

Methodology in the Study of Implementation of Legal Frameworks for Supporting Children with Disabilities in Regular School

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Introduction: Background, aims and main questions of the study

Serbia has a long tradition of providing special education for children with special needs and disabilities. Special education is provided in special schools and in special education classrooms within regular schools. At the same time, a large proportion of children with special needs and disabilities have been educated within regular school classes according to the regular curricula for several decades (e.g. Nikolić & Janković, 2007). However, their education within regular school classes has not been recognised by educational authorities, and no systematic adjustment of educational processes and support for pupils with special needs has been provided within regular school education (Rapačić, Nedović, Ilić & Stojković, 2008).

In accordance with the international trend, the country's educational legislation has been moving towards the development of inclusive education over the last decade. However, research has shown that attempting to implement inclusive policy into practice meets many challenges, some of which include 1) regular school teachers' insufficient knowledge regarding development and

realization of individualised education programmes; 2) persistence in numerical evaluations of children's achievements according to general standards; 3) lack of coordinated and comprehensive training of teachers in skills needed for teaching tailored to the individual needs of each student; 3) sparse material resources and deficient support for teachers participating in inclusive programmes; 4) lacking knowledge concerning abilities of children with special needs and of successful models for their inclusion, forming the basis for prejudice toward inclusive education among teachers and parents (Jablan & Hanak, 2007; Rapaić, 2001; Todorović, Vuković & Hanak, 2003).

With this backdrop, the aims of the present study are:

- To analyse legislative regulations regarding educational rights of pupils with developmental disabilities in the Republic of Serbia
- To investigate an innovative programme of inclusive education based on possibilities arising through recent changes in Serbian legislation on inclusive education. Characteristic of this programme is cooperation between regular schools and a special school in the process of inclusive education (for more detail, see the section on participants)

The overall research questions of the joint classroom study project, of which this study is a part, are the following: How does school teach in accordance with the pupils' different levels of mastery and needs for support in the learning process? What are the recourses, barriers and dilemmas in school's development towards inclusion (Johnsen, 2006)? In accordance with these broad questions, the more specific research questions of this study are the following:

1. What are the educational rights of pupils with developmental disabilities according to Serbian educational legislation?
2. What challenges do regular schools face in the process of developing inclusive education, and what are regular school teachers' suggestions regarding further development of inclusive practices?
3. How is the teaching process adjusted according to special needs of pupils in an inclusive classroom (what accommodations and modifications are provided)?
4. How is the learning process of pupils with special needs affected by different types of classroom organisation and by different types of teaching methods? Is there a relation between different types of classroom organisation and teaching methods and the engagement in learning tasks of pupils with special needs?

5. What are the characteristics of communication of pupils with special needs with teachers and other pupils during lessons?

Regarding the eight main areas of research forming the theoretical model upon which the joint project is based (Johnsen, 2006; 2008), this study focuses on the following: a) legislation on inclusive education as a frame factor; b) classroom organisation and teaching methods; c) and communication.

Research design

A case study research strategy is used involving an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1994). The phenomenon investigated in this study is the innovative programme of inclusive education within the legislative context. Both qualitative and quantitative data have been collected using the following sources: legislative documents, interviews and observations.

Participants/Data sources

The programme of inclusive education which is the subject of our study is realised in twelve regular primary schools in the city of Novi Sad, Serbia. These schools are participating in a cooperation project with a special education school called “Milan Petrović”. During the project period, special educators from “Milan Petrović” provide support for pupils with special needs and regular school teachers through offering the following activities: individual and group work with pupils both within and outside inclusive classes, identification of pupils’ special needs and determination of the type of support needed, cooperation with regular school teachers in the process of planning, realisation and evaluation of the learning process, and cooperative and counselling work with parents of pupils with special needs (Marković, 2008). Twelve teachers (who teach grades one to four), and twelve principals in the regular schools have been interviewed for the purposes of this study.

During the observational part of the study, six inclusive classes are observed during all lessons (5) in a school-day. Pupils with special needs who attend the observed classes have the following disabilities: autism (n=2), leucodystrophia (n=1), cerebral palsy (n=1), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (n=1), and mental retardation (n=1).

