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# INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND THE DISABLED STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT<sup>4</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The inclusive education is an especially relevant segment of each educational system. Worldwide, numerous discussions on this issue continue to interpret its various aspects, pointing out mostly the disabled students' assessment. Therefore, in line with the ongoing exchange of view on this matter, the present qualitative study aims to deliver general insights into these students' assessment in the municipality of Bitola, RNM. Considering the inclusive education as a new phenomenon in the RNM and the complexity and multidimensionality of the regular students' assessment process, this research posts a single, however very relevant question: What is the teachers' practice in the disabled students' assessment so far? In order to answer it, interviews with 5 teachers are conducted. Data analysis comprises interviews coding and general interpretative/inductive method. Research results highlight the insufficient teachers' knowledge to assess these students, and promote the urgent necessity of trainings related to the disabled students' assessment.

**Keywords:** *inclusive education, assessment, students with special needs.*

## **1. Introduction**

According to UNICEF (2003), the inclusive education has its base in the fundamental human right to participate in quality education, meaning that each student, regardless of his disabilities, sex, ethnical and cultural background should have equal access to education in the community, which nourishes the student's potential. As a new concept in the Republic of North Macedonia, several international legal documents, such as the UN Declaration on humans' rights (1948), the UN Convention for the child's rights (1989), and the UN Convention for persons with disabilities rights (2006) endorse the inclusive education. This Convention (2006) is the first legal document, which obliges the states to implement inclusive education. It aims to promote, protect and provide equal human rights and freedoms for all persons with disabilities, prescribing their rights to be included in the general educational system and effective and individual measures for their support. Consequently, these persons have the right for maximal academic and social development, signifying that the society has to promote and upgrade their rights and dignity and to struggle against stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices toward them.

The Regulation introduced by the Ministry of education and science in the RNM (MES) (2021) anticipates the disabled students' assessment according to the Individual educational plan goals or through modified teaching process. Correspondingly, these students are not involved in the regular teaching process. Given that assessment of the students' achievements is a complex and multidimensional part of the teaching and learning process (Janusheva & Pejchinovska,

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<sup>4</sup> Revisional scientific paper

2011; Talevski, Janusheva & Pejchinovska, 2014; Talevski & Janusheva, 2015), the issue with the disabled students' assessment leads to one inevitable research question: What is the way the assessment is conducted in the inclusive education? Answering this question enriches the inclusive educational theoretical and practical frame, and contributes the continuing studies.

It is more than clear that more developed countries, like Sweden and England, have more advanced inclusive educational practice in relation to the disabled students' assessment. The Macedonian Bureau for development of the education, states that Sweden educational system relies on the philosophy that all students have the same personal growth and learning rights. Hence, it does not express separately the students' rights for special support. Disabled students' quality indicators rest on the goals and the schools' plans in order to meet the national goals. Depending on the goals, the evaluation system functions on several levels, including the school boards, communities, the educational national agency and the government. In line with the Bureau for development of education's examination, in England the schools have to supply curricula, which do not discriminate disabled students. Teachers must set the interventions for helping and teaching and the students can completely participate in all segments of the teaching programs. Teachers have the right to make reasonable adjustment where needed.

### **1.1. Law for elementary education (2019)**

Several articles in the Law for elementary education (2019) in the Republic of North Macedonia mention the inclusive education. For example, article 5 deals with the protection of discrimination and promotion of equality; article 11 defines the inclusive education as a process which considers the different individual enhancement needs, providing equal opportunities of using the right for progress and quality education. Further, according to this Law, the inclusive education involves content, structure and teaching strategies changes and adaptations. Furthermore, this Law states that the infrastructure, individualized support and the teaching plan and program reasonably adjust to the students' individual needs. Article 16 from this Law prescribes the existence of inclusive school team, comprised of pedagogue (psychologist and social worker), teachers, parents/tutors, special educators and rehabilitators and the school principal who holds the responsibility for the school inclusive politics and practice and the students that are included in individualized educational program, as defined in article 30 of this Law. The school team is obligated for the activities design and implementation; if needed, it invites other teachers, students or parents; if needed, it appoints experts from centers for students' learning endorsement and/or from schools with resource centers. The school team cooperates with other teachers and experts who are partaking in the students' educational process as well.

