutions in charge of detection and treatment of dyslexia, the “diagnosis” of this condition is performed as a team, i.e. usually by a speech therapist, special educator, psychiatrist, psychologist, pedagogue, orthodontist, otolaryngologist and audiometric.

In terms of diagnosing dyslexia, these two institutions face a problem regarding the duration of the diagnostic procedure, because according to “My appointment” this time is limited to 30 to 40 minutes, which according to the employees of the institutions is very short. Dyslexia treatments in these institutions are really long-lasting and according to the statements of the parents last from 1 to 3 years and are limited to 30 to 40 minutes, 2 to 3 times a week. For the treatment of dyslexia and other conditions that cause learning difficulties in these two health institutions, various methods and exercises are used, i.e. general re-education of psychomotor skills, exercises for the development of pre-reading methods, exercises for development of auditory perception, exercises for the development of visual and spatial perception, classical methods, parts of the ABA method related to reading, etc. However, it is important to note that these methods are not specialized for dyslexia and staff working in health care institutions need additional education on dyslexia and specific learning difficulties.

A devastating fact for the Macedonian society as a whole is the prescribing and use of medications in the treatment of dyslexia, something that is not a practice at all in any developed society. According to a survey of 75 parents who have children with dyslexia, 35.8% of children were prescribed various medications. Children with dyslexia are prescribed everything from vitamin therapies to antipsychotics. It is important to note that according to the prescriptions submitted by a number of parents who were prescribed therapy, drugs such as Ritalin, Paracetam, Escitalopram, Tanacan and similar drugs were prescribed to children that are generally applicable to diseases such as depression, schizophrenia, dementia and the like.

Macedonian Teachers Need Education to Work with Students with Dyslexia

Primary school teachers only partially knew the term dyslexia three years ago, and the situation hasn't changed much since then. According to a survey conducted by the Association for Dyslexia – “EINSTEIN” in four Skopje municipalities: Karpos, Kisela Voda, Centar and Aerodrom, more than half of teachers said they did not have enough information about this difficulty.

The situation is leaning towards a better path, but not enough, shows the latest survey of the Association, conducted in April 2018, in the same schools. There are still a large number of teachers who know very little about the condition, but it is positive that many of those who already had knowledge, in recent years have been further educated to work with children with dyslexia.

Awareness of the existence of dyslexia among students in our primary schools has increased in recent years, but teachers still lack training for easier recognition, as well as techniques for working with children with learning difficulties, research shows. A huge number of teachers today claim that they urgently need further education on this topic, because in each class they meet more than two children who have difficulty reading and learning, most often at the ages of 7-8 years.

In 2015, over 70 percent of teachers in the conducted survey said that the term dyslexia was never defined or it was only mentioned in training for reading and learning difficulties. In 2018, such an answer was given by about 30 percent of the surveyed teachers, who stated that they had only encountered this term and had no additional information. A repeated survey shows that the number of those who in recent years have been educated on how to recognize the first signs of dyslexia among students in some municipalities has grown to 50 percent. As a positive step in this direction, the surveyed teachers evaluated the trainings for learning difficulties, in which they received more detailed information about dyslexia and the ways to treat these students organized by the Association for Dyslexia – EINSTEIN.

Although with only partial information, some teachers even three years ago as well as now are sure that they would recognize a child with learning difficulties, including children with dyslexia. However, over 65 percent of those surveyed in the primary survey said they needed additional training to work with these children, while in the re-survey, less than 60 percent of teachers required training due to the large number of trainings and seminars conducted by the Dyslexia Association EINSTEIN.

According to a large number of teachers, a different approach needs to be taken when working with children with dyslexia both in classes and out of classes (homework) so that they can successfully master schoolwork. According to the answers of the teachers from 28 schools from all municipalities, most often dyslexia and other learning difficulties are recognized in the second and third grade. This is the period when children learn to read and write, and begin learning the basic mathematical operations. In the cases of the teachers, they usually meet between 2 and 3 students where they notice learning difficulties, which corresponds to the number of 10 to 15 percent of students with dyslexia. The majority of teachers, about 60 percent, considered dyslexia and learning disabilities to be transient and that the need to work with these children was equal for both teachers and parents.

