

## **The Importance of Teachers Training in Relation to the Socialization of Children with Special Education Needs in the Mainstream Classrooms**

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This article aims to highlight the importance of teachers training about inclusiveness by relying on statistical differences in teachers' perceptions of who are trained in the last five years and those who are not, in the realm of inclusive education as regards the socialization of SEN children with their class peers. The approach of this study was quantitative, and sample extraction is carried out through the stages sampling method. For the data collection, it was used a Likert scale with a Cronbach's coefficient alpha reported 0.86. The dimension of this research, "Teachers' perceptions as regards the socialization of children with SEN with peers" consists of three factors, respectively (1) "Teacher perceptions as regards the adaption of children with SEN to the group of peers", (2) "Teachers' perceptions as regards the participation of children with SEN in managing the situation", (3) "Teachers' perceptions as regards the social participation of children with SEN with their peers". The results of the "Mann-Whitney U Test" revealed significant differences in the perception of trained and untrained teachers, as regards the three factors of the study.

*Keywords:* teacher's training, children with SEN, inclusive classes

### **Introduction**

During the last 15 years, the education system in Albania was challenged by the need to provide inclusive education for every child, especially for children with disabilities (CWD) and those with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. Following the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012, as well as based on the guidelines of the European Community and of the documents published by reputable organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and ODIR, the first step undertaken was to align the legal and policy framework with the International Conventions, to provide access and quality inclusive education for these children in mainstream schools, so they are no longer segregated in special schools. In addition, the mainstream school staff in cooperation with the school community and local education' decision-makers, have been investing in serious efforts to improve access, culture, practices, and policies, in mainstream kindergartens and basic education schools, where CWD or SEN children are enrolled, to welcome these children and support them to reach their best potential.

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In this light, one of the most important challenges remains teacher training and teacher professional development (PD) in the issues that are related directly to the socialization of these children in mainstream classrooms. Although studies have been conducted in this area, it remains necessary to study specific aspects of this issue. During the research work for the writing of this article, not enough studies were found in this field to support the results obtained from this study. For this reason, the results obtained from this study are a very valuable contribution that would help to clarify the main milestones on which training curricula, for the PD, should be built. By the same token, from this PD, teachers can gain knowledge and practical skills in the field of inclusiveness, which will serve them to increase the quality of classroom work for all students.

This paper is extracted from wider research, carried out in basic education schools in Albania, which aims to identify if there were any differences between the perceptions of teachers who received training in the last five years in the field of inclusiveness, compared to the group of teachers who did not receive training, in terms of the level of participation of SEN children in-class activities, as well as the level of socialization of the SEN children with their class's peers. The study was conducted in the middle schools of 38 cities and towns across the country.

## **Review of Literature and Research Papers**

### **The Importance and Effectiveness of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education as defined in the Salamanca Statement promotes the “recognition of the need to work towards ‘schools for all’ or institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs” (UNESCO, 1994). According to UNESCO, an inclusive education system is a system that has developed schools based upon “a child-centered” pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities (UNESCO, 2012). Additionally, inclusive education is endorsed on two foundations: the rights of children to be included in mainstream classes and the intention that inclusive education is more effective (Lindsay, 2011). At this glance, the development of more inclusive schools (Mattson & Hansen, 2009) is one of the challenges for the educational system today (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). Meanwhile, some factors, are still vocal about the value of segregated education (Meynert, 2014), all actors of the community, schools, and families, are working to develop the relationship between them, because this is the fundamental base to include these children in mainstream education settings (Kozleski et al., 2015) under the framework of inclusive education philosophy (UNESCO, 2012). By the same token, researches show that children with SEN have a lot of academic benefits from inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2002), and inclusive programming can be effective for some children with moderate disabilities (Manset & Semmel, 1997). Some other researchers pointed out that children with intellectual disabilities, perform better than their analogous segregated children, mostly in academic attainment and social

competence (Freeman & Alkin, 2000). Inclusive education influences slightly positively in the school attainments of children without SEN (Szumski, Smogorzewska, & Karwowski, 2017), and inclusion has its impact on children (Shogren et al., 2015).

