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## From Segregation to Inclusion: the Case of Kosovo

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*Abstract:* Implementing inclusive education is a challenge for each educational system. Conceptualizing inclusion and implementation practice depends primarily on cultural contexts as well as on the educational systems in different countries. Kosovo, like other countries, has experienced the road from segregation towards inclusion and faces many challenges with the practice of inclusion. Following a qualitative approach, the study focused on the analysis of the legal and pedagogical documents related to inclusive education in Kosovo. Moreover, the study also explores teacher attitudes and understanding of inclusion and identifies the needs and challenges faced with the implementation of inclusion in Kosovo. The data were collected from two focus groups (one with nine teachers from regular schools, and the other with seven teachers from resource centres) and semi-structured interviews with six teachers from regular classrooms. Results were analysed and interpreted based on the thematic analysis method. The study showed that the participants are clear on the legislation and pedagogical documents and consider them well drafted. Participants argue that good inclusive practices do exist where teachers have invested in their training and professional development. The study also showed that teachers need adequate training to work successfully with students with special needs, even as they face numerous challenges in the process of transition from schools or special classes to inclusive classes. Through describing the situation about inclusive education in Kosovo, this paper documents the transition and lays out the present achievements and challenges which will support the next steps in implementing inclusive education in the future.

*Keywords:* segregation, inclusion, legislation, pedagogical documents, challenges of inclusion

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## **Introduction**

For a long time, segregationist philosophy and practice has had decisive effects on people with disabilities, schools, and society in general (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1996, in Stainback & Stainback, 1996). This philosophy conditioned the marginalization of children with individual learning differences and gave rise to the idea that students with special needs are better accommodated in special schools due to opportunities for higher academic achievement. Inclusion, as a philosophy, on the other hand, supports teaching students that it is necessary to understand that everyone is equal and valuable to our society (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). According to Universal Design Learning (UDL) framework, recognizing that the way individuals learn is unique supports teachers to develop instructions that meet the diverse needs of all learners. Therefore, the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate individual learning differences is essential for the implementation of inclusive education so that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities ("Universal Design for Learning" n.d.). Often, the term 'inclusive education' becomes synonymous with education for children with disabilities. While this may still be the primary motivation for inclusive education, successful inclusive practice will be successful for all children with many different attributes such as ethnicity, language, gender, and socio-economic status (Schuelka, 2018).

In practical terms, inclusive education seeks to increase access, presence, participation and success for all students in education (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). Its implementation is also aspired by Education for All and Sustainable Development Goals for ensuring inclusive and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning (SDG4), especially the most vulnerable individuals and population cohorts (UNESCO, 2017).

Inclusive education is a continuous process of educational transformation, and a clear set of equity indicators (UNESCO, 2017) can support inclusive education implementation. There are clear indicators to demonstrate the success of the implementation of inclusive education (European Agency for Special Needs Education, 2011, 2012 & 2013) such as Education jurisdictions' legislation and regulations for inclusive education; Increasing government budgets for inclusive education; Increased funding of re-search programs and projects on inclusive education; etc. (UNESCO, 2017).

According to Schuelka (2018), key factors in inclusive education implementation include, first of all, a clear concept and definition of inclusive education. Authors Zabeli and Perolli-Shehu (2020) explored in more detail the understanding of the meaning of inclusion among Kosovo teachers, concluding that teachers have broad knowledge about inclusive education and believe that it has only positive effects for children with special needs.

The authors found that the teachers involved in this study understood the essence of inclusive education and are in alignment with current thinking about the moral basis of inclusion.

Another key factor in the implementation of inclusive education involves school and classroom level transformation. Researchers Villa and Thousand (2012), defined 12 characteristics of the inclusive school: A sense of community; Visionary leadership; High standards; Collaborative partnership; Chang-ing roles and responsibilities, Array of services; Partnership with parents; Flexible learning environments; Strategies based research; Forms of accountability; Access; and, Continuing professional developments. Depeler (2012, in Boyle & Topping, 2012) awarded special importance for the functioning of the Inclusive School to collaboration among all school factors by considering it as a social complex, which depends on leadership and collective structure that makes diversity be respected. In this sense, community involvement is of great importance. Furthermore, McLeskey and Waldron (2002) conclude that for schools to be inclusive, they should be prepared to undertake substantive changes and thus make sure they are designing good programs. The researchers note ten basic lessons, including lessons that change needs to be substantive and transformational, not simply an “add-on”; change needs to be supported both from the top and bottom levels; tailored to each school; and supported in professional development.

Salend and Whittaker (2012) highlight some good practices for inclusive education in classrooms drawn by educators and students, such as: Implement Response – to – Intervention (RtI) system; Develop Individualized Education Program (IEP) tailored to students’ strengths and challenges; Adopt a competency-oriented approach; Foster acceptance of individual differences, diversity, friendships and peer supports; Collaborate and communicate with professionals and family members; Implement a comprehensive and balanced classroom management plan that is consistent with the school’s positive behavioural intervention and support; Differentiate instruction and incorporate the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL); Employ instructional and assistive technologies; Teach students to use a range of learning strategies; Use peer-mediated instruction; Use culturally and responsive instructional practices; and, use a range of assessment strategies to monitor student learning and inform teaching practices.