Macedonian Society May be Slowly but Surely Catching up with World Trends Regarding Dyslexia

It can be said that in the past six years major steps have been taken to raise public awareness of dyslexia, with many teachers, psychologists, pedagogues, special educators, and speech therapists showing interest in expanding their knowledge in this area with purpose and desire to provide adequate support to this category of students.

In the past few years, organized by the EINSTEIN Association, and with the support of the University American College – Skopje and the Faculty of Philosophy – Skopje, a total of 53 educational seminars and webinars on dyslexia and specific learning difficulties were successfully realized on the territory of North Macedonia. Through this type of education, with fundamental knowledge and techniques, over 5000 teachers, psychologists, special educators, speech therapists and pedagogues gained adequate knowledge about working with students with dyslexia. From 2018, the Association EINSTEIN began with the realization of the second module of seminars, i.e. seminars for acquiring practical tools and techniques for working with students who face learning difficulties.

With the realization of the project “Focus on dyslexia” funded by the Foundation Open Society – North Macedonia, the Association for Dyslexia – EINSTEIN educated about 600 class teachers

in the Municipality of Strumica, the Municipality of Center and the Municipality of Cair. Within this project, a manual “Focus on Dyslexia” was prepared, which was made available to teachers in order to more easily identify students with dyslexia and provide adequate support to these students.

Through the project “Info wall for dyslexia” 700 secondary school students got acquainted with the condition of dyslexia, how to recognize it in themselves and their classmates, and also got acquainted with practical self-help techniques that they can use if they face any of the conditions that cause learning difficulties.

An important step in terms of education of the psychological-pedagogical services from the primary schools in the City of Skopje was made through the project “Inclusive educational policies for students with dyslexia”, which was funded by the Foundation Open Society – North Macedonia. Through this project, about 250 representatives of the professional services from 60 primary schools were educated to recognize and support students with dyslexia. For the needs of the project, the first handbook for identification and support of students with dyslexia was created for pedagogues, psychologists and special educators. The manual is available in electronic version on the EINSTEIN Association’s website so that all interested parties can use it, in order to provide inclusive educational conditions for students with dyslexia.

The Republic of North Macedonia is a leading country in the Balkans, especially among the former Yugoslav republics in raising public awareness of dyslexia. Even though in neighboring countries, where dyslexia associations have existed for more than 15 years, public awareness about dyslexia in North Macedonia has been more readily raised by the EINSTEIN Association which began active work in 2015. This was possible through the Association’s campaigns to raise public awareness and educate the teaching and professional staff of schools, which led to big success in raising awareness of this situation at a very high level in a very short period of time throughout the Republic.

A great contribution to the creation of inclusive educational conditions for people with dyslexia was given by the Institute of Special Education and Rehabilitation, which through the Commission for Information and Computer Technologies at the Faculty of Philosophy created the Cyrillic font DyslexicFZF. This specific font was specifically adapted for people who deal with dyslexia and have difficulty reading both on the computer and/or printed forms of text. This font is actually the first Cyrillic font in the world that is adapted for people with dyslexia.

Reference

- Nikolovski. D and Shurbanovska. O. Research „ Research on the prevalence of dyslexia among high school students in the Republic of Macedonia “, Skopje (2018)
- Tasevska Nikolovska. S “Manual for identification and support of students with dyslexia” Skopje (2019)
- Ph.D. Filipova. S. Institute for rehabilitation of hearing, speech and voice – Interview, august – Skopje (2020)
- Ph. D. Topuzovska. S. Faculty of Medicine – Interview, august Skopje (2018)
- Ph.D Karovska Ristovska – Interview, august Skopje (2018)
- Nikolovski. D. and Naumovska. S. Николовски, „ Research on the teaching staff’s familiarity with dyslexia”, Skopje (2019)
- Karovska Risovska A. Ajdinski G. , Shurbanovska. O. and Kardaleska. Lj. “Assessment and strategies for working with students with specific learning difficulties” Skopje 2018.
- Farell, M., The effective teacher’s guide to Dyslexia about other learning difficulties (learning disabilities), Wiltshire: Routledge, 2012
- Nikolovski D., Shurbanovska O. “Dyslexia (un)recognized by the state institutions” in: 5th International Conference, “Transformation towards a sustainable and flexible society for people with disabilities”, Ohrid (2018)
- Karovska Risovska A. Ajdinski G. and Kardaleska. Lj. “Specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia)” Skopje (2016)