



Social Capital and Inclusive Policies as Instruments to Facilitate Education of Children with Disabilities in Albania

Anisa Proda¹

Abstract

Children with disability in Albania continue to be one of the most segregated groups from the education system. After the fall of communist regime in the early 90-s, in our country, efforts have been made by the civil society organizations and state bodies to develop the necessary policies and legislation in support of the education for children with disability,. The goal was to create and promote inclusive models to the mainstream schools. The minor number of children with disability attending the regular schools though indicates that inclusion is a challenging process. The focus of the study conducted in 2 mainstream schools and 2 special schools in Tirana Region was to comprehensively assess from the perspective of the different stakeholders (teachers, parents of children with disability, children themselves and school mates of children with disability) the implementation of the inclusive model for children with disability in the regular schools or special schools by identifying the concerns and the need for intervention. The theory of social capital was put in place to analyze how much networks and norms as elements can improve the full inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. The social capital is studied as an asset found inside the family and school likewise. Representatives from all types of stakeholders were considered to the research such as parents and siblings of child with disability, teachers, school mates etc. They contributed to the findings for the study through a combined qualitative methodology. The study concluded that notwithstanding the positive approach of the stakeholders towards this process, the inclusive model for children with disability in the regular schools cannot be fully implemented/achieved. The existing shortcomings in terms of school organization, supportive infrastructure, qualification of school staff and integration of parents and school mates show that the current education system needs all of them coordinated to provide the necessary conditions for a thorough inclusion. Social capital through its non-formal networks, and the formal procedures both can make the ground to guaranty the successful participation of those children into education system.

1. Introduction

The debate about the education of children with disabilities begins with the coverage of this issue done today in the perspective of guaranteeing basic human rights [1]. Children with disabilities are estimated to be [2] one of the most excluded from the benefits groups, benefits that they should enjoy from the educational systems, as well as their peers. The all-inclusion is a philosophy that has its beginnings to social justice, de-institutionalization and the '60s' movements for human rights. The Albanian education system currently offers two approaches to segregate education of children with disabilities, their education in special schools and in mainstream schools. The function of these two systems separately in Albania, creates the opportunity to outline that students with disabilities in our country are educated by two paradigms, medical and social paradigm. The first system (special education), builds the curriculum for the child starting from the perspective of the medical paradigm, locating it in a learning environment with other children with disabilities, denying completely interaction with peers without disabilities, who attend mainstream schools. The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, developed under social paradigm, gives them the opportunity to learn and benefit from the educational programs in environments with non-disabled classmates.

2. Methodology

The main purpose of the study is to assess the implementation of the process of inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream and special schools and to select other cases to ensure the right of education of children with disabilities in Albania. This is a descriptive study based on data collected from a representative sample. There were conducted semi-structured interviews and six focus groups. The research questions that guided the work during this study were: What is the impact of including pupils with disabilities in mainstream schools? What are the advantages and disadvantages of learning in special schools?

¹ European University of Tirana, Albania



Inclusive education efforts in Albania began and became visible after the 90s. Local organizations in collaboration with the financial support of foreign donors initiated projects that aimed the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. The implementation of these projects enabled the implementation of modern teaching methods to help teachers, influencing directly in improving their attitudes [2]. In order to be effective on educating pupils with disabilities in mainstream schools, and to make an organic connection between policy and practice, it is important to assess all systems that include directly or indirectly pupils with disabilities on micro, meso, exo and macro level [3]. The process dictates schools to become a welcoming environment, in the social aspect as well as with infrastructure, because only this way they enable access without barriers and increase the chances of children with disabilities to gain social and academic benefits. The comprehensive index [4], related to the implementation of three dimensions, should be implemented to create inclusive schools:

the creation of inclusive cultures in schools; (B) the creation of inclusive education policies; and (C) the implementation of inclusive practices. Creating customized and flexible curriculum can also serve as a "key" to creating "schools for all". It is important that the curriculum is sufficiently flexible to provide opportunities to fit the needs of students with disabilities and stimulate teachers to find solutions that can respond to the needs and abilities of each student.

Another element that also plays a role in the progress of education of children with disabilities is the social capital as wealth of the individual and the community. This paper defines social capital as: the personal and social power of disabled people and their organizations to promote full inclusion in the community, to reach social support networks, and to increase their quality of life [5]. Social capital is not only discussed in disability studies, but also plays a key role in these individuals lives who are in danger of being neglected and having less self-determination chances [6], [7]. Information through informal networks can improve the chances to from finding a school, succeeding in it and find a job. The more support children get from their friends and community, the more are the resources and mechanisms in action that make things happen in their lives. Trainor [6] notices that participation of the family influences the student's ability to gain social capital through education. Trainor [6] argues that disabled students often have a low social capital which comes from their racial status, their social-economical past, as much as from their status of disabled. Being a student does not guarantee them social capital if the chances of relationship and networking are low. Relating to adults that have resources, helps disabled youngsters to socialize with mutual norms and take significant social roles which prepare them for taking leading roles in their community areas [8]. Incapable career advisers might exclude disabled people form the natural environment.