### **For a Better Climate in the Inclusive Classes**

In the framework of improving the school culture and school effectiveness (Dessel, 2010; Hargreaves, 1995), the value of diversity is promoted, by nurturing the spirit of mutual respect (Koutsouris, 2014) and tolerance between children and community entitlement (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006), and by providing equal opportunities for all children without discrimination in education settings (Jacobs, 2010). This spirit is leading children to know each other for what one can do, rather than what s/he is not able to do, and therefore is beneficial in this regard, and improving peer social interaction (Koegel et al., 2012). The merit of such schools is not only that they can provide quality education to all children; their establishment is a crucial step in helping to change discriminatory attitudes, create welcoming communities, and in developing an inclusive community (Skidmore, 2004). In a certain respect, for authors, such as Nutbrown and Clough (2009), inclusion must be seen as a process of continuous improvement. This process is a state of becoming' where all the actors involved, the school and the family, are working together to improve the various challenges they encounter (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009).

### **Teachers' Attitude Toward Children with Special Needs**

Breaking negative trends to include children with special needs in mainstream classrooms is not always easy (Persson, 2013). And this comes for a few reasons. In the first place are the difficulties faced by children with special educational needs during the learning process, which must be addressed through the design of individual program development (LeRoy & Simpson, 1996). But a very important element that needs to be taken into consideration is the teachers' attitudes towards these children (Lee, Yeung, Tracey, & Barker, 2015; Gash, 1996; Leyser & Abrams, 1982; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). Some studies pointed out that teachers show positive attitudes towards children with disabilities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005), and this factor is very important for the inclusion process (Beacham & Rouse, 2012). In a certain respect, other researchers stressed that the positive attitudes of teachers and willingness to care for these children in the classroom (Dinnebeil, McInerney, Christine, & Juchartz-Pendry, 1998), are very salient factors concerning how successful inclusive practices will be (Stafford & Green, 1996; Saloviita, 2020). But according to other researchers, there are teachers with lack awareness regarding children with autism (Al-Sharbati et al., 2013), and they lack the knowledge, skills, and expertise necessary to support children with SEN (Black-Hawkins, 2012). And yet, one very important challenge is that teachers need to reduce prejudice (Marks, 1997).

## **Professional Development (PD) of Teachers Regarding Inclusiveness and Special Education Training**

Teachers have a very important role in inclusive classrooms, given that teachers' action plays a crucial role in setting the tone (Forlin & Jobling, 2003), and promoting participation and achievement in the classrooms (Rouse, 2017). Teachers' training and professional development in this regard also play an important role (Lee, Yeung, Tracey, & Barker, 2015), and preparing teachers for inclusive education is very complex (Miskolci, Magnusson, & Nilholm, 2021; Ricci & Fingon, 2017). In this aspect, teachers who are in the early stage of their professional careers must pay more attention to responding to new challenges, such as applying new policies and practices regarding the inclusion of SEN children. More important is to adapt mainstream lessons to all the children (Kirk, Gallagher, Coleman, & Anastasiow, 2012). And yet, literature in this realm emphasizes the importance of teachers' preparation to work with SEN children, by revising teacher education programs (Florian & Rouse, 2009). In this light, the OECD (2012) report, encourages the quality of teaching, especially concerning staff that works in inclusive classes, as one of its most important goals. At first, the emphasis is put on setting out explicit goals and regulations that orient the use of resources in areas of priority; coordinating the resources and the involvement of parents to make informed choices; helping staff to enhance instructional strategies; and helping parents to understand better the child development. Furthermore, another priority is to promote further training for school staff, by advancing qualifications, professional development, and improving the working conditions (OECD, 2012).

Scholars too, find very important the pre-service training and ongoing in-service professional development in the field of inclusive education (Sokal & Sharma, 2014; Arthur-Kelly, Sutherland, Macfarlane, & Foreman, 2013; Browder, et al., 2012; Campell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003). These relate closely to the improvement of teaching quality in inclusive classrooms (Sokal & Sharma, 2017). Moreover, according to many researchers, it is essential to encourage open debates and discussions in the workplace, among teaching staff (Ferrante, 2017), about all the challenges they face in the daily routine of working with SEN children. Open debates can be the starting point for teachers to enable the learning environments, by feeling free to express their questions and ask for help, and share the best experiences and skills (Tadam, 2013), so they can solve their challenges (Gash, 2006). Part of the PD curriculum of all teachers should be at least one course about working with SEN children. All teachers need a foundation in individualized learning needs, classifications of SEN, and practical teaching methodologies (Losert, 2010).

