

CONCERNS OF REGULAR TEACHERS ABOUT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

ZABRINUTOST REDOVNIH NASTAVNIKA ZA INKLUZIVNO OBRAZOVANJE UČENIKA SA TEŠKOĆAMA U RAZVOJU

**Daniela DIMITROVA-RADOJICHIKJ, Suzana SIMONOVSKA,
Zoran KITKANJ**

University Ss Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje, N. Macedonia

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ABSTRACT

The legislation in the Republic of Macedonia, from the school year 2022/23, mandates full inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. In our school system, regular teachers are implementing inclusive education, but they have limited knowledge and resources for this process. The aim of this study is to determine the levels of teachers' concerns regarding inclusive education by utilizing Stages of Concern Questionnaire (SoCQ). The SoCQ is comprised of 35 statements to which the participants responded on a 0-7 Likert scale according to how true the statement seemed to them at the time from 0 (irrelevant) to 7 (very true of me now). Descriptive statistics (mean & standard deviation) were used to evaluate teachers' concern regarding inclusive education. A total of 81 regular education teachers participate in the study. More than half of the participants were primary school teachers (N=42; 51,9%), while 80,2% (N=65) of the participants were female. Based on the SoCQ instrument, teachers reflected concern in Stage 0 (Awareness) and Stage 3 (Management), and low level of concern in Stage 5 (Collaboration). The high score on Stage 3 indicates that teachers are more concerned about how inclusive education will actually happen. Results revealed that regular teachers have low level of concern toward inclusion. But, we consider that policy-makers in Macedonia should focus further activities on continuous educator training and increase funding for education.

Key words: concern, inclusive education, teachers, students with disabilities

APSTRAKT

Zakonodavstvo u Republici Makedoniji, od školske 2022/23 godine, predviđa potpuno uključivanje učenika sa teškoćama u razvoju u redovne učionice. U našem školskom sistemu redovni nastavnici sprovode inkluzivno obrazovanje, ali imaju ograničeno znanje i resurse za ovaj proces. Cilj ove studije je utvrditi nivo zabrinutosti nastavnika prema inkluzivnom obrazovanju korišćenjem Upitnika za nivo zabrinutosti (SoCK). SoCK se sastoji od 35 izjava na koje su učesnici odgovarali prema Likertovoj skali od 0 (nebitno) do 7 (vrlo tačno). Deskriptivna statistika (srednje vrednosti i standardnog odstupanja) korišćena je za procenu zabrinutosti nastavnika prema inkluzivnom obrazovanju. Ukupno 81 redovni nastavnik učestvuje u studiji. Više od polovine ispitanika bili su razredni nastavnici (N=42; 51,9%), dok su 80,2% (N= 65) učesnika bile žene. Na osnovu instrumenta SoCK, nastavnici su izrazili visok nivo zabrinutosti u stepenu 0 (svest) i stepenu 3 (menadžment) i nisko nivo zabrinutosti u stepenu 5 (saradnja). Visoka zabrinutost 3. stepena ukazuje na to da su nastavnici više zabrinuti

za to kako će se inkluzivno obrazovanje zaista dogoditi. Rezultati su pokazali da redovni nastavnici imaju nizak nivo zabrinutosti prema inkluziji. Smatramo da bi kreatori politika u Makedoniji trebali usmeriti dalje aktivnosti ka kontinuiranom usavršavanju nastavnika i povećanju finansiranja obrazovanja.

Ključne reči: zabrinutost, inkluzivno obrazovanje, nastavnici, učenici sa teškoćama u razvoju

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, countries around the world have progressively been more concerned about ensuring the rights to education of all children in regular schools. Despite the global adoption of inclusion, there are reservations regarding whether the regular classroom can provide optimum quality education to children with disabilities (Yadav, Das, Sharma, & Tiwari, 2015). These initiatives, in enshrining the right of inclusive education of children with disabilities, make it obligatory on the part of regular teachers to be aware of the implications of inclusion as a responsibility of their normal teaching task (Shah, Das, Desai, & Tiwari, 2014). General, inclusive education (IE) depends on several factors including necessary revisions and changes in policies, regulatory systems, and administrative structures and the availability of materials and resources (Yadav et al., 2015). Multiple studies have been conducted in education to identify the problems and concerns faced by teachers. Concretely, studies about IE indicate that teachers' concerns are influenced by the lack of training in special education, incompetence to teach children with different disabilities, inadequate knowledge, and skills about inclusive practices and difficulty in keeping all the children with and without disabilities focused during the class (Majoko, 2018).