The education system in Kosovo from the 1950s until the last decade of the 20th century was influenced by the education system of the former Yugoslavia, characterized by the socialist-communist regime, and as such, reflected a centralized education system - controlled by the state. The whole educational mechanism, including schools, curricula, textbooks, methods, etc. were controlled by the state and were uniform in their organization. Schools primarily served political regimes, and pedagogy – particularly ob-

jectives, content, and method – were unified and often externally controlled. Teaching focused on delivering selected and often ideologically favored knowledge, with little or no space for the learner’s own interpretations, initiatives, or critical thinking (Sahlberg & Boce, 2010).

In the post-1999 conflict years up to now, the education system in Kosovo is continually changing in terms of structure and content. It is more focused on transforming society through radical changes in education. Progress is made in the curricula of pre-university education beginning in 2001, which initially was objective-oriented and did not differ much from the previous curricula. The predefined curricula, although administered by teachers, was prepared without seeking their input in designing the plan and program for their classes. While radical changes were made with the Kosovo Curriculum Framework (KCF) of 2011, these efforts were not directed at the development of the content, but rather on the development of student competencies. This conditioned changes in teaching methods, teaching techniques (from traditional to interactive lessons), and also changes in assessment practices- from traditional summative to more formative assessment (KCF, 2011). The 2011 curriculum was revised in 2016, and guidance was provided through other teaching and work planning documents at all levels (KCF, revised, 2016). Besides changes in legislation and policy documents, a shift from special schools to resource centres brought about change in education and mindset but also challenges in the implementation of inclusion. Today, Kosovo students can attend resource centres, attached classes, or regular classrooms.

### **The interpretation of inclusion in Kosovo context and beyond**

In the Albanian terminology through the year 2000, the term “special schools”, “special classes” was used, while students were labelled “students with developmental disabilities.” Since 2000, a different terminology began to be used, such as “disabled students,” pupils with disabilities, sometimes “handicapped students,” and lastly, “special needs students.” All of these denominations are used for students who have learning difficulties as a result of mental retardation, sight impairments, hearing impairments, communication difficulties, emotional and behavioural disorders, or other specific learning difficulties. Conceptualizing differences among children, specifically, differences entailed by disability and special needs is a difficult educational problem (Terzi, 2007). Therefore, this terminology has distinguished students with atypical development from typically developing students. As in other countries, pupils with special educational needs are thus distinguished from “ordinary” or “normal” pupils” (Evans, 2007).

In recent years, the term “special needs” is used officially by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), covering all children who

have difficulties in the education process as a result of impairment/disability and also students with learning difficulties due to their language, ethnicity, or economic and social status. There is no differentiation of the notion of “disability” from other difficulties, so when it comes to the right to education, this reflects the inclusion of all without distinction. In this way, the term “students with special needs” replaces the terms “disability” (which, although being used in this text, has no use in Albanian because it is considered an offensive term), “handicapped,” “abnormal,” “atypical,” “disabled,” etc. Therefore, the notion of “special needs” serves as an “umbrella” term within the framework of which all pupils are included without distinction. This term, “special needs,” was used for the first time after 2000 and is now understood as a term that supports the inclusive approach, which is seen as a guiding philosophy and strategy for securing the right to education for all.

Parallel to the notion “inclusion” there are two other notions used in Kosovo, “segregation” and “integration.” Segregation implies the education of children with different impairments in special schools. Segregation in Kosovo reflects the special education that can be briefly described as education to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability with identifiable goals and methods (Farell, 2012). Segregationist philosophy and practice are determined by the fact that it has a greater effect on people with disabilities, schools and society in general (Karagianis, Stainback & Stainback, 1996, quoted by Stainback and Stainback, 1996). In Kosovo, for several decades it was thought that special education offers more opportunities for the development of children with special needs. This is similar to reasoning from various countries where research shows that the functioning of special schools presents benefits in four areas: (1) children’s functioning levels (mostly for significant medical care needs, needs associated with severe emotional, behavioral and intellectual difficulties/disabilities); (2) the kind of provision available (safe, calm, flexible programs, temporary, part-time, link and movement between ordinary/general and separate settings); (3) special services offered (specialist facilities, specialist professionals); and (4) stakeholder’s interest (parental and teachers’ preferences)” (Norwich, 2012, p. 216).

The notion of “integration” was common as a term after 1999 to express the meaning of providing opportunities - special needs students who had access to regular, attached and occasionally participatory classrooms in regular classes, with the same curricula as other students in regular schools (although the use of the notion “regular school” is not always preferred). Slee (2011) and Norwich (2002), both explain that integration in some countries implies the place where the child is involved in a system, in which the child is assimilated without adapting itself contrary to inclusion that is described as participation. Nevertheless, Norwich (2012) finds that in England in the 1980s, the term integration was not intended solely for the location but also

for other social aspects of children with and without special educational needs, whereas, Farrell (2012) defines the notion of integration as a term that precedes inclusion and can be understood as a principle of special education. Generally speaking, segregation is referred to education in special schools; integration is referred to education in attached classes, whereas inclusion relates to education in regular classes.

