

Inclusive Education in Regular Classes from the Perspective of Media Support for Students with Special Needs: Kosovo Case

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Abstract

Schools and media continually evolve and impact each other and society in various ways. This study investigates how media contributes to integrating students with special needs into regular pre-university classes and influences the changes in inclusive classroom teaching. Notably, there is a need for a more comprehensive exploration of the relationship between media and inclusive education in Kosovo. Our study investigates the perspectives of teachers instructing in inclusive classrooms (i), parents of students with special needs (ii), and parents of other children (iii). We explore their views on adapting teaching methods in inclusive classrooms and the community's approach toward children with special needs, whose cases have been highlighted in the media. Our research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining analysis, interviews, and surveys from random samples to gather information from key stakeholders in the field. The study reveals that media significantly impacts everyone's lives, including children with special needs, their families, and educators. Furthermore, it confirms that media information influences student behavior and the school community, particularly concerning inclusion in education and teaching practices. As a result, our findings recommend that schools and media prioritize identifying elements that either facilitate or hinder inclusion in education and teaching practices in inclusive classrooms. Additionally, efforts should focus on eliminating barriers.

Keywords: Education; students with special needs; media; inclusion; parents; teachers.

Introduction

This study aims to evaluate the role that media has played in facilitating the inclusion of students with special needs in regular pre-university education classes, as well as its connection to the changes experienced in inclusive classroom teaching. The focus is on students and educators at levels I and II of education in Kosovo (MASHTI, 2016), with the goal of investigating the effects of media in the field of education, specifically within inclusive classroom teaching, which includes students with special needs.

Education is a fundamental right for every individual worldwide. This right is also regulated by state laws and international conventions, including those signed by Kosovo.

The Constitution of Kosovo, particularly the article governing the right to education, states that public institutions ensure equal opportunities for every person to be educated, based on their abilities and specific needs (Assembly, 2008). Kosovo has also adopted other legal documents in favor of implementing inclusion, including training programs for educators and the employment of assistants for children with special needs. (NNV).

The term “individuals with special needs” refers to people who require specific assistance and care, often due to limited abilities (Dictionary). Unfortunately, these individuals are sometimes portrayed in the media as a social category facing challenges in their everyday lives. However, media can play a crucial role in changing negative attitudes toward people with special needs, ultimately promoting their acceptance in society. (AlMeqdata, Q., AlZbounb, A., Sloan, L. & Mohaidata, 2023).

Despite efforts to promote inclusion and understanding, (Haug, 2016) challenges persist in Kosovo more than a decade after the introduction of inclusive education within the regular school system. This study aims to explore the connection between media's role in educating and informing schools and parents about inclusion in education and teaching practices within inclusive classrooms.

The study seeks to shed light (Rapp, A.C. & Corral-Granados, A., 2021) on a specific dimension: how media can support the teaching process in inclusive classrooms in the context of Kosovo. While inclusion is a broad concept, this study specifically focuses on the inclusion of children with special needs in regular

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pre-university education classes (levels I and II) in Kosovo. The goal is to examine whether the cases highlighted in the media have influenced teaching practices in inclusive classrooms and the behavior of the school community.

Primary Research Questions

What is the relationship between teaching in inclusive classrooms and the media representation of students with special needs?

What is the interconnection between the role of media in educating and informing teachers and parents about inclusion in primary and secondary education in Kosovo?

To what extent have the media played a role in preparing schools/teachers and parents for inclusion?

Methodology/Instruments

- The methodology (Kumar, 2014) used for this research is qualitative and quantitative;
- The population and samples have been selected; the schools/teachers and parents of Kosovo, respectively the samples taken from four major schools in Pristina (44 teachers: 24 samples taken through questionnaires, and 20 others through structured interviews). Survey with parents and interviews with a spread from all over Kosovo (50). Anonymity has been guaranteed to the participants.

Theoretical Context

International context - In the era of hypermedia (Diebert, 1995), where everyone has access to the internet, it naturally raises the question of whether society is prepared to utilize media to their advantage. As media increasingly mediates everything in society—work, education, information, civic participation, social relationships (Livigstone, 2018) the need for media education (Buckingham, 2015) grows so that society can be educated about the benefits of using media to achieve a noble goal, such as the inclusion of children with special needs in regular classes. Always bearing in mind the attention around terminology (Cedillo G.I, Contreras R.S., Orozco A.L.C.& Hernandez L.A.K., 2013) that is used both in and outside the media, for specific social groups, such as children with special needs. Efforts—to initially change in theory and then in practice (Nilholm, 2021) the situation of individuals with special needs—need to be intensified. This year marks 30 years since the adoption of the Salamanca Statement (Spain), where 92 countries of the world and 25 international organizations agreed that children with special needs should be included in regular classes (UNESCO, 1994).