### **Methodology**

The research employs the quantitative research method. The part of the research that is used to develop this paper, aims to analyze the differences in the

perception of teachers who are trained in the last five years and those who are not, as regards the level of socialization of SEN children with their peers in inclusive classrooms.

### **Population and Sampling**

In the Albanian education system, one or two SEN children are enrolled in mainstream classes, and therefore the number of SEN children is almost the same as one of the teachers working in inclusive classes. From this population, a sample of 351 teachers has been extracted. The probability method of stage sampling was used to select the sample from the whole population. It includes selecting the sample in stages, which is, taking samples from samples (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Subsequently, from each educational district, 10% of the teachers who work with SEN children were randomly selected. Only for Tirana city, and Tirana district does the sample represent 20% of the respective populations, due to the highest number of SEN children in these geographic locations and consequently the highest number of teachers who teach in these classes. The main criterion applied to select the teachers for the sample was for a teacher to have at least one SEN child in his/her class. Analyses of the sample show that 88.3% of teachers who teach in inclusive classes hold a bachelor's degree, and 11.7% hold a master's degree. In the function of the inferential analyses, the sample was divided into two groups; the first group has attended training in the inclusive education field in the last five years and the second group did not. 47% of the teachers report that they had attended training in the last five years in inclusive education, and 53% report that they did not attend any training in this field.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this study was carried out over a period of three months. Questionnaires were distributed to teachers in open envelopes, together with an information letter. In the informative letters, teachers were informed about the nature of the study, its goals, and the nature of their voluntary participation. After teachers completed the questionnaire, they returned the envelope sealed to the front desk of their respective schools. During this phase, there was no intervention or interaction with the participants. For data collection was used the Likert scale. All items to design the scale for data collection originally came from a standardized questionnaire (Grift, 2007). All items from this scale were adopted for the Albanian context and were piloted twice, to improve its' alpha coefficient. From all items of the scale, six factors were extracted to carry out the factorial analyses. The result of data analyses reveals differences between the two groups of teachers in three factors. These factors are: "Teachers' perceptions as regards the adaption of children with SEN to the group of peers", "Teachers' perceptions as regards the participation of children with SEN in managing the situation", and "Teachers' perceptions as regards the social participation of children with SEN with their peers". These three factors compose the dimension of the research: "Teachers' perceptions about the level of socialization of SEN children with peers in inclusive

classes". The items were grouped into three sections. The first block of items sought information on "teachers' perception regarding the adaption of children with special needs to the group". This block consists of 14 items. The second block asked for information about "Teachers' perceptions as regards the participation of children with SEN in managing the situation". This block consists of 24 items. And the third block asked for information on "Teachers' perceptions as regards the social participation of children with SEN with their peers". This block consists of 18 items.

For all items that include the three main factors, reliability analyses were performed (Table 1). The reliability coefficient has been greater than the value of 0.7 (Cortina, 1993). Table 1 summarizes the Cronbach' coefficient alpha for the three factors.

*Table 1.* Alpha Coefficient and the Factors for All the Research Factors

<b>The dimension of the study</b>	<b>Factors of the research</b>	<b>Alpha coefficient</b>
"Perceptions of teachers (trained/not trained in the last five years) in the relation of the socialization level of children with special needs with peers in inclusive classes."	"Teachers' perceptions as regards the adaption of children with SEN to the group of peers."	0.84
	"Teachers' perceptions as regards the participation of children with SEN in managing the situation."	0.96
	"Teachers' perceptions as regards the social participation of children with SN with their peers."	0.81

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The data collected from the survey was transported into the computer statistical package SPSS, version 23. Before reviewing the data, assumptions for the statistical analyses were performed. The data have been examined for normality (skewness and kurtosis), as well as for any missing data. A two-tailed alpha level of 0.05 was set and used for all statistical tests.

