

Methodology in Action Research on Provision of Education and Rehabilitation Support to Children with Special Needs in Regular Classrooms

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Introduction

In Bosnia and Herzegovina the term “special needs” is not clearly defined in official documents and refers mainly to children with various developmental disorders: mental retardation, physical disability, hearing loss, visual impairment, multiple disabilities, and behavioural as well as speech disorders (Official Gazette of the Tuzla Canton br.7/2004).

The right of children with special education needs to access to regular schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina is regulated by the provisions of the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education (2003). Analysis of the legal provisions of the Framework Law indicates that it regulates formally the right of all children to receive appropriate education, including children with special needs. However, although children with special needs are “legally allowed” attendance in regular schools, there are at the same time several issues not clearly defined such as 1) ensuring support for the children with special needs in regular schools, 2) issues regarding individual programs and 3) teamwork and involvement of parents and local communities in ensuring support.

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In order for these new general legislative regulations on educational inclusion to function, a number of more specific regulations are needed concerning identification and provision of support for children with various special needs, individualised teaching processes and provision of expert classroom professionals, such as educators-rehabilitators, speech and language pathologists, experts on hearing impairment and social pedagogues. Furthermore, some teacher education programmes have reputation for holding arid lectures and relatively few practical exercises as well as little introduction of new forms of flexible and creative teaching approaches focusing on children with different abilities.

A large number of studies conducted in the entire Bosnia and Herzegovina show that in our schools – especially primary schools – you will find a large number of pupils who struggle to comprehend the subject matter (Muminović, 2000; OSCE, 2001; Ibralić, 2002; Hatibović, 2002; Smajić, 2004; Salihovic et. al, 2007; Dizdarevic et. al, 2008). Ensuring educational and rehabilitative support for children with special needs in regular classes is based on their human rights. However, many schools are faced with problems of adapting their entire educational practices to these children's educational needs. Planning and maintaining adequate levels of support through identification of teaching resources and learning opportunities to meet the diversity of educational needs, individual educational programs, adequate instructional procedures, and individualised evaluation are significant steps to support children's special educational needs in inclusive classrooms.

Research assumptions and objective

The educational challenges faced by children with special needs in Bosnia and Herzegovina are various and extensive. This research project is based on the assumptions that 1) in regular schools there are a number of children who do not master the expected learning content due to a variety of special needs, and 2) children with special needs can successfully learn and develop in regular school environments with appropriate educational support focusing on their potential.

The overall objective of this study is to upgrade teachers to develop individually adapted education for pupils with special educational needs through collaboration between special educators, regular teachers and school administration.

Research design

The assurance of education and rehabilitation support for children with special needs in regular classrooms is the focus of this study on behalf of the University of Tuzla, to the joint project *International Comparative Classroom Studies towards Inclusion*, with participating universities from Belgrade, Ljubljana, Skopje, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zagreb and Oslo (WB 04/06). This is an action research project involving mixed methods applying quantitative and qualitative elements.

Linking the terms ‘action’ and ‘research’ elucidates the essential characteristics of this approach, namely: exploring new ideas and approaches and using them in practice to expand knowledge about the field of research. Action research as described in research methodology, involves the action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. Rapoport (1970) points out that the aim of action research is to contribute not only to understanding and solving practical dilemmas of people involved in research, but also in elucidated dilemmas that emerge in the research. It may be said that the action research process progresses and is shaped as the understanding of the phenomenon of study grows; it is also a circular process that leads to better understanding. In most cases, action research is participative (among other reasons, changes are easiest to achieve if the individuals who are expected to change participate in the changing process themselves) and qualitative. Action research is useful in “real”, concrete situations when it is difficult to control variables, given that the situation is specific and complex during the changing period (Dick, 1995; Armstrong & Moore, 2004). Dick (1995) and Armstrong and Moore (2004) point out that action research is used by researcher-practitioners in complex situations that are difficult to control in conventional research terms.

In light of this research contribution, action research provides the opportunity to evaluate the process of teaching and learning in six case studies, examining and testing new ideas, methods and materials; assessing the effectiveness of new activities; providing feedback to other team members and joint decision-making about the most effective ways to approach pupils, learning, adjustment of programs, instructions and pupil assessment methods. According to Gall, Gall and Borg (2003), one of the basic characteristics of qualitative research is its focus on specific instances, the ‘cases’ of a phenomenon. The phenomenon in focus in this research is the process of providing support to children with special needs who attend regular primary school.