Throughout these years, teachers are seen as key persons to implement inclusive education (Boer, A., Jan Pijl, S & Alexander, M., 2010), but for the realization of inclusive education, they have needed to adopt teaching in inclusive classrooms. The positive attitude of teachers (Avramidis, E. & Norwich, B., 2020) plays a significant role in inclusion. These attitudes and the successes that teachers achieve in the inclusion of students with special needs within the classroom need to be promoted (Ainscow, 2020) also in the media, so that they can become a motivation for others.

Kosovo context- Kosovo, like other European countries, has joined the effort to implement inclusive education (Assembly, 2011), especially in the last decade. Inclusive education, as a first step towards social inclusion, benefits the entire society. The experience of the past century has taught society a valuable lesson that segregating a portion of students into special schools has negative effects on their future lives, as well as on society at large (MASHTi, 2014). Necessary steps have been taken to adapt inclusive education in regular schools, from special schools that existed separately for children with disabilities. The terminology has also changed: from ‘children with disabilities’ it has now been adapted to ‘children with special needs’. This term is non-discriminatory and well-accepted, based on the principle that we all, as unique beings, have special needs. In recent years, efforts have been made to employ assistants in schools for children with special needs (Havolli, 2022)

While there are very few articles about inclusive education in Kosovo (Zabeli, N., Perolli Shehu, B., & Anderson, J., 2021), these studies indicate that inclusion has had only positive effects on children with special needs.

However, the same cannot be said for teachers, as the inclusion of students with special needs in regular classes at school is challenging teaching and education at all levels, from preschool to university level (Zabeli, N., Kacaniku, F., Koliqi, D., 2021). This is because there is still a need for the development of intellectual capacities on one hand, and on the other hand, for society's awareness of accepting children with special needs in regular classes.

While Kosovo (a country with 1.8 million residents) has approximately 250,000 students attending grades 1-9, the number of children with special needs attending regular education ranges between 4,500 and 6,000. This figure may vary from year to year, but it has been noticeably higher in recent years.

Individuals with Special Needs - 15 Percent of the World's Population

The latest data from the United Nations (Nation, 2023) indicate that there are currently about 1 billion individuals with special needs worldwide, or 15 percent of the global population. They are seldom presented in the media, but even when they are, they are depicted as poor and dependent on others (Barnes, 1992). This discriminatory and stereotypical portrayal (Programe, 2023) harms the image of individuals with special needs, despite research speaking to their achievements in various areas of life. However, to reach this point, they must be educated just like everyone else. The integration of children with special needs has sparked a broad debate among parents and teachers (Ola H.A., Sabah M.E.Sh., Zainab G.A.A., Tanazor H.A., Amany G., 2023). While practice has shown that learning in regular classes has brought significant improvement to students with special needs, including academic and emotional achievements. Meanwhile, inclusion has also yielded another result: other children are prepared to accept each child—regardless of differences—as something normal and without prejudice.

The media can be a vital instrument in raising awareness, against stigma and misinformation. It can be a powerful force for changing people's worldviews and for presenting individuals with special needs as part of human diversity.

By increasing awareness and understanding, the media can actively contribute to the effective and successful integration of these individuals in all aspects of social life. In fact, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Special Needs (Nations, 2006) calls on states to raise awareness and fight the stereotypes associated with these individuals, including encouraging the media to portray individuals with special needs in accordance with respect for human rights.

Research Findings

The majority of respondents agree that there is a tangible relationship between the media, inclusion, and teaching in inclusive classrooms.

Teachers;

34.2% of subject teachers (teachers of subjects for grades 6-9) and 65.8% of class teachers (teachers of grades 1-5), with an average teaching experience of 14 years, have stated that they are directly involved in the connection between media news and information about inclusion. The effects of this connection are explained as follows:

54.5% of teachers declare that they first heard about the inclusion of students with special needs in regular classes from the media, while 45.5% received this information first from institutions.

Meanwhile, 58% of teachers state that the media have played a significant role in preparing the school/teachers about the process of including students with special needs in the regular education system. 31.8 percent think that the media have not done enough regarding this issue. Another 10.2 percent do not have a clear stance on this.

On the other hand, teachers declare that the media do not sufficiently reflect the work they do with students with special needs at school, especially when it comes to praise for good work, or even the difficulties that the integration of students with special needs into teaching has brought to teachers.

61.4% of respondents declare that they rarely hear or read news of this nature in the media. 11.3% say they never hear/read such news in the media, while 27.3% state they do not have a definitive answer for this.

