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CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATISATION: DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SERBIA

Abstract

Educational reforms, as initiated in Serbia in 2001, were based on the concept of quality education for all. This concept was put into practice as an inclusive approach in 2010/11. Inclusive education has been defined as a provision of full support and optimal environment for each student to be taught in the nearest school and in a regular class. In this paper we review the achieved results in providing necessary conditions for a successful implementation of the inclusive education, i.e., school policy, preparation of teachers, building-up their attitudes and system of values, as well as attitudes and system of values of other participants in the educational process. It has been shown that educational institutions, teaching staff and other participants in the educational process are fully aware of the need for an integrated schooling of all children and accept the concept of inclusive education. However, several shortcomings of the current inclusive education have been revealed. They are a consequence of the means it has been implemented, as well as socio-economic conditions that affect the Serbian society and educational sector as its part.

Key words: Serbia, democratisation, education policy, inclusive practice

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, Serbia found itself in very unfavourable social circumstances that affected education, along with the economic, social, political and cultural sector. After the socio-political changes in 2000, the new authorities proclaimed that improvement of quality of education system was the priority of their politics, since it figured as an efficient means of social development. Accordingly, they initiated a process of thorough restructuring and reorganisation of the education system aimed at overcoming a number of existing problems: unequal accessibility of education to all categories of students, their poor academic achievement, unbalanced quality of teaching staff, poor school infrastructure and working conditions, centralised management of school system and bureaucracy in regulating school work, along with a low level of school autonomy, etc. The main goal of reforms was to use education as means for the provision of an efficient support to economic recovery and development of the country, development of democracy and international integration of the country, while decentralisation, democratisation and improving the quality of education were defined as the main directions of educational reform (Kovač Cerović & Levkov, 2002).

Democracy in education is based on recognition of two basic principles: the principle of equality (fairness, accessibility and acknowledgement of rights for all) and the principle of participation (freedom of expression, choice and active participation in making decisions about/in education practice, along with assuming responsibility) (Kovač Cerović & Levkov, 2002). Modernisation of the society cannot be achieved without democratisation of the society, while the latter cannot be

accomplished without democratisation in education. School is a very powerful instrument in systematic propagating of democratic values and their practicing, especially in the situation of sudden and turbulent social changes, and hence its reform in accordance with different social circumstances becomes more urgent (Maksić & Pavlović, 2011). On the other hand, in every country success in implementation of the education system reform more or less depends on features of the social context in which the reform takes place. Although the intended changes in structure, organisation and functioning of Serbian education system were conceived very ambitiously, the reform process was not implemented continuously and without interruptions during the past ten years. Hence, the achieved effects failed to fulfil both the expectations of experts and the wider public.

Education policy on inclusive education

Starting from 2002, one of priorities of the Serbian educational authorities has been to increase accessibility of education and create conditions for quality education for all students in the country. These goals can be accomplished in the inclusive concept of education. Inclusive education should remove all kinds of barriers and discrimination, such as gender, ethnic origin, religious or socio-economic background, abilities, medical condition or any other personal characteristic of an individual, as well as provide social cohesion. Changes in the education system aimed at increasing inclusion are expected to largely enhance accessibility and quality of education, primarily within the regular system of education, for children from socially unsupportive environments (Roma, poor, rural, displaced), children and adults with developmental impairments and physical disabilities, and children with learning disabilities (Ministarstvo prosvete..., n.d.).

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, inclusive approach to education was supported by passing of *The Law on the fundamentals of the education system* (Službeni glasnik, 2009). The mechanisms envisaged by the Law comprise: fair enrolment policy, prohibition of discrimination, increased accessibility of education for children with disabilities, as well as children from other vulnerable groups, and changes in funding of institutions that support children's inclusion in the education system. The Law also includes measures that refer to the achievement of standards, development of individual education plan and provision of additional support, school enrolment, running the final exam and appointment of pedagogue assistants. Achievement standards can be adjusted to each individual student in cases where that is necessary due to social deprivation, developmental impairment, physical disability and other reasons. Educational institutions are obliged to eliminate physical and communication obstacles to students' attendance. Schools should also adopt individual education plan for a student who needs it. Children with developmental difficulties can be enrolled into school based on recommendation of the child's doctor working at the community health centre, providing that a relevant commission evaluated the student's needs for additional educational, medical or social support and the parents gave their consent. A developmentally impaired or physically disabled student should take the final exam adapted to his/her motor and sensory abilities, i.e. to conditions dictated by a certain type of disability or in keeping with the individual education plan that has served as the basis for his/her education. Hiring a pedagogue assistant should help teachers, preschool teachers and

associates in extracurricular and curricular activities as a form of additional support to children and students, suitable to their needs.