Concerning legislative regulations of inclusive education, The Law on the Foundations of the System of Education of the Republic of Serbia from years 2003 and 2009 has been reviewed.

Research methods

Interview. A semi-structured interview guide has been constructed for the purposes of this study. The interview consists of open-ended questions concerning the following areas: 1) support provided to pupils with special needs and teachers in the teaching/learning process (kinds of support, providers of support); 2) challenges met by teachers due to possible deficiencies in support; 3) teachers' and principals' opinions on the effects of inclusive education in the areas of academic achievement and socio-emotional development of pupils with and without developmental disabilities; 4) what factors, according to them, determine the efficacy of inclusive education and what should be done in order to promote the process of inclusive education.

Observation. Observation methods are used to obtain data regarding the teaching/learning process in inclusive classrooms. The observation is focused on the following aspects of the process: 1) classroom organisation and activities/patterns of interaction; 2) types of tasks in which a pupil with disabilities is supposed to be engaged in, and whether he/she engages in the task; 3) accommodations and adaptations provided to him/her; and 4) communication between the pupil with disabilities and other pupils and between the pupil with disabilities and teacher. Event coding strategy is used with recording of onset and offset times of each "codeable" event (Bakeman & Gottman, 1997).

Categorisation of types of classroom organisation and activities/patterns of interaction takes place using a coding scheme developed by Klette et al. (2005). The scheme contains three categories of organisational structure (whole class instruction, individual work, and group work) and fourteen categories of activities/patterns of interaction (whole class instruction-monologue, whole class instruction-dialogue, question/answer sequences, whole class discussion, pupil's reading aloud, pupil presentation, task management, comments on misbehaviour, messages and comments, individual guidance, involving the whole class in the individual pupil's question, group guidance, teacher out of classroom, and no interaction between teacher and pupils).

The types of tasks that a pupil with disabilities is supposed to be engaged in is coded according to a scheme which contains the following three categories:

tasks which are related to the general curriculum of the class, tasks which are related to a grade level other than the pupil's current grade, and tasks that are linked to an individualised educational plan (IEP). These categories are adopted from a coding scheme developed by Wehmeyer et al. (2003). We have omitted some categories from the original scheme related to accommodations and adaptations because they are coded independently of types of tasks in our study. In addition to the coding of type of task a pupil is supposed to be engaged in, whether the pupil engages in the task or not is also coded.

No pre-defined coding scheme is applied when obtaining data on communication between pupils with disabilities and teacher, and between pupils with disabilities and other pupils. We have adopted a narrative descriptive approach where observers make field notes describing a) type of communication, b) who initiates it and c) the emotional tone of the interaction.

Procedure

One-to-one interviews with school principals and teachers have taken place in their schools in spring 2008. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study, assured confidentiality and asked permission to make notes. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

Dates for observation are agreed upon in advance with teachers of the respective classes. The researchers have accepted suggestions made by teachers that pupils would be less affected by the presence of observers who are already familiar to them. Consequently, special needs educators who participate in the project of inclusive education are given the observer's role. Each lesson is observed and coded by two observers. Prior to data collection, observers are engaged in training sessions in which two of them observe classes, followed by discussions of disagreements concerning coding between coders and members of the research group.

Data analyses

Based on the answers obtained by interviews, categories were formed through discussion between the study's authors. Frequencies and percentages for each answer category were calculated.

As regards the observational data, percentages of time spent in different categories of activities were calculated. In order to test the relation between dif-

ferent categories of classroom organisation, activities/interaction and pupils' engagement, χ^2 test was used.

Data concerning communication were recorded and analysed using a narrative approach.

Research ethical considerations

Teachers and school principals participating in the study have been informed about the study's procedures and goals, and they are told that they are free to withdraw and discontinue their participation at any time. Parents of all pupils who attend observed classes are informed about the study at parents' meetings, and they asked for their consent to conduct classroom observations. In order to minimize pupils' discomfort, the teachers have told pupils at the start of each classroom observation that the observers are merely "interested in learning what their school day looks like" and that they therefore have no reason to feel upset. In reporting study results participants' anonymity is has been ensured.

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