While the term “segregation” and “integration” now have a clearer distinction, the term “inclusion” still causes uncertainty, because it is interpreted in different ways. The concept of inclusive education differs from previously held notions of ‘integration’ and ‘mainstreaming,’ which implies a concern mainly with a disability and a ‘special educational need’, and preparing students for mainstream education. In contrast to this, inclusion is about the rights of children to participate fully in the general curricular activities of the school and a respect for their social, civil, and educational rights (Meynert, 2014). According to the UDL framework, which is based on the philosophy of inclusion, teaching, and learning needs to be tailored to help all students and give an equal opportunity to succeed.

Inclusive education finds its philosophical roots in ideas about human rights, social justice and equity. According to some scholars, the term Inclusion generally means ending all separate special education placement for all students and move students to full time placement in general education with appropriate special education support within that classroom (Garvar-Pinhas & Pedhazur, 1989; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996, in Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016).

The philosophy of inclusive education has generated attention worldwide arguing that exclusion and isolation are not justifiable solutions. Thus, the reconstruction of the education system goes towards accommodation for all students indiscriminately, though this is not considered an easy mission (Duhaney, 2012, in Boyle & Topping, 2012), especially if the inclusion is based only on the right to education and the right to participate in the same learning program within the same location. Therefore, individual needs are to be taken into account through inclusion (Norwich, 2012).

The “inclusion” notion has its history and development of its contextual meaning. Topping (2012), in analysing other authors (such as Nind et al., 2003; Farrell & Ainscow, 2002), concludes that “...inclusion implies celebrating the diversity and supporting the achievement and participation of all pupils who face learning and/or behavior challenges of any kind, in terms of socio-economic circumstances, ethnic origin, cultural heritage, religion, linguistic heritage, gender, sexual preference, and so on”. He illustrates this definition as expanding the notion of inclusion in four levels: Children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream school; Children with SEN accessing mainstream curriculum with social and emotional integration; All

children participating despite challenges stemming from poverty, class, race, religion, linguistic and cultural heritage, gender, etc.; and all children, parents, and community equally achieving and participating in lifelong learning in many forms in and out of School and College. This is also evident in understanding and developing inclusion in Kosovo. It was initially characterized with the inclusion of students with various types of impairments in regular schools as physical participation. The second level represents the momentum when children are included in the system, in regular schools and have access to a same customized curriculum. The third level characterizes the stage when children are included in the system, in regular schools regardless of diversity, while the fourth level is currently in development which involves inclusion in the community and lifelong learning at school from elementary **to higher education**.

### **A brief history of special education in Kosovo**

In the last five decades of the 20th century, education for children with special needs in Kosovo was delivered in special institutions. Special needs students in Kosovo have been provided with education in pre-school institutions, special schools and special classes, which functioned within regular schools with a relatively small number of children (Zabeli, 2010). Special education in Kosovo has undergone two basic phases. The first phase (1950-1999) was characterized by the education of children in special schools and special classes, which began after the Second World War in the 1950's and continued until the end of the 20th century. This period was characterized by typical segregation, with isolated special schools, teachers with preparation for regular class teachers and no specific preparation for work with students with special needs. The second phase, which began in 2000, brought changes in the entire education system and therefore a different approach to special education. Under the auspices of international associations, the new phase of thinking about inclusive education began. Until then, "inclusive" was an unknown notion in Albanian terminology and an unfamiliar practice. It initially seemed too illusory, as something that may occur elsewhere, but not in Kosovo.

After 2000, radical changes were made in the field of special education. Special schools were transformed into resource centres, and special classes into attached class. The goal was to provide greater opportunities for the education of children with special needs and then gradually integrate this population of children into regular classes at the nearest schools (MEST, 2015). Unfortunately, the sole infrastructural transformation was insufficient in bringing about meaningful change. Teachers in these classes took charge without any training, formal or non-formal, without the appropriate

textbooks and without any professional assistance. Formal and non-formal training took place in the last 15 years within the institutions of higher education and various associations through international projects.

In the development of the second phase, international projects have helped specifically, cooperating with the education sector then-led by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). In this sense, a major contribution was initially provided by the Finish Support Development Education in Kosovo (FSDEK). FSDEK's several-year contribution has been geared towards educating teachers, directors, and educational leaders, and this influenced the thinking about inclusive education as a philosophy, strategy and educational practice (Venäläinen & Gashi, 2015). Other organizations such as Save the Children, UNICEF, etc. have also contributed, mainly in the training of teachers of special schools and regular schools.

In this way, with the consolidation of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), a number of laws and strategies were drafted that regulated the issue of special education, respectively inclusive education. All these are based on world documents including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; the Salamanca Statement, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other important international documents (UNESCO, 2009; Garner, 2009; Stubbs, 2002).