The legislation in the Republic of Macedonia, from the school year 2022/23, mandates full inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. In our school system, regular teachers are implementing inclusive education, but they have limited knowledge and resources for this process. The aim of this study is to determine the levels of teacher's concerns regarding IE by utilizing Stages of Concern Questionnaire (SoCQ) (Hall, George, & Rutherford, 1979). The questionnaire was administered during the 2018-19 school year.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 81 regular education teachers participates in the study. More than half (N=42,51,9%) of the participants were primary school teachers (teaching students aged five to 10) and 48,1% were secondary school teachers (teaching students aged 10 to 14). 80,2% of the participants (N=65) were female. The mean age of the teachers was 45.97 years (SD=10.26 years). The demographic data show that 62.9% of teachers had between 1 to 20 years of teaching experience. Twenty-two (27.2%) teachers had between 21 to 30, and eight (9.9%) had 31 or more of teaching experience. Regarding the experience of teaching children with disabilities, 65 teachers (80.2%) said that they had experience and 16 (19.8%) had no experience teaching students with disabilities.

Instrument

The Stages of Concern Questionnaire (SoCQ) is a thirty-five item questionnaire that functions to categorize and assess concerns surrounding the potential change in programs and practices. Participants mark each item on a 0-7 Likert scale according to how true the statement seemed to them at the time from 0 (irrelevant) to 7 (very true of me now). Respondents typically need around 15 minutes to finish the questionnaire, which also has a small section to gather personal information from the teachers such as age, gender, and job experience.

SoCQ is generalized to cover any innovation and administered with only the name of the innovation changed on the cover page. For specificity, wherever in the original questionnaire innovation had been used, inclusive education was used instead. The individual taking the questionnaire will fall into one of the six categories (awareness, informational, personal, management, consequence, collaboration, refocusing) by being scored on their responses to the questions found in the SoCQ (Table 1). Also, SoCQ describes the stages of concern for individuals in three broad categories: self, task, and impact.

Table 1. Stages of concern

Stage of Concern	Common Thoughts	Recommended Action
0: Awareness	Not concerned with change. Is not interested in implementation.	Bringing attention to the material, emphasizing its importance, and generating interest.
1: Informational	Begins to show interest.	Providing open access to precise, quality information.
2: Personal	Begins to think about how a change would directly affect themselves, as educators.	Continue to provide information. Build rapport with individuals. Provide encouraging affirmations.
3: Management	Begins to think about the time needed to prepare.	Showing how it has already been implemented.
4: Consequence	Concerned with how change will directly affect students.	Provide resources and examples of how it does work/has worked.
5: Collaboration	Becomes interested in sharing the implementation with others.	Encourage discussion amongst others about the implementation.
6: Refocusing	Exploring ideas of what could be better.	Provide further resources on strategies.

Resource: Bullard, Rutledge, & Kohler-Evans (2017)

According to Bullard et al. (2017), if an individual falls into a category such as collaboration or refocusing, they are likely to have less concern about the implementation of the new program or practice. On the other end of the spectrum, scores that fit into the informational or personal categories would indicate more concern from the individual regarding the change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' concerns are interpreted as very high, high, moderate, low or very low based on the range of their percentile scores as follows: very high: 81–100; high: 61–80; moderate: 41–60; low: 21–40; and very low: 0–20.