Respondents say that the type of news they receive from the media about the inclusion of children with special needs in the regular education system mainly relates to the lack of technical conditions for access to school facilities (the infrastructure for entry-exit has not been adapted); about obstacles in registering in regular classes; about their discrimination in various forms, or when the International Day for Persons with Special Needs is marked.

“From the media, I often hear complaints that the infrastructure for access of persons with special needs to school facilities has not been arranged, and not positive news,” (Teacher, grade 6-9)

“It is rare to talk about the successes achieved, as an impact that would turn into motivation for families, for the students with special needs themselves, and for teachers to move forward with advancement in inclusion,” (Teacher, grade 1-5).

Meanwhile, when asked why they think news about inclusion is missing in the media, respondents declare that priority is given to other problems with which education is challenged, where the challenges of teaching in a class where the majority of students are exposed to technology without time limits dominate, then there are barriers around public appearances both from the school and from the family because there is fear due to the mentality to publicly present difficulties and successes, etc.

From the accepted responses, the dominant answer is that there is a lack of media education for all participants in the school to utilize its beneficial aspects, in achieving better results in lessons with all students without exception.

Meanwhile, when asked about the impact of publishing a news story in the media about students with special needs, the results are as follows:

69% of respondents declare that the publication of a news story in the media, such as that a student with special needs has difficulty entering school because there are no crossings for students with wheelchairs, has made other students help their friend every day to come to class. 16.3 percent of respondents said they are not sure if the publication of a news story about the challenges that students with special needs have at school or in lessons has encouraged other students to help them. Meanwhile, 13.9 percent do not believe that news in the media has influenced their classmates to change their attitude towards students with special needs, as there are still problems in their better acceptance in class.

93.2% of respondents have declared that during their teaching experience, they have had students with special needs in the classes they taught, within the regular education system.

97.8% of teachers who have had students with special needs in their classes state that this fact has had a direct impact on their work. They report having changed many aspects of their teaching methods when there were students with special needs in the class.

“During my 11-year teaching experience, I have had three students with special needs in different generations. Although they did not exhibit problematic behavior, I had to dedicate at least 10 minutes exclusively to them each hour. This meant that I had to modify my plans and was forced to explain the lessons more quickly or reduce them to an extent I did not desire,” (Teacher, grade 6-9).

The interviewed teachers declare that they have adapted their teaching methods depending on the characteristics of the student with special needs and that information obtained from the media has greatly assisted them in this.

“I had a student with special needs who liked to sing. So, I started every day with a song, even though it was not in the lesson plan. However, it was a condition that then allowed me to continue teaching according to the daily program plans. I learned this method from the media, being informed that these students might enjoy music,” (Teacher, grade 1-5).

Meanwhile, the study finds that teaching becomes more challenging in classes where students with special needs are noisy.

“The student I had last year in a class was often noisy during many lessons, tending to disrupt the teaching process. I insisted that the assistant/support teacher be there with me every hour, but when she was absent,

it was difficult to conduct the lesson according to plan due to the distraction of the other students,” (Teacher, grade 6-9).

Parents

It should be emphasized that although the sampling was done randomly, it is only the mothers who are involved in the research and are willing to contribute to raising awareness about inclusion. The average age of the respondents is 45 years old.

When asked how they were informed about the term “inclusion,” 63.9% of respondents say they were informed by the media, while 26.1% state they were informed by colleagues, friends, and family or by institutions.

When asked if there are students with special needs in the class their child attends, 11.3% say they are themselves parents of children with special needs, 27.6% say their children have had a classmate with special needs. 61.1% declare that their children have not had close experience with students with special needs (SNS).

When asked if they think the media have played a significant role in preparing the school (teachers and students) for inclusion, 74.7% respond positively. Meanwhile, 69.8% of the surveyed parents believe that news in the media about the challenges that students with special needs face in school has influenced the school community to mobilize to make it easier for them (SNS) to acclimate and learn.

75.4% of parents think that media coverage of cases where students with special needs face barriers or difficulties in school has positively influenced their resolution; 26.6% think NOT; and 2% express that they do not know.

Meanwhile, 81% of parents believe that schools and teachers are not sufficiently prepared for the process of inclusion, hence challenges arise in the teaching and learning process in inclusive classes.