A review of existing documents in Kosovo, conducted within the frames of this study, found that the current legislation regulates aspects of the right of all children to education, including children with special needs, and affirms inclusive education whereby all educational institutions have to accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, linguistic or other. The principle of inclusiveness is required to be implemented in accordance with international norms as foreseen in the international documents (2004 Law on Primary and Secondary Education; 2011 Law on Pre-University Education). Other legal and policy documents, emphasize, among main principles, the creation of equal opportunities for all students and teachers without any distinction; and the curriculum framework obliges for inclusive education and promotes inclusiveness, which implies the right of each child to equal and qualitative inclusion and taking on the basis of differences in the learning process. It is evident that the emphasis of the importance of inclusion and measures towards inclusiveness are well reflected in all government policies and documents governing the functioning of institutions. This is also evidenced by the improvement of laws and other pedagogical documents that have transformed segregation policy of special education to inclusive education (Zabeli, 2013). Parallel to this, several changes were also made to school practice. Special schools were transformed into a resource centre, with special classes in attached or resource classes. Resource centres,

in addition to working with children with special needs, have been established to also provide assistance to educational institutions and families and individuals in need. Meanwhile, attached classes are classes that function in regular schools and teach children with special educational needs. These classes were foreseen to be transformed into resource classes in the future. The attached classes provide support to students with special educational needs included in regular school classes and provide support services, individualized for special educational needs, and produce teaching materials; to support teachers working with students with special educational needs; they organize inclusive activities inside and outside the school; plan, advise, and evaluate individualized education plans (IEP); hold meetings with parents and various NGOs. A review of literature suggests that to implement inclusive education, inclusive practices across the school municipality, including curricula, learning resources, textbooks, pupils, parents, etc. have their importance and weight. However, the authors believe the crucial factor is the teacher. Academic, professional, pedagogical preparation, willingness to face challenges, and level of responsibility are decisive for working with all children indiscriminately. Research reports that to minimize barriers to inclusive education, the teacher plays a very important role (Odongo, 2016). Teachers need to recognize education policies towards inclusion and need continuous professional development to meet established standards (Forlin, 2006). Teachers should know and have the skills to use differentiated teaching strategies, curricula, materials, assessment methods, to successfully engage a diverse student population (Buli- Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016). All of these features can be synthesized as basic values for all teachers in inclusive education defined by European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education: Valuing learner diversity – learner difference is considered as a resource and an asset to education; Supporting all learners – teachers have high expectations for all learners' achievements; Working with others – collaboration and teamwork are essential approaches for all teachers; and, continuing personal professional development – teaching is a learning activity and teachers take responsibility for their own lifelong learning.

The main purpose of this study is to identify and describe the process of transition from special education towards inclusive education in Kosovo and identify teacher perspectives and understanding in this regard, as well as the needs and challenges they face in implementing inclusive education in Kosovo.

The study explores the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of teachers in Kosovo in relation to the transition process from special education towards inclusive education?
2. How well are teachers equipped with information regarding the legislation in force and the pedagogical documentation of inclusion?

3. What are the teachers' experiences in relation to best practices in inclusive education?
4. What are some of the needs, challenges and perspectives of inclusive education in Kosovo?

By exploring these research questions, the study aims to generate findings on good practices and challenges in the transition from special education to inclusive education, and explore teachers understanding and attitudes towards this change.

## **Methodology**

Research methodology literature suggests using qualitative approaches to better understand attitudes, experiences, and contextual factors of a given situation. Through a qualitative approach, one is able to analyse the context within which the process of transition from special education to inclusive education happens, having in mind the contextual factors and the uniqueness of the problem (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). Although statistical data is more reliable, it can result challenging to interpret when analysing change (Silverman, 2001). Therefore, this study aims to gain a better picture of the situation and deepen the understanding of changes brought about by inclusive education, rather than testing hypotheses.

The findings are extracted from data collected through document analysis and exploring teacher understanding and attitudes. Similar studies conducted in the past were examined in order to support the qualitative design of the study. Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were used to obtain the data. The methodology and instruments are considered typical when compared to instruments used in this study.

## **Sample size and participants**

The study was conducted in two different educational facilities. Using a convenience sampling, the study targeted teachers with considerable experience in working with children with special needs, and considerable knowledge in the area of special and inclusive education. The sample consisted of teachers from all levels of the pre-university education system, working in both regular schools and resource centres. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the information collected in this study is kept strictly confidential and ensures the anonymity of participants/

Teachers were recruited from two different educational facilities, one regular school and one resource centre. A total of 16 teachers participated in two focus groups, and six teachers participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. The first focus groups consisted of teachers working in regular school, with a total of nine participants (seven female, two male), out of

which one was a preschool teacher, four elementary school teachers, two subject teachers, one traveling teacher and one supporting teacher. The second focus group was conducted with 7 teachers from the resource centre (7 female), out of which three were elementary school teachers and four subject teachers. Semi-structured interviews were held with three elementary school teachers, two subject teachers for grades 6-9 and one subject teacher for grades 10-12. All 16 participants have completed formal education- 3 BA graduated teachers and 13 in the process of completing their MA studies.

### **Approach to data collection and analysis**

The study was initially based in the analysis of the legislative and pedagogical information on inclusion. Specifically, Law on Primary and Secondary Education (2004) which regulates aspects of the right of all children to education, including children with special needs; Law of pre university education, 2011 (no. 04/L0032); The New Kosovo Curriculum Framework (2001), which obliges for inclusive education; Kosovo Curriculum Framework (2011) and the revised version (2016); Kosovo Strategic Education Plan 2011 -2016; Strategic Plan for the organization of Inclusive Education of Children with Special Needs in Pre-University Education in Kosovo, 2016-2021; and Individual Education Plan, 2017. The information from the review of the documentation was analysed using the content analysis method.