Correspondingly, article 18 from the mentioned Law determines the role of the elementary school with special classes' principal in establishing a resource center to reinforce the disabled students' learning. This center provides material and human resources to deliver appropriate assistance to these students, teachers, parents and the inclusive teams from other elementary schools. Article 19 specifies the boost from the elementary schools regarding the disabled students, meaning that schools assign educational assistant, personal assistant, and proper expert's help from the learning support center, as well as inclusive team and assistive technology. The schools that do not have resource center or learning support center must get help from the one that have such centers in the community. In compliance with article 30 of this Law, the individualized educational plan includes the educational results' adjustment and modified programs designed for students with complex needs, which determines the educational results based on the students' skills to develop their independence, personal growth and social relations.

## **1.2. Regulation for the educational assistants' assignments (2020)**

In accordance with article 5 from this Regulation, the educational assistant prepares personal programs cooperating with the student appointed by the principal, teacher/teachers, and other inclusive team members as well as with the elementary schools with resource center. The educational assistant is not a carrier of the teaching process and does not make the individualized educational plan or altered programs and resources needed for work with the student. Article 10 defines the educational assistant cooperation with the parents/tutors, pointing out that he should act with respect and understanding and that he represents a person the parents can rely on when sharing expectations in their children's need, under the teacher's supervision. The educational assistant exchanges information with parents for each student's alteration, under the teacher's supervision as well and acts carefully with the information obtained from the parents, which are especially sensitive. Article 11 determines the educational assistant cooperation with the teacher on the methods and activities he implements in a particular teaching class. Further, the educational assistant respects the teacher's opinion and, in collaboration with him, arranges the level and the type of help these students need. Furthermore, he gets and provides feedback for the teacher and is capable to propose methods and activities that he sees as helpful for the students. In addition, he observes the students' behavior during the teaching class and the breaks and supplies the teacher with information on improvement of the socio-emotional and inclusive school climate.

## **1.3. Regulation for assessment of the disabled students (2021)**

This Regulation is amongst the most relevant documents that determines the disabled students' assessment. Article 4 from this Regulation states that the students' get their grades after finishing a program topic/area and a specified period (trimester, semester, the end of the school year). These students can get the grade after the achievement of the adjusted learning results of the teaching program (these results are included in the individualized educational plan) and the students with complex needs can get their grade after the accomplishment of certain learning results according to the modified program. What is very important, this article stresses out that the grade will include only the attainment of the adapted learning results. Students with complex needs participating in the modified program obtain a descriptive grade, again considering only the learning results defined in the modified program in regard with teaching content remembering and reproducing and teaching content understanding and comprehension, i.e. the students' ability to implement the learning content in particular assignments. In forming the descriptive grade, teacher uses all the instruments and formative assessment evidences in order to achieve students' assessment objectivity.

## **2. Broader research context**

Substantial studies indicate positive and encouraging changes in the broader public knowledge and attitudes toward the disabled students (UNICEF, 2014, 2018), in sense that people know more of these students and comprehend that what has to alter is the environment and not the children themselves. According to this research, the public also supports the view that the disabled students should live more independently and productively and that they should be involved in the education among their inmates without disabilities. The UNICEF's analysis also demonstrates the change in the terminology, i.e. replacement of the phrase handicapped children with disabled children. Further, the Research education sector within the Bureau for



the development of the education in the RNM (Hasipi et al., 2018) provides insights in the actual inclusion of disabled children in the RNM elementary education. They find out that the majority of the examined schools have prepared personal programs, action plan for the work of the inclusive school team and procedures for design of the individualized education plan, although certain inclusive teams do not have developed such procedures, pointing out the teachers' lack of training in such activities, as a main reason. Furthermore, in regard to assessment, this research shows that 68,9 % of the schools have prepared procedures for following the disabled students' advancement and results. Besides these results, some studies indicate teachers' lack of knowledge on the ASD (autistic specter disorder) which leads to negative attitude toward the ASD persons' inclusion (Mitrovska & Trajkova, 2013). They conclude that solid bases for real inclusive education implementation in the RNM do not exist yet, thus they recommend compulsory workshops/trainings and simulative activities which introduces teachers in these students' specific needs. Moreover, Mitchell (2015) concludes that the inclusive education improves disabled students' writing, reading and mathematics achievements, thus pinpointing its philosophic ground to recognize and accept the students' diversity, socially and emotionally, which, accordingly, will fulfill the key criterion of the inclusive education concept. Atanasova (2018) claims that disabled students included in the regular education constantly show better results than those who are not part of the inclusive education. Talevska (2019) sees the following as barriers to real inclusive education: lack of education, trainings, teachers' and pedagogical-psychological service's motivation, lack of parents' education (they who have children with typical and with special needs), as well as lack of proper technical factors for the inclusive education quality. Dvojakova (2019) stresses out that there is no uniform and unique way to identify the disabilities and believes that the Ministry of labor and social politics estimation model will lead to changes.