Sample

The sample included in this study consists of 97 subjects divided into four sub-samples:

1. **Subsample of pupils with special needs**, which consist of 6 pupils with special educational needs (intellectual difficulties, speech-language difficulties, hearing impairment, behavioural disorders, motor disorders, chronic diseases and visual impairment), aged 8–13
2. **Subsample of pupils without developmental disabilities** consisting of 81 pupils who are in classes with pupils with special educational needs
3. **Subsample of parents of pupils with special educational needs** consisting of 6 parents of pupils with special needs, both genders
4. **Subsample of teachers of pupils with special educational needs** consisting of 4 teachers, both genders, who are working in the classes with the pupils of the abovementioned samples.

Measuring instruments

Three scales have been applied to follow up the innovation process during the action research project. The assessment instruments are used to follow up the development in the action research study, exploring whether and how the action research and action methodology contributes to increase the understanding and solve practical dilemmas for the participants involved in the project, and also shed light upon dilemmas in the teaching collective, the family, as well as in the immediate and extended context. Investigation of the six case studies has a short-term goal of focusing on the increasing levels of the children's functional status and annual goals of achieving good results in comprehending the teaching curriculum and teaching of social communication in the teachers' collective, the family, and in the immediate and extended surroundings.

1. **The Scale of Adaptive Behaviour/II Behaviour Rating Profile BRP-2** (Brown & Hammill, 1990). This instrument is used to assess the behaviour of pupils or students with special needs at home and school based on relations between student-school; student-parent and student-teacher. It consists of six measurement instruments that assess student behaviour in various contexts by teachers, parents, pupils and peers. The teacher assessment scale contains

30 negatively formulated statements that describe inappropriate behaviour of pupils at school. Teachers assess whether the behaviour is very common for students, usual, unusual or not at all common for students. The parent assessment scale contains 30 negatively formulated statements that describe inappropriate behaviour at home. Parents assess if the behaviour is very common for students, usual, unusual or not at all common for pupils. The pupil assessment scale includes 60 negatively composed statements that describe behaviour at home, at school and in the company of friends. The students evaluate their own behaviour in response to the allegations of 'true' or 'false'. This is a sociometric questionnaire intended to determine the level of acceptance pupils with learning difficulties receive within regular classes. The questionnaire contains 8 criteria, 4 of which are affirmative and 4 negative. When answering each question, pupils gave the names of three students with whom they wanted or did not want to participate in class activities.

2. Scale of Adaptive Behaviour AAMD I & II part (Igrić & Fulgosi-Masnjak, 1991). The Scale of Adaptive Behaviour-AAMD Scale is a two-part standardized scale used to assess adaptive and non-adaptive behaviour in school children. The first part of the scale is related to two kinds of behaviour: 1) universal and essential in order to perform daily activities and 2) significant only in certain situations dependent upon characteristics of the group to which he/she belongs. The first part is divided into 10 areas (independence; use of money; language development; numbers and time; household activities; work activities; self-determination; responsibilities and socialization), which are important aspects of personal responsibility and independent living. The second part of the scale is used for measuring non-adaptive behaviour in relation to individual and behavioural disorders and comprises fourteen areas (tendency to display aggressive behaviour and destruction; non-social behaviour; resistance toward authority; irresponsible behaviour; withdrawal; stereotypical behaviour and mannerisms; unsuitable and unusual habits; self-destructive behaviour; tendency to display hyperactive behaviour; unsuitable sexual behaviour; psychological disorders; use of drugs).

3. Expressive scale using the Bosnian language to assess language abilities (Jewett & Echols, 2005) has been adapted for the purpose of this research. Relating to semantic abilities, the following aspects are examined: receptive and expressive vocabulary, ability to provide definitions, categorical knowledge, associations, comparison and contrasts, sequential storytelling and the ability to tell stories. Relating to syntax assessment, these aspects are examined: receptive

comprehension and grammar, general expressive syntax and grammar, gender/vocabulary suffixes, number, case suffixes, comparative and superlative, verb tenses, and sentence development.