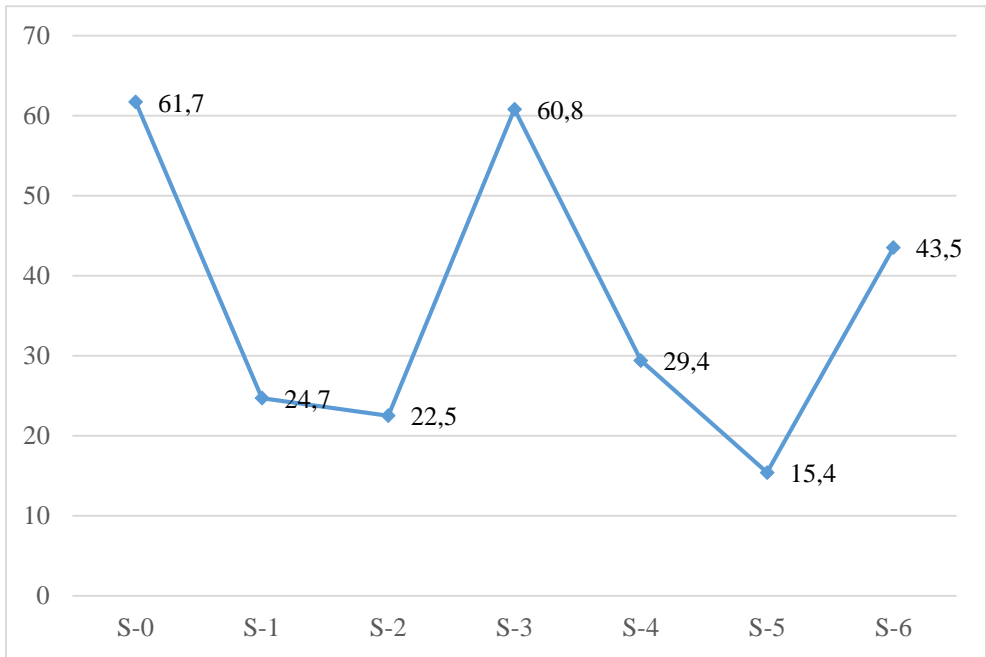


Figure 1. Percentile scores of SoCQ levels

Highest peaks indicate the stages where the concerns are most intense. As shown in Figure 1, most of the teachers had their peak scores at Stage 0 (Awareness) and Stage 3 (Management). The highest score (61,7%) on the Awareness stage, e.g. *I am completely occupied with other things*, indicates that the teachers not fully aware of the innovation and were somewhat more concerned about other things (i.e., other programs, innovations, and activities). Also, the teachers' Management concerns of 60,8%, e.g. *I am concerned about my inability to manage all the requirements of IE*, indicated that they had some concerned about the inclusive processes, resourcing, and tasks of using the innovation. In essence, a high level of management concerns indicates teachers' uncertainty about how to apply the curriculum in inclusive class, how to plan the course and how to use the instructional materials effectively. In sum, because the frequency of concerns was low on Stage 1 (Informational), it revealed that the teachers were not interested in learning more about the IE.

The teachers' percentile scores in Stage 6 (Refocusing), e.g. *I am concerned about revising my approach of using the IE*, were moderate high (43,5%). This score indicates that teachers did not give thought to exploring the potential for broader benefits of the curriculum, including the possibility of major changes or replacement with an alternative. That means that they were moderately interested in learning more

about IE of students with disabilities. In other words, the teachers had ideas that they believed had more merit than the proposed IE in their school.

The teachers' low score (24,7%) in Stage 1 (Informational), e.g. *I have limited knowledge about the IE*, suggests that regular teachers have enough knowledge about inclusive education and how it works. Meanwhile, a person with low intensity at the same stage indicates that she or he has less concern or little or no desire to have information about the IE. The low concerns (22,5%) in Stage 2 (Personal), e.g. *I am interested in knowing the effects of IE on my professional status*, indicated that teachers were not concerned about status, rewards, and what effects the implementation of inclusive education in their schools might have on them. In addition, the teachers' low score (29,4%) in Stage 4 (Consequence), e.g. *I am concerned about how the IE affects students*, indicated that they had a low level of concern about the consequences of implementing inclusive education for their students with and without disabilities. The teachers' concerns were the lowest (15,4%) in Stage 5 (Collaboration) among the seven stages of concerns. The low score in Stage 5, e.g. *I am interested in helping other teachers learn how to implement IE*, indicated that they were not concerned about working with others in connection with the implementation of IE in their schools. The higher the score on the SoCQ chart, the lower the level of concern. If a participant scored a 4, 5, or 6, she is experiencing a low level of concern. If a participant scores a 3, 2, 1, or 0, she is experiencing higher level of concern (Zamani et al., 2011).

Table 2. Teacher Concerns Group Profile

Stage of Concern	M	SD
0: Awareness	2.95	0.654
1: Informational	4.66	0.819
2: Personal	4.94	0.085
3: Management	3.43	0.555
4: Consequence	4.5	0.510
5: Collaboration	5.17	0.615
6: Refocusing	4.17	0.417

As indicated in Table 2, teachers were experiencing a high level of concern in Stage 0 (Awareness) and Stage 3 (Management), and the lowest level of concern in Stage 5 (Collaboration). The high score on Stage 3 (M=3.43) indicates that teachers are more concerned about how inclusive education will actually happen. Teachers' concerns were the highest in Stage 0 and the low in Stage 4, indicating that they had a very high level of concern about a number of other initiatives, tasks, and activities besides IE and a low level of concern about the consequences of implementing IE for their students, respectively. Unfortunately, the low concerns on Stage 1 (Informational) and in conjunction with low concerns on Stage 5 (Collaboration) indicate that teachers don't want more information about IE and have not a desire to learn.

CONCLUSION

General results from this study revealed that regular teachers had a low level of concern toward inclusion (36,9%). The results demonstrate that, on average, teachers in the sample mostly identified themselves with either awareness or management

stages, and least identified themselves with concerns relating to collaborative and personal issues pertaining to IE. According to Van den Berg and Ros (1999), curriculum implementation might take from three to five years for teachers to move from self-concerns (like informational stage) to higher stages of concern such as refocusing stage. In line with this proposition, the current finding is quite worrying and problematic since IE has been implemented in regular schools in Macedonia for about two decades and still the regular teachers have hazy understanding of the inclusive process and not clear about what is required of them and the program's impact on students. Sharma, Moore, and Sonawane (2009) finding that the greatest teachers' concerns to be a lack of resources. Also, Agbenyega (2007) found that teachers' major concerns related to their lack of skills to effectively teach students with disabilities and lack of resources to accommodate individual differences, concluding that teachers' acceptance and commitment to implementing inclusion are likely to be affected by their attitudes and concerns. Furthermore, there are a number of challenges and benefits for the implementation of IE in schools. But, we consider that policy-makers in Macedonia should focus further activities on continuous educator training and increase funding for education.

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