In addition, plenty of researches focus on the inclusive education connection with disabled students' assessment. Chickering & Gamson (1987) comprehend the assessment through the students' work quality, communication with students and teachers, students' motivation on how to learn and what to focus on, students' and teachers' work. Radulov (2004) stresses the formative assessment developmental character and its motivational function and confirms the difficulty to explain the differences in the quality of students' achievements especially if they have the same grade and if the grades refer to different types of curricula. Rouse (2008) highlights the irrelevant teaching programs, didactic methods, inappropriate assessment systems and the insufficient teachers' training as most relevant barriers to inclusive education. Silva, Munk & Bursuck (2015) insist on the mutual teacher, parents and children cooperation in decision-making, which brings out criteria for students' assessment and the way it will be conducted. Hence, they appeal on adaptations in various types of assessments, which will make the assessment process more relevant and fair for disabled students. Angeloska-Galevska & Ilikj-Peshikj (2018) argue that teachers in the educational process encounter difficulties when assessing the disabled students' knowledge, especially for those involved in inclusive classrooms, and indicate that many teachers implement informal individual assessments, thus inferring the lack of specialized politics and recommendation in this area. Finally, Ilikj-Peshikj (2021) states that there are ideas for assessing the disabled students according to the accomplishment proposed in the individualized education plan during the school year and according to the goals of the regular teaching program at the end of the school year, which, according to her, is unfair and unacceptable. As she says, it is very hard to explain the disabled students that they cannot achieve the grade they deserve according to the individualized education plan due to not fulfilling the standards and criteria prescribed with the general educational norms. She adds that the solution for these problems is the descriptive assessment, which, unfortunately, does not apply to higher classes. According to her, descriptive assessment gives insights on the scope and quality of the students' advancements, on the

achieved goals and on establishing the future goals. This means that the students can achieve the goals set in the individualized educational plan and get a higher grade, however, compared to other students, their grade should be lower. In this sense, the disabled students' assessment can lose its objectivity. Hence, if the students' achievements are assessed only according to the individualized education plan, which is more acceptable, then the grade does not provide correct information to the outside world and parent will get unreal picture of their children's improvement, which further leads to problems and misunderstandings. She recommends the need of teachers' trainings that will promote their competencies to assess these students and improve their skills to prepare an IEP as well; the upgrading of the teaching approaches that will contribute to higher students' achievements; the role of the inclusive school team in addressing the question related to assessment.

This short survey indicates that all conducted research concentrates on the fact that teachers do not have proper knowledge on how to assess the disabled students, thus they insist on enhancing the teachers' training in this very relevant segment.

### **3. Methods**

The present qualitative study aims to contribute the inclusive education and assessment connection, answering a single, yet a very significant question: What is the teachers' practice in the disabled students' assessment in Bitola municipality RNM so far? Therefore, informal interviews with 5 teachers from Bitola who are the main inclusive educational process carriers and who can provide objective and practical insights for the research question serve as a sample, having in mind Lincoln & Guba's (1985) view that each sample is determined according to certain goal, hence, in this sense, each sample is purposeful. Then, Maxwell's (2005) claim that the reasons for the choice of the mentioned sample should be revealed is considered, as well as Dörnyei's (2007) stance that those interviewed need to deliver different and rich understanding of the phenomenon being examined. When there is only one research question, it is justified to use a small sample size (Myers & Barnes, 2005). The authors record the interviews and then transcribe them. Data analysis comprises interviews coding, i.e. inductive coding, initial, axial and selective coding and constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and the general qualitative interpretative/inductive method (Dey, 1993; Merriam, 2002; Thomas, 2006; Creswell, 2009; Morse, 2011; Kahlke, 2014; Harding & Whitehead, 2016).

The main research question entails three meaningful aspects on the disabled students' assessment: the role of MES in supporting teachers' work with disabled students; teachers' IEP writing competencies; and teachers' assessment practice related to these students.