Focus group discussion and in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect data on the attitudes and experiences of teachers with inclusive education. This choice provides the participants with the possibility of free expression and allows for a more in-depth analysis of the issue at hand, reflecting this was more exploratory research (Matthews and Ross, 2010). The data was registered during the focus groups and interviews, and later transcribed and analysed.

Results were analysed and interpreted based on the thematic analysis method in three steps, namely (1) development of indicators to identify the data easier, (2) development of codes and categories from the extracted topics, and (3) summary and interpretation of data.

## **Results**

### **Understanding of legislative and pedagogical documentation in inclusion**

Kosovar legislation regarding the education of children with special needs is comparable to highly developed countries in Europe. In addition, legislation and other documents from the Kosovo Curriculum Framework (KCF, 2011; revised 2016) promote inclusiveness. From its five basic principles, inclusiveness is set as the first principle, referring to the right of every

child for equal access and inclusion to quality education. Guided by this principle, KCF provides customized solutions to address student diversity in the learning process. This allows students to express their values, feel accepted, appreciated, and benefit from the learning process.

Other supporting documents and various manuals have been drafted to assist teachers in working with children with special needs. Finland supported the education sector in Kosovo during the period 2000–2013 in the development of inclusive policies. The support aimed to contribute to the establishment of an inclusive education system that would be able to respond to diverse special educational needs. Support was directed to the development of education policies, building capacities, and the development of a support system for students with special education needs enrolling in regular schools. From the analysis of the documentation, we find that the legislative and pedagogical documents are well-oriented towards inclusion and are generally perceived as a positive ground by the respondents in the study.

The content analysis of Kosovo legal and pedagogical documents reveals that the legal and policy infrastructure in Kosovo promotes a) learning environment that enables access, accommodation and support for all students, b) active learning and participation for all students in the learning process, including students with special needs, gifted students, and those with learning difficulties, c) learning that reflects learners' needs, interests, capabilities, and learning styles, and d) active involvement of the learners in the selection and organization of learning experiences, highlighting their importance and enabling them to assess their learning outcomes. The five elements were synthesized as central components and competencies of the educational policy of inclusive education in Kosovo (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Components of the educational policy of inclusive education in Kosovo



The realization of the above-mentioned competencies and opportunities may result in improved school attendance and increased student achieve-

ment. Therefore, the existing documentation paves the way for the implementation of inclusive education.

The study revealed that teachers agree that laws and pedagogical documentation are well-grounded and harmonized with international conventions on child rights, and other international documents. Still, there are major shortcomings in their effective and qualitative implementation. Laws and other documents are good and that through various training, teachers have gained knowledge about them.

Following the analysis of responses from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, the study found that teachers have good knowledge of the legislative framework, administrative guidelines, and pedagogical documents that regulate the issue of inclusion of students with special needs in education. However, participants in both focus groups and semi-structured interviews have no knowledge about the Index for Inclusion. In none of the issues discussed in the focus group and in any of the questions posed in the interviews, the Index for Inclusion was never mentioned as a document, a guide and instrument that helps schools towards inclusion. Teachers also identify that working with students with special needs is very challenging, and they lack institutional support, teacher assistants, and other professionals that would support them in their daily work. Some of the answers they provided include:

“The law on pre-university education supports inclusiveness. They are well- designed and understandable, but implementation is difficult” (Interviewee 02).

“Some teachers in regular classes regard it as a ‘waste of time’ and think that this should be done by non-governmental organizations or expert teams rather than teachers who do not have the necessary professional training” (2nd Focus group participant 03).

“I understand the legal basis and other documents regarding inclusion but it is difficult to work with because we have a large number of students in the classroom and do not have institutional support.” (Interviewee 04).

Teachers consider it very difficult to work with students with mental retardation, first-hand injuries, hearing impairments, communication difficulties or emotional and behavioural disabilities, and believe these children belong in special schools, rather than regular schools. One participant stated that:

“Teachers in regular schools are afraid to have children with special needs in their classes because they do not have the necessary profes-

sional training to work with children with special needs.” (2nd Focus group participant 05).

All teachers have a clear understanding of the legal basis and administrative instructions that regulate the issue of inclusion of children with disabilities in education, but consider it a very challenging task, especially when they consider the fact that they do not have institutional support. Although laws and other policy documents guarantee the inclusion of each student in-discriminately, research participants think that teachers should be supported more through different forms, including institutional support, support from the school leadership, and support from assistants, peers, and parents. The legislation and the attitudes of research participants in this study are found to be in line with the studies from other European countries, and with their needs and demands are similar (Kavelashvili, 2017; Garcia & Fernandez, 2016; Kavkler, Babuder & Maganja, 2015).