School year 2010/11 marked the beginning of practical implementation of inclusive education in Serbia. What did educational authorities do to provide conditions for implementation of inclusive education policies? First, they conducted trainings on inclusive education, attended by over 10,000 employees of the education sector. According to the 2012 data, all schools in Serbia received basic training for inclusive education, while 320 schools received advanced training. Additionally, every school received inclusive education materials for teachers. On the whole, 94% of municipalities in Serbia conducted at least one project in this field: 307 regular schools, 56 preschool institutions and 140 schools implemented Roma inclusion programmes, while 49 preschool institutions and 126 schools hired a pedagogue assistant and received equipment necessary for inclusive education. Manuals and guides for enhancement of inclusive practice were published, such as, *The guide for advancing inclusive education practice*, *The manual for school inclusive development*, *The collected examples of inclusive practice*, *Teaching strategies for children with developmental impairments and physical disabilities*, *Professional competences for inclusive education* etc. The national network of support to inclusive education comprised 80 experts and practitioners and 14 model schools were formed (Ministarstvo prosvete..., n.d.).

Evaluation of inclusive education

Educational authorities in Serbia intend to conduct evaluation of inclusive education in order to test the effects of introduced changes and develop the system further. At this moment, it is possible to analyse the results of a number of small-scale studies that point to certain difficulties.

First, we will discuss the study on class teachers' needs and capacities for development of inclusive education, conducted by the Serbian Teachers Association and Institute for Evaluation of the Quality of Education, immediately before the introduction of the inclusive model (*Procena kapaciteta i potreba učitelja za razvoj inkluzivnog obrazovanja*, 2010). The findings indicate that somewhat more than one half of class teachers held a positive attitude towards inclusive education, while one quarter was against such a practice. Only a small percent of respondents (12.8%) perceived their working space as sufficiently adapted for quality participation of students with developmental impairments/physical disabilities, and less than one fifth thought they had adequate work equipment at their disposal. Additionally, a majority of class teachers were not satisfied by the current forms and kinds of support to development of inclusive education, and assessed as inadequate their preparation for working in inclusive schools. Only one-fifth of respondents said that teachers were trained to provide adequate support in learning and participation of students with developmental impairments/physical disabilities. This is in accordance with the finding that only 16.8% of respondents opined that they had received adequate knowledge for quality work with students with disabilities. Almost one half of teachers did not attend any in-service training in the field of inclusive education. On the other hand, it is an encouraging finding that teachers were willing to attend inclusion trainings and agreed that system-level support was necessary.

Another study conducted at the same time, but involving both school and kindergarten teachers, pointed to similar difficulties in implementation of inclusive education in educational institutions (Gašić Pavišić & Gutvajn, 2011). The majority of kindergarten teachers (82%) and class teachers (74%) assessed they were not sufficiently prepared for working with children with disabilities. One quarter of kindergarten teachers who participated in the study and more than one third of class teachers stated that they had one, two or three children with disabilities in their group/class. Groups with these children consisted of up to thirty children, the same as school classes, and their disabilities ranged from slight speech impediments to attention disorders and aggressiveness to intellectual deficits, cerebral palsy, autism and epilepsy. There were no differences in self-assessment of preparation for working with children in inclusive conditions between those kindergarten and class teachers who had received some kind of training and those who had not. According to respondents' opinion, the biggest obstacles to successful implementation of inclusion were lack of expertise and preparation of kindergarten/class teachers (mentioned by one-half of kindergarten teachers and one-third of class teachers); too many children in group/class; inadequate work conditions – lack of teaching aids, inadequate space, lack of staff, too extensive curriculum, lack of literature; lack of support from colleagues, headmaster, local community, parents; lack of teamwork; poor cooperation with parents, unrealistic parental expectations.