### **4. Analysis, results and discussion**

#### **4.1. Teachers' interviews**

During the initial coding (reading the transcribed interviews for the first time), many in vivo codes emerge, such as: training, MES, Regulation (2020), knowledge, IEP, program, section, knowledge, tests, writing assignments, knowledge, quizzes, games, dilemmas, certificate, program, grades. Then, the second and the third author read the transcripts, and they agree with the initial established codes. These in vivo codes come up directly from the participants' answers, showing that they represent a big concern for them. After that, the authors turn to axial coding in which they develop categories consider the similarity of the initial codes. The codes training, MES Regulation, knowledge, program, dilemmas, certificate and grades form the category named MES; the code paying arise a memo writing; the codes IEP, program,

section and knowledge refer to the category IEP; and the codes tests, writing assessment, quizzes and games form the category named methods.

The first category indicates that the main teachers' concern relates to the MES. According to the participants, MES does indeed conduct several teachers' trainings helping them to understand the inclusive education concept and providing assistance in working with disabled students and they really broaden their horizons on these students' nature, complexity and needs. These trainings make them aware that disabled students really need inclusion and deserve the right to participate in quality education. Moreover, teachers comprehend that various barriers may constrain the disabled students' involvement in the society and their equal rights as others. In addition, they understand the society efforts to include these students in the general educational process. However, in the participants' words, none of the trainings focuses on the disabled students' assessment issues, which contributes to their lack of knowledge for this relevant matter and to the teachers' uncertainty of whether they assess these students correctly. Obviously, the disabled students' assessment is among the factors that worries them. One participant says:

*“Simply, I do not have knowledge to assess disabled students. I do not know how to conduct it. I am uncertain of whether I am assessing them correctly. I am afraid that I can harm their feelings.”*

Other participant says:

*“Believing that these students deserve an objective and proper assessment and not having any training related to their achievements assessment, I have paid for a personal training myself. Yet, in my opinion, it does not seem right for teachers to pay for trainings themselves.”*

The abovementioned item regarding the teachers' payment for training engenders numerous inclusive education questions. Although, in this case, it is the teacher's intention to pay, the MOES should not allow such payments and should provide proper teachers' help and assistance. What comes in mind is that many careful and concerned teachers want to work with these students taking into consideration their interests, motivation and needs. Hence, teachers are entitled to appropriate trainings with respect to disabled students' assessment. This will direct teachers to assess disabled students appropriately and motivate them to adjust various assessment activities to meet these students' necessities.

Correspondingly, the teachers' need for special training on the disabled students' assessment is apparent. In the participants' words:

*“We do have a need for more training, it is really complex matter, after all, we are qualified to work with so called regular students, whose assessment is also quite demanding and multidimensional process.”*

The lack of trainings on the disabled students' assessment and specialized politics and recommendation in this area correlates with the findings declared in the search of Rouse (2008), Angelovska-Galevska & Ilikj-Peshikj (2018) and Hasipi et al. (2018). However, this contributes to some considerations regarding the teachers' training. Namely, all of the teachers, so far, conduct teaching with so-called regular students. Thus, the MES believes that these teachers can manage the disabled students' needs are debatable. Whether the teachers' trainings will really make them competent in working and satisfying disabled students' needs, given that there are special persons (special educators, rehabilitators etc.) who are educated in this

complex area is also arguable although teachers state that they believe trainings will help them to deal with this complex matter.

All of the participants claim that they adhere to the Regulation for the disabled students' assessment issued by the MES, meaning that they adjust the regular teaching program to these students' needs and use instruments and formative assessment evidences. While the first appears to be true, i.e. each teacher adapts the regular teaching units to the disabled students' needs, the second requires further elaboration related to the category methods because none of the participants mention the words instrument and formative during the interviews. Yet, they list special tests, writing assessments, quizzes and games which are formative assessment techniques. The reason for such answers can be twofold, firstly they may not quite comprehend the question, and secondly, they may expect that there are some particular techniques, methods, procedures and strategies for these students' assessment that they have no knowledge of and that these methods, techniques and procedures differ from the ones they use in their everyday practice. In line with the study of Janusheva & Pejchinovska (2011), Talevski, Janusheva & Pejchinovska (2014) and Talevski & Janusheva (2015), there are many evidences from the practice, which certifies that the formative assessment techniques, methods and procedures are quite suitable for assessment of the disabled students' achievements. Only one teacher uses quizzes and games that he creates for these students' assessment:

*“These techniques work well with regular students, i.e. quizzes and games are always welcomed because they increase students' motivation and achievements and encourage their independence, critical and creative thinking. Therefore, I use these techniques with the disabled students and it appears that they work fine with them too.”*

What comes out is that teachers' creativity is amongst the very factors that can boost these students' confidence and customize different assessment methods, techniques and procedures to their needs, which correspondences to the research of Silva, Munk & Bursuck (2015). Still, it is incomprehensible that teachers have no knowledge on formative assessment techniques and do not even consider adjusting them to the disabled students. One logical conclusion is that, as said before, teachers are uncertain that these techniques will work with the disabled students and that in their opinion there are some special assessment techniques that distinguish from the one they use in their teaching practice. If inclusive education needs adjustment and modifications during the teaching process, then it is easy to assume that customizing the formative assessment techniques will have effect in the disabled students' assessment.

Furthermore, in respect with these students' assessment, teachers raise their dilemmas bond to the adjusted teaching programs, certificates and grades, stating that the students' certifications should clearly indicate that these students get their grades according to the adjusted teaching program. They support their arguments with the regular students' complaints that disabled students learn less material, but obtain higher grades. All participants say:

*“It is not fair, the disabled students certifications should definitely articulate that these students' accomplishments are gained within the adapted teaching programs. It does not seem right to equate the grade 5 given to these students and the grade 5 given to the regular students. Many things are still not clear.”*

In this sense, the Ilikj-Peshikj (2021) proposal for descriptive assessment of these students sounds reasonable. Regarding the disabled students' assessment, it is apparent that they will obtain their grades according to the IEP. However, when it comes to students' grades in the certifications, many things are still confusing the teachers. If disabled students' education with inmates without disability is amongst the society's priority, as seen in UNICEF's study and

other research, then the society efforts to provide real and not only declarative education is amongst the key concept for the inclusive education. Hence, the MES should specify whether the students' certification suggest that the disabled student's achievements are result of the adapted or modified teaching programs.

Additionally, the interviews signify the lack of teachers' knowledge on preparing the IEP. As said before, they all adapt the teaching lessons to the disabled students' necessities. Yet, what is the nature of this adjustment? Do teachers have uniform model for IEP writing? Does the IEP refer each disabled student separately given the disability complexity and variety? If each teacher tailors the teaching program within his view on what should this program contain, then there will be different modifications on one lesson unit and this practice further hardens the disabled students' assessment. Hence, the MES should refer to these concerns as well

However, four participants' IOP lack the assessment section, meaning that they do not fill in the section referring to these students' assessment, saying:

*"I do not know what to write in this section. I am not sure whether the formative assessment instruments, methods, technique and strategies used for regular students comply with the disabled students' needs."*

Only one teacher fills in this section. However, his knowledge is a result of a training he paid for himself. He says:

*"I prepare the IEP and fill in the assessment section, thanks to the training for which I have paid. I include checklist, anecdotal notes, portfolio, working sheets with illustrations and control list. I compose all these documents for each teaching class and for each topic. During the teaching class, I mostly use the checklists and at the end of the class, the anecdotal notes. Then, when I need to assess these students, it is not hard at all because working on these activities allows me to follow the students' achievements and I have already insights on their achievements."*

As seen from this participant's state, the mentioned techniques are in fact formative assessment techniques teachers use when assess the regular students' achievement. It is obvious that they work well with the disabled students' as well. Therefore, the fact that this particular teacher pays for his training and four teachers do not fill in the assessment section sound a little bit odd and leads to dilemmas and hesitations. How can it be for teachers having experience not to be aware that if inclusive education connects with adjustments and modification, assessment needs adaptation as well. This provides a solid base to infer that teachers' confusions reflect their classroom activities and inclusive education concept needs to be clarified.

## **5. Conclusion**

From all mentioned above, it is clear that the inclusive education is still at the beginning of its development and the debate of whether there are solid basis for its introduction are still going on. Besides many other difficulties, dilemmas, hesitations and confusions related with the inclusive education nature, multifold issues refer to disabled students' assessment. The general conclusion is that MES should conduct continuous training and workshops to strengthen teachers' assessment competencies, which helps to clarify the dilemmas and improves the inclusive educational climate. Further, the cooperation among the relevant factors responsible for the students' inclusion is extremely important in order to adapt the inclusive education closer to the disabled students' needs. In relation to the assessment, it seems that assessment

adaptations lift the assessment process on a completely new level and make this process more objective and rightful.

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