### **Teacher attitudes concerning the transition process from special education towards inclusive education**

According to findings extracted from the interviews, teachers generally consider it positive that the laws, curricula, and administrative instructions drafted are aligned with relevant world documents and promote inclusive education, and express positive attitudes concerning the transition process from special education towards inclusive education. However, they identify several barriers in the implementation of inclusive education, that have a direct effect both on the social inclusion of students as well as their academic performance in inclusive classrooms. Respondents identified aspects like lack of knowledge and training on inclusive education, attitudes of parents and community towards diversity in schools and in the surrounding communities seem to be still mostly negative, learning difficulties for students of minority communities (Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian) in non-native languages, the students with special educational needs in the schools have not been identified and lack Individual Education Plans, curriculum differentiation is not yet done, and they do not have the right access to learning, and Individual Education Plans are only for pupils in attached classes or special schools - resource centres; teaching strategies still limited; local evaluation teams have not been consolidated; there are no supporting systems (assistants, pedagogues, psychologists), classes are overcrowded and physical infrastructure is still not satisfactory.

On the other hand, respondents report that teachers who do not have or have little formal and nonformal training about inclusive education do not understand the essence of inclusive education, therefore are not positive on the transition from special schools to inclusive ones. Some of them understand inclusion very superficially, more like “physical integration”, or

passive inclusion in classes based solely on the right to education but not in their ability to achieve academic achievement or social skills development. The inclusion of students in regular classes is seen with more scepticism, according to the respondents involved in the research.

In general, a transition to inclusive education, despite the difficulties identified, is seen as a possible reality. This is found in the participant's statements:

"The prospect of inclusive education in our country should not create dilemmas. It is possible, with the commitment from the relevant institutions" (Interviewee 02).

"... Adequate training is needed for those aspects that are so well written on paper to be successfully implemented in practice" (Interviewee 05).

"School-based debates need to be organized to develop an inclusive culture and this is the task of school managers (Interviewee 03).

"Inclusive education is possible if there is maximum commitment from all relevant actors. If good practices that have taken place in our country are encouraged and if they are combined and adapted with good practices from different countries of the world" (Interviewee 06).

"To succeed in achieving inclusion of students with special needs, curriculum adaptation and strong collaboration between teachers and all school staff is needed" (Interviewee 05).

Participant attitudes are similar to those found in other research studies. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2012) report that inclusive education is effective for the success of all students with disabilities and has many influences, including valuing inclusion, co-teaching, and differentiated curricula.

### **Teaching practices and experiences working with children with special needs**

Each child is unique, each has special learning needs, specific imagination, memory, temperament, character, and style of learning. Therefore, to implement active inclusion, it is important to plan work according to the diverse needs of each student. According to Ashman (2012), planning should include: knowing each student's learning characteristics and capabilities; focusing attention on the ecology of the teaching-learning environment that maximizes human and physical resources and developing instructional styles and techniques that accommodate learner diversity.

Besides supportive environments, adaptable teaching practices specifically highlight the differentiation of the curricula content: what is taught and

learned (e.g., by focusing on activity-based tasks through to the conceptual and abstract); process or methods for acquiring content: how knowledge is delivered (e.g. accommodating preferred learning styles: visual, auditory, tactile, kinaesthetic); and methods for assessment: how learning success is evaluated (e.g., using authentic tasks that involve real and relevant problems); and resources required: including material and human resources (e.g., equipment, ICT, aides, volunteers, experts).

Research participants present difficulties in implementing inclusive education, but on the other hand, argue that practices show that the inclusion of special needs students in regular classes has no negative effects. There are many positive effects on the academic, emotional, and social development of children. Most of the participants from both focus groups have similar attitudes that students with special needs in inclusive classes develop positive social skills as a result of their integration and interaction with others. Unlike focus group 1, with the participants from regular schools, participants from focus group 2 working with students with special needs at the Resource Centre (formerly known as special schools) reported that students with special needs in resource centres perform better academically than most children in regular classes. This is justified by the fact that teachers in resource centres deal more directly and individually with the students, implement the Individual Education Plan, and this supports children to have better results in academic achievement.

Participants from focus group 1 (regular classroom teachers), report that “students with special needs, feel better in the emotional and social aspect... create friendly relationships, imitate the behaviours of other students, feel supported by others and generally have the feeling of being equal to everyone else. And if a student with special needs in the regular classroom has a good, dedicated teacher and he has support with classroom assistants, the academic achievement is also more positive. They support these statements from their personal experiences and the experiences of their colleagues. Research participants report that good inclusive practices are conditional on teachers being strongly engaged, having leadership support, assistants in the classroom, and support by professional experts.

“I have seen schools where students with special needs are very well integrated and have positive results because there is support from the school leadership, a school psychologist, a school counsellor, and three supporter teachers. All students with special needs are included in regular classes and this is working very well (Interviewee 01).

“The inclusion of special needs students in regular classes is working well because the cooperation with parents and the community has been working well and together, we have created a suitable environment for students” (Interviewee 06).

“In recent years, we have been trained in working with students with special needs and we have worked together in adapting the curriculum and applying appropriate methods through which we take into account the potentials of all learners” (Interviewee 04).

These attitudes of the research participants are found to be similar to the findings of other researchers as well. Success is possible when there is support from leadership (Sider, Maich & Movran, 2017) where classroom inclusion is strongly related to teachers’ behaviors (Yildiz, 2015), when good rapports are developed between teachers and students (Santos, Sardinha & Reis, 2016).