Results of another study among kindergarten teachers confirmed that they generally held a positive attitude towards inclusion of children with developmental difficulties in regular preschool groups, but felt they lacked professional skills for working with them (Gutvajn & Lalić-Vučetić, 2010). In the kindergarten teachers' opinion, advantages of inclusion lay in the domain of better chances for progress of mentally impaired children through participation in some activities together with other children, but they were worried that presence of a disabled child might endanger safety of other children (Nikolić & Mitrović, 2010).

Teachers dominantly perceived themselves as inadequately professionally prepared for working with children with disabilities, emphasising that it should be the responsibility of special educators (Đerić & Pavlović, 2011). Primary school teachers thought that individual education plan was largely the essence of inclusion (Lazić, 2011). Teacher training on inclusion organised by the Ministry of Education was assessed by teachers as successful in the theoretical part, but as inadequate in preparation for solving practical issues. Teachers believed that it was possible to include children with milder impairments in regular school, and stated they were ready to work with this category of students (Bogner, Jablan & Golubović, 2011).

Positive teachers' attitudes towards joint education of children with and without disabilities have also been confirmed by the study conducted among teachers and students, with the exception that more than one-half of respondents stated that selective approach was necessary, depending on the impairment type and degree (Đević, 2010). Teachers expressed their concerns about academic achievement of a class that involved students with disabilities. The same study has shown that students were ready to accept disabled children. More positive attitudes, both among teachers and students, were expressed by those whose schools were involved in inclusive education programmes. For example, increasing students' level of

information about visually impaired children resulted in reduction of negative attitudes towards them (Jablan & Hanak, 2010).

It has also been shown that initial teacher education did not significantly contribute to the development of competences and teacher preparation for inclusive education (Macura-Milovanović, Gera & Kovačević, 2011). Analysis of teacher education curricula showed that in the majority of cases there was only one course relevant for inclusive education, while the dominant approach was the perspective of special education, i.e. medicine, without the cross-curricular approach. The main obstacles to preparation for inclusive education mentioned by teachers were inadequate curricula, non-functional professional practice and negative attitudes of university teachers towards inclusive education.

A study conducted among parents, some of them belonging to minority and/or marginalised groups, pointed to links between school initiative, parent-teacher relationship and parents' readiness to be involved in various aspects of school life. Building trust and partner relations with teachers, cooperation between parents and constant focus of all involved parties on child's best interests were perceived as possibilities for higher parental involvement in school life and work (Vranješević, 2011). Another study among parents whose children had developmental difficulties showed that higher parental readiness for partnership with school was a result of informing parents about their rights and roles in children's education and inclusive education, as well as appreciation of their needs (Velišek-Braško, 2011).

Conclusion

Based on previous discussion, it can be concluded that at the level of educational policy Serbia has embraced a modern and human inclusive approach to education. However, experience from practice of numerous educational institutions points to many problems in the implementation of inclusive practice. Research studies have shown that both kindergarten and class teachers do not feel competent enough for inclusive education, that they are not satisfied with the existing types and forms of support provided for the development of inclusive education, as well as that there are no physical conditions for entry, movement and stay in the building and classroom for children with disabilities. Another conclusion is that inclusive approach was introduced into Serbian kindergartens and schools without the provision of necessary prerequisites for its success. Still, it is encouraging that teachers are aware of the needs of all children for integrated schooling and they accept the idea of inclusive education. Nevertheless, there is still much to be done in strengthening the capacities of teachers and schools in developing the inclusive practice.

Further endeavours in providing appropriate conditions for inclusive education should take place at multiple levels, timely and systematically. First and foremost, it is urgent to implement changes in the initial teacher education, as well as in the field of their professional development. The scope of teachers involved in trainings was not sufficient, and there is also a particular set of competences that cannot be acquired through one-time professional training while working. Additionally, it is necessary to persevere in providing various kinds of help and support to teachers, through involving paraprofessionals in work, cooperation with special pedagogues within school team, organising special schools as resource centres, devising

trainings in keeping with teachers' professed needs, encouraging horizontal learning etc. It is also necessary to adapt spatial and technical conditions to the needs of all children to a much larger extent than it has been done so far. However, removal of physical barriers, provision of assistant technology, hiring of pedagogical assistants, etc. demands sufficient funding. Unless these obstacles are overcome, envisaged legal solutions that guarantee the right to equal access to education and encouragement of development of all children have no chance to be accomplished.

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