42.8% of parents agree that families of other children experience a kind of hesitation for their children to attend lessons in a class where there are children with special needs, fearing that there will be delays in the implementation of the lesson plan, or that their children may be physically attacked by students who may be aggressive. According to them, the media should contribute more to preparing all participants in the school for the acceptance and respect of inclusion. Nevertheless, 88.7% of parents think their children would help their classmate with special needs in every aspect if this were requested by the teachers.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact that media has had in relation to inclusion and teaching in inclusive classrooms. The focus was on students with special needs; the approach to addressing the barriers surrounding them which have been reflected in the media; and the examination of how the publication of their cases has reflected on inclusion throughout the schooling at the primary and secondary levels of education in Kosovo. The research has confirmed that information in the media has influenced the behaviors of students and the school community regarding inclusion. Additionally, our study has revealed that the media has influenced the identification of many obstacles concerning inclusion, but has also assisted in the process of accepting inclusion as a whole, despite the fact that news about this process is rarely reflected in the media. Our research highlights that the acceptance of inclusion by the school community is a powerful element in advancing the integration of students with special needs, similarly to foreign studies, which state that the students’ feeling of belonging to the school community implies a sense of being accepted, respected, included, and supported in the educational environment (Gray, 2021).

Other research also shows that there are many barriers and obstacles in educational institutions for inclusion, such as the lack of teacher training, which is necessary to respond to the needs of all students; then the consideration that the diversity (inclusion) of students is a problem, physical barriers, or even the non-use of existing ones (Sánchez, P.A., Rodríguez, R.H-G., Martínez, R.M.M., 2019). This finding is also supported by our research, based on the findings from the study, as in the findings where it results that 42.8% of parents agree that families of other children experience a kind of hesitation for their children to attend lessons in a class where there are children with special needs, for fear that there will be delays in the implementation of the lesson plan, or that their children may be physically attacked by students who may be aggressive.

On the other hand, the dilemmas of whether teaching in inclusive classes undergoes changes compared to that in other classes - where there are no students with special needs, have been the focus of many other researchers, as has been addressed in our research. The results of the research on these questions are positive. Similarly, as stated in the study by Lani (Florin, 2005) it is noted that the response to differences among students is not just a matter of 'good teaching', because we know that what works for the majority does not work for some. Indeed, this is the reasoning that initially led to the development of special needs education as a distinct form of provision; but this is also the point where difficulties arise in articulating what is distinctive for special education, or inclusive education. Therefore, our research strongly supports the assertion that "good teaching" (Florin) is essential for inclusion, and despite the challenges, the successes are evident.

Other studies suggest that teachers need adequate training to work successfully with students with special needs (Zabeli, N., Perolli-Shehu, B., Gjelij, M., 2020). This assertion is strongly supported by our study, which shows that teachers seek other alternatives (such as searches in media and the internet), as they are challenged during teaching in inclusive classes, as a result of the lack of adequate training for inclusion. Meanwhile, our study emphasizes that the media rarely address educational topics in general, and even less so topics on inclusion, although previous studies highlight the significant role of the media in influencing public opinion. Mass media are widely considered one of the most dynamic participants in public affairs and democratic life, so mass communication can significantly influence public opinions and social rationality (Liu, Sh., Cai, L., & Zhao, X., 2018). The findings in our research also support this assertion based on the attitudes of respondents who argue that news in the media about the challenges that students with special needs face in school has influenced the school community to mobilize for the elimination of these challenges.

Conclusions

Media plays a significant role in everyone's life in these times of technical-technological expansion. However, schools and educational institutions in general, as well as parents, have not utilized the power of the media at their disposal to highlight the obstacles encountered by children with special needs during their journey toward inclusion in regular classes. This research finds that there is a lack of media education among the masses, in terms of raising awareness for the media to be used as a tool that aids the integration of students with special needs in education. The study concludes that cases, such as when students with special needs encounter obstacles or difficulties for integration into regular classes, once published in the media, receive support from society and the school. It is also noted that when the media promotes inclusion, support for it increases in schools. The study concludes that teaching develops differently in inclusive classes compared to regular classes, influenced by circumstances created as a need for inclusion. Hence, this study contributes to clarifying that schools and the media should give more space to identifying elements that help or hinder inclusion in education, and these should be more broadly researched. Additionally, the study aids in understanding that school stakeholders should collaborate more with the media to promote inclusive education and to encourage research and publication of cases that reflect different perspectives on the inclusion of students with special needs. Another contribution is the advice that efforts should be made for better collaboration between schools and parents for initiatives that raise awareness of the importance of inclusive education. Therefore, more efforts should be made to support individuals who demonstrate a willingness to challenge stereotypes and prejudices about people with special needs using the media.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the research contributes to the field of inclusive education from a different perspective, it has some limitations. One of them is the inability to further investigate what changes teaching undergoes when there are students with special needs in the class, compared to classes that do not have such students. Better results in such research could be obtained through the method of observation. Another limitation is the exclusion of the perspective of parents of both genders, as in this research the sample was taken 100% only from mothers, because fathers refused to respond to the research questions.

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