### **Needs and challenges in the process of implementing inclusive education**

Implementing inclusive education in many different education systems in different countries is seen as a great challenge for the future. From both focus groups and interviews several difficulties were reported, including a large number of students per class; lack of adequate teaching practice during studies at the Faculty of Education; lack of proper training; and lack of experts and assistants in classrooms. The majority of participants consider it challenging to work with students with special needs. This is due to the inadequate preparation of teachers to work with children with special needs of different natures:

“We have an extraordinarily large number of students, I have 27 students in my class, and I cannot dedicate time and effort to students as much as they need it” (Interviewee 03).

“I have a group of children with Down Syndrome and still do not have the necessary experience to be actively involved in inclusive activities” (Interviewee 04).

“In the trainings provided, we were not given enough practical opportunities, we got more knowledge but not practical, we were not provided with practical strategies for working with students with special educational needs” (Interviewee 01).

“... I lacked the prior preparation and especially the practical component during my studies that has hampered my proper pedagogical work and approach” (Interviewee 02).

Regarding the actual needs of teachers, focus group participants 1, teachers of regular classes expressed the need namely for trainings in general pedagogical strategies and methodologies, including differentiated instruction and individualized planning, as well as cooperation with professionals and parents, whereas focus group 2 participants, teachers of Resource Center

in Pristina, expressed the need mostly for very specialized training such as training in Sign language or provision of first aid (by type of psycho-physical problems).

Among the challenges in the transition process from special education to inclusive education, teachers in both focus groups and semi-structured interviews can be summarized in several aspects related to: “creating an inclusive culture, providing professional resources in schools (psychologists, school counsellors, supportive teachers and assistants), securing financial resources, reducing the number of students in classrooms, training in adequate teaching methodology (differentiated instruction, individual development plan), cooperation with parents and caregivers.

## **Discussion**

The literature covers that inclusive education was considered unrealistic years ago and was discussed whether it is possible for people with special needs to be educated jointly with other students in regular classes. However, in the Karagiannis, Stainback and Stainback study (1996) more than two decades ago, this approach proved to be successful in a few schools but increasingly in Australia, Canada, Italy, USA and other countries (Villa & Thousand, 1998; Stainback & Stainback, 1996). How successful schools are promoting inclusive school practices depends on a variety of factors. One of the factors is the school administrators' focus and involvement. Other factors include collaboration among school stakeholders. Education provides people with more social capital when everyone collaborates to build a conscious community that is able to support schools to have full oversight of children (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1996, in Stainback & Stainback, 1996; Gavalda, Rueda & Velasco, 2016; Haug, 2017)

Full inclusion is a matter of debate in many countries around the world. In the U.S., these debates are focused not only on how students with special needs participate in education but on which parameters better fulfill their rights. Thus, full inclusion is based on basic civil rights, and there is currently a clear trend for more inclusive school environment (Muchad & Scruggs, 2012). Inclusion should benefit not only students with special needs, but all students, educators, parents, and community members (Villa & Thousand, 2005). Hicks-Monroe (2011) concludes that classrooms that successfully include students with special needs are designed to welcome diversity and address the individual needs of all students, whether they have a disability or not. If schools are to be effective in providing services for all students, then school personnel must address the needs of all students and have an understanding of the types of disabilities and services models. Inclusion should not be disregarded because of lack of funding, staff, or preconceived ideas of

its complexity. Inclusion should be based on individual students' needs. For the successful implementation of inclusion, schools should provide support at the administrative level and classroom level by providing time for planning, training, and an overall commitment to providing support.

The present study found that the positive effects of inclusion are clearly stated by the teachers. From the analyses of literature and empirical studies, as well as from the results of the present study, it is evident that inclusion has more advantages compared to segregation. When referring to inclusion, respondents have mentioned increased social interactions and relationships; better academic, social and behaviour skills; enhanced skill acquisition; increased school staff collaboration; and increased parent participation. Teachers generally present positive attitudes towards inclusion, and a good understanding of inclusive principles, however, they also note that infrastructural transition alone (physical and legal) is not sufficient. Inclusive education is not a project; it is a continuous and dynamic process that requires reconstruction of the education system and school change and access to the entire community.

Participant attitudes are similar to those found in other research studies. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2012) report that inclusive education is effective for the success of all students with special needs and has many influences, including valuing inclusion, co-teaching, and differentiated curricula. From the analysis of other research, these authors report that the benefits of inclusion also include: academics benefits (50%); social benefits (70%); general benefits (60%), and benefit for general education students (60%). Also, developing an education system that treats schools as places that need to constantly monitor change is not considered an easy job. In this regard, Slee (2012, in Boyle & Topping, 2012), presented four important segments of education task, which are important for changing schools: (a) The expectations and organization of schooling; (b) Curriculum so that it recognizes all student identities; (c) Pedagogy and assessment so that it is a force for development of each student's potential; and, (d) the culture of schools to embed them in community as a neighbourhood hub dedicated to building more holistic well-being. Teacher educators need to adopt an inclusive whole schooling approach to educate all teachers to understand the complexity of diversity. Educators need to de-center their location in discourses that pathologize difference as abnormal or deficit, as well as acknowledge and incorporate in child-rearing, family and language practices that are represented by families and children attending the setting (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2013). These attitudes of the research participants are found to be similar to the findings of other researchers as well. Success is possible when there is support from leadership (Sider, Maich & Movran, 2017) where classroom inclusion is strongly related to teachers'

behaviors (Yild-iz, 2015), when good rapports are developed between teachers and students (Santos, Sardinha & Reis, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