Action research methods

Data have been collected by using specific methods and techniques of data collection. We have used interviews, observations (non-participant and participant observation of pupils in their regular educational environment, activities outside of school and at home) and unobtrusive research methods (analysis of school documents, pupil work, school assignments and tests). Information has also been collected using scales (see above), tests and checklists, which allow the creation of pupil profiles containing individual characteristics, contextual characteristics, learning and playing, and suggestions for educational (curriculum adaptation, instructional procedures and evaluation methods) and rehabilitative approaches (in accordance with certain special needs areas).

Based on a holistic team approach (child, teacher, educator, parent, educator-rehabilitator, and hearing impairment- and speech therapist, social pedagogue and other experts as needed), data have been collected and analysed relevant to the needs and interests of pupils. The pupils' educational needs have been determined through focusing on the following areas: educational-rehabilitative, social, occupational, physical, psychological and recreational in pupils' different contexts and interests; identification of potential aims necessary to program adaptation or development of special needs support programs was performed as a team.

At the beginning and end of each academic year, an assessment was made by using the scales, tests and checklists. The pupils' progress has been analysed in academic- as well as other developmental areas, which served as the basis for providing a descriptive analysis of this study's results as well as proposals for improving further research in this area; improvements to providing support for children with learning difficulties in the regular classroom and the creation of effective inclusive schools.

Implementation of the research

The following are criteria for purposeful selection of a case school:

- The school has a large number of pupils

- It does not have support systems for children with special needs at the project's start
- The school director and administrative staff are receptive to cooperation
- It is an urban school
- None of the staff are educated for working with children with special needs
- It has welcomed children with different special needs in several classes

Within the school itself, classes have been purposely selected in order to work with six different categories of special needs. The selection criteria are:

- Pupils of both genders
- Pupils whose teacher and project researchers have assessed as having difficulties in comprehending the applied curriculum
- Classes with pupils with different special educational needs due to the categories: intellectual difficulties – language and speech disorders – psycho-social / behavioural difficulties – visual or hearing impairment – mobility disabilities – chronic disease/s

Preliminary studies have been implemented in order to select one school to be the research arena. We gained access to a school fulfilling our selection criteria and started base- line studies. However, when the school decided to withdraw from the research cooperation, we set out finding another school that fulfilled all the participation criteria and it is now participates in our project. The school is a regular primary school having 841 pupils enrolled at the beginning of the study. The study includes pupils from first to eighth grade, both genders. This research is implemented in collaboration with the school's teaching staff (director, educator, class teachers, etc.). A total of 400 pupils have been examined and 85 of them have been found to have special educational needs that may be divided according to the following disabilities: 6 pupils with intellectual disabilities, 70 pupils with speech and language difficulties, 1 pupil with hearing difficulty, 6 pupils with behavioural disorders, 1 pupil with motor disorder and chronic disease and 1 pupil with visual impairment.

One pupil was selected from each category of special educational needs based on the consent of the child's parents and their willingness to cooperate as well as the teachers' willingness to cooperate with a special needs educator during the research period. The beginning of the study with the first actual assessments and creation of individual educational and rehabilitation programs may be said to have started at the beginning of the 2007–2008 school year and ended at the end of the 2008–2009 school year. During this period additional assess-

ments were performed – two medial and one final measurement – in order to observe the results of applied programs for all six case studies related to the six selected pupils.

Analysis

The positive results of this study that were gained through the close cooperation with all participants, have led to positive experiences and development of positive attitudes towards diversity and acceptance of all children regardless of their personal characteristics. At school level, a team has been established to support inclusion, specifically focusing on children with special needs (educator-rehabilitator, speech therapist, expert in hearing impairment, social pedagogue, regular teacher, educator, parents). In-service workshops for regular teachers have been carried out concerning characteristics of learning / teaching children with special needs in regular classrooms. Advisory work with teachers and parents / caregivers / families was conducted regularly throughout the project period. Through implementation of project activities, adequate technical support has been ensured by participants in the project and students of the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation, University of Tuzla, for 6 pupils with different special needs included in regular classes of the project school. Detailed information about these findings is expected to appear in Anthology no. 3 of this series.

Ethical considerations

When conducting any research, we must take into account ethical considerations during the process of collecting data, analysing results and writing a narrative report. In this study we prepared an application for approval to conduct research in a regular school in the form of 'a letter of consent' signed by the head of school. A memorandum of confidentiality of data was also signed, guaranteeing confidentiality of all information collected during the investigation of children, school and informants.

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