Gerber & Popp [9], say that parents, as a result of better cooperation with teachers observe very positive impact on their children, who are included in mainstream schools. When parents are seen as an ally, a partner in working with students with disabilities, the chances for inclusiveness to work for these pupils increase. There are times when parents of children with disabilities do not accept at first that their child has a disability and that the work should be done in particular. They often provide limited information to complete the record of the disability of their child. Building inclusive relations, cooperating and consulting with the parents of a child with disabilities is important to support in time the child's needs and increase his chances to benefit from the adjustment of the curriculum. Teachers have the main role in the creation and keeping of this relationship at the extent that a child with disabilities can benefit as much as possible. In some cases, parents choose special schools because they are not satisfied with the progress of their children in mainstream ones [10]. The reasons of the withdrawal of children from regular schools are numerous, but often these pupils do not feel well because of the school's conditions, they're being forgotten, therefore they don't benefit like their parents want [6]. Parents of children with disabilities appreciate the importance of individual education programs (IEp), as the basic element of the education of their children in classes [3]. However, many parents appreciate mainstream schools as environments where their children with disabilities can benefit from social interaction with their peers, which provides them with the skills to be more independent. Special schools in their opinion, separate the children and make them feel unwanted. Turnbull and Ruef [11], cited in Salend [5], highlight that the perception some parents of children with disabilities have considers mainstream schools areas where their children are provided with positive role models.

Nano [2] noted that the integration processes at schools should be realized gradually, in order to avoid distrust and refusal, which leads teachers or pupils to negative attitudes that can not be changed. Haxhiymeri [4], in a study on the legal analysis and inclusive processes of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, states that the Albanian mainstream school is sympathetic towards children with disabilities, but it is still not ready to provide them equal opportunities to education. Awareness and



training, which must precede the process of inclusion in education are seen only when schools are involved in projects and this process ends along with the project. The progress can be seen in terms of the efforts of MASH (Ministry of Education) in collaboration with civil society actors to improve the legal framework and the implementation of pilot projects for the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-school and school system. Albania lacks a rating at national level of the needs of children with disabilities to be educated in mainstream schools. Infrastructural accessibility is partial and concerns only the entrance part of the school buildings. Loping ramps, which provides barrier-free access to children, who are users of wheelchairs or with mobility difficulties have been built.

Supportive teacher is another important factor in the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. School headmasters emphasize the lower number of supportive teachers in the structure of the school. They say, there are no funds allocated to implement this service in support of the teachers, who work directly with students with disabilities. Parents say they feel the lack of supportive teachers in schools and this makes more complicated their work as parents with children with disabilities at home. The commitment of the multidisciplinary team in facilitating the learning process in mainstream schools is another key factor for the progress of students with disabilities in the acquisition of the curriculum. The Ministry of Education has launched for several years the implementation of psychological service at school.

An important part of the process of inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools is the adaptation of the curriculum in accordance with the specific needs that children with disabilities show while learning.

Lack of (i) additional structures inside the school with specialized staff for inclusive education (teacher-coordinator for inclusive education, supportive-teachers, other professionals); (ii) teaching and informational materials, textbooks adapted for inclusive education; (iii) the suitability of the premises of the classes and the school as a whole - are stumbling direct objective factors in the implementation of inclusive education for students with disabilities.

The phase where we are currently indicates that a few students with disabilities are included in mainstream schools, but there is no all-inclusion. Our educational system still does not offer completely these adjustments, and therefore inclusiveness of students with disabilities in mainstream schools remains at the edges of the partial realization.

Conclusions

Although guaranteeing the right to education for children with disabilities it is still a major challenge in Albania, efforts towards inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools are being observed. Creating supportive mechanisms as national policies relating to inclusion, with local support systems, structural and financial resources, curricula, teaching methods, is important in order to create the right context for the development of inclusive education [38]. Monitoring should take into account the conditioning factors, such as political, economic and social factors, as inclusive education is established and applied in the context of political-economic-social developments, and cultural developments where applicable.

Inclusive education models are offered mostly in Albania through projects implemented by civil society in partnership with MASH, referring to international standards. Although the legal and political framework can be considered as complete, there are problems in its implementation. The lack of financial resources the most, is the main obstacle to the realization of inclusive education practices.

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