Good models and practices in countries worldwide, along with various good practices in Kosovo, show that despite the controversial issues, inclusiveness is possible and has multiple advantages at many levels. At a societal level, inclusive education is seen as a reform that should support all student diversity and conceive education as a human right for justice and equity in society (Kavkler, Babuder & Magajna, 2015). At the school level, meaningful changes in the general mindset of school actors have been found to have positive effect on staff, children and parents. It is not the inclusion of non-learners to fit the system, but the system fits students and adjusts the needs of each (Kazan, Kashapova, Akmulla & Shavaliyeva, 2015). At the individual level, studies have found benefits both for students with special needs, as well as for other students in the classroom.

As in all European countries and Kosovo as well, laws and education policies are oriented towards inclusive education. The legislation and the attitudes of research participants in this study are found to be in line with the studies from other European countries, and with their needs and demands are similar (Kavelashvili, 2017; Garcia & Fernandez, 2016; Kavkler, Babuder & Maganja, 2015). By analyzing the three inclusion models: the special education model (children with special needs to meet the needs of the education system pose problems for school and society); pragmatic model (approaches, practical implications and dependence on school reputation, a balance between resources and number of students); social model (based on social justice, for the inclusion of all without distinction) as outlined by Meltz, Herman, Pillay (2014), we conclude that in Kosovo all three models are in operation. First, education policies and laws are drafted on the basis of the social model, because they are oriented towards guaranteeing the right to education for each individual without regard to any distinction. Second, Kosovo children with special needs are still seen as a problem and third, there are school institutions that have included supportive teachers, assistants, and good physical infrastructure reporting good results.

In addition to achievements such as the development of advanced legal documents, the application of the Index for Inclusion, the training of teachers, challenges to the fair implementation of the inclusion continue and slow down the transition period from segregation to inclusion. Challenges at the macro level relate to understanding inclusion, teacher preparation and effective implementation of inclusive policies, while at the micro-level, challenges are related to scarce human and material resources, poor physical infra-

structure, inappropriate practices (differentiated teaching), the large number of students in the classes, the lack of leadership support, the lack of teachers' performance appraisal and the lack of research in this area.

Even with European countries, research has reported on the need for a new framework that should be oriented towards values such as democracy, tolerance and solidarity (Garcia & Fernandez, 2016). In Kosovo, in addition to focusing on the implementation of inclusive policies and addressing the challenges mentioned above, a new macro-level framework is needed to promote democratic values beyond the narrow comprehension of inclusion as education for children with special needs.

The research showed that regarding the process of transition from segregation to inclusion, participants identify several barriers, including the high ratio of students per teacher, inadequate professional preparation of teachers, and difficulties in conceptualizing inclusion. However, most of them express positive attitudes regarding the effects of inclusion. Moreover, the participants are clear on the legislation and pedagogical documents and consider them well-drafted, however, they are reserved when it comes to the possibilities for successful implementation of these documents in practice. They express that implementing inclusive education policies is difficult without institutional support, which seems to be currently not at a satisfactory level. Participants argue that good inclusive practices do exist only where teachers have invested in their training and care for their professional development through inclusive training. The research showed that teachers need adequate training to work successfully with students with special needs, even as they face numerous challenges in the process of transition from schools or special classes to inclusive classes. The challenges they identify include the creation of an inclusive culture, the proper preparation of teachers, and the development of psychological and pedagogical supporting services.

Last but not least, the participants in the study all agree that good cooperation between relevant actors and sustainable institutional support for teachers, parents, and children, could make inclusive education possible in Kosovo. This conclusion indicates a need for the development of community programs to strengthen the cooperation between schools, families and children, as well as initiatives to bring together policymakers and civil society actors to increase institutional support for the implementation of inclusive education in Kosovo.

This study has several limitations. One limitation of this study is the relatively short period of implementation of inclusive education in Kosovo, having in mind also that structured inclusive education teaching programs are relatively new. The level of awareness generally is low, as is the experience of implementation of inclusive education. Nonetheless, having these factors

considered, the implementation of inclusive education in Kosovo is considered a success.

Another limitation is that this study was qualitative and limited to a small number of participants and the lack of research at the local level, which has made it possible for the authors to further develop the theory in this regard. The authors plan to continue this study following a more quantitative approach, to include a larger number of participants and test variables related to teacher experiences, quality of work, teacher training, etc. Findings are essential to identify the strengths and gaps in the Kosovar education system in terms of the implementation of inclusive education. The findings of this study, however, will help teachers to better understand the legislation and pedagogical documents in the field of inclusion and be encouraged to work in inclusive classrooms through the good results reported from good practices. Findings from this and future studies will help shape teacher education and training programs as well as re-shape the policies and practices of implementation of inclusive education in Kosovo.

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