The analyses of the three factors that compose the dimension resulted in a violation of one of the assumptions that are very crucial to carry out parametric techniques. From all five assumptions that were needed to perform the parametric tests, four were met, and one was not. Thus, the level of measurement criteria was met, (a continuous scale was used), for data collection probability sampling was used, all the observations were independent, and the homogeneity of variance assumption was met, (Levene's test). The assumption that was not met for the three factors was the normal distribution. The test of Normality performed for the three factors was significant. Results from Kolmogorov - Smirnov statistics, reported sig. value less than 0.05.

For this reason, nonparametric tests were used to investigate the differences between groups. In Table 2, the research question of this article, the main factors

of the study, and the type of inferential statistical analysis performed are presented in a summarized way.

*Table 2. Research Question, Variables, and Analytic Procedures*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Variables</b>	<b>SPSS Procedures</b>
Are there statistically significant differences between the perceptions of trained and untrained teachers as regards the level of socialization of SN children with their peers in inclusive classes?	<p>“Teachers’ perceptions as regards the adaption of children with SN to the group of peers.”</p> <p>“Teachers’ perceptions as regards the participation of children with SN in managing the situation.”</p> <p>“Teachers’ perceptions as regards the social participation of children with SN with their peers.”</p>	Mann – Whitney U test

## Results

To respond to the research question: - “Are there statistically significant differences between the perceptions of trained and untrained teachers as regards the level of socialization of SEN children with their peers in inclusive classes?”, the Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. This analysis was done to reveal the differences in the perceptions of two groups of teachers. The first group was teachers that were trained in the last five years about several topics such as inclusiveness, or the socialization of SEN children with their peers in inclusive classes. Teachers have received various qualifications in this field offered by universities or training which belong to the PD of teachers and are provided by licensed organizations. The second group was composed of teachers that are not trained for this aim.

*Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Variable of Training in Inclusive Education in the Last Five Years for Each Factor*

<b>Ranks</b>	<b>Participation in training sessions in inclusive education topics, in the last five years</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean Rank</b>	<b>Sum of Ranks</b>
Teachers’ perceptions as regards the adaption of children with SEN to the group of peers.	Yes	164	222.20	36440.00
	No	173	118.57	20513.00
	Total	337		
Teachers’ perceptions as regards the participation of	Yes	164	224.17	36763.50
	No	185	131.41	24311.50

children with SEN in managing the situation.	Total	349		
Teachers' perceptions as regards the social participation of children with SEN with their peers.	Yes	165	217.49	35885.50
	No	186	139.20	25890.50
	Total	351		

Table 4. Results of the Mann-Whitney U Test for Each Factor

Test Statistics			
	Teachers' perceptions as regards the adaption of children with SEN to the group of peers	Teachers' perceptions as regards the participation of children with SEN in managing the situation	Teachers' perceptions as regards the social participation of children with SEN with their peers
Mann-Whitney U	5462.000	7106.500	8499.500
Wilcoxon W	20513.000	24311.500	25890.500
Z	-9.769	-8.588	-7.230
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000

a. Grouping Variable: Training in inclusive education in the last five years

Table 5. Results of Medians for Sorted Cases of Each Factor

Report				
Participation in training sessions in inclusive education topics, in the last five years		Teachers' perceptions as regards the adaption of children with SEN to the group of peers	Teachers' perceptions as regards the participation of children with SEN in managing the situation	Teachers' perceptions as regards the social participation of children with SEN with their peers
Yes	Median	36.00	24.00	23.00
	N	164	164	165
No	Median	29.00	15.00	19.00
	N	173	185	186
Total	Median	32.00	19.00	21.00
	N	337	349	351

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to compare the score of the perception of teachers who were trained, and the teachers who were not trained in the last five years. This test revealed a significant difference (Tables 3 and 4) in the perception of teachers that were trained (Md = 36.00, n = 164) (Table 5), from the perception of teachers who were not trained, as regards the adaption of children with special needs to the group of peers (Md = 29.00, n = 173), U = 5462.000, z = -9.769, p = 0.000, r = 0.53).

In this case, it is also important to report the effect size, to make it possible to have a standardized measure of the size of the effect that is observed. The equation to convert z-scores into the effect size estimate, r, is as follows (Field, 2013)

$$r = z/\sqrt{N}$$

For “Teachers’ perception as regards the adaption of children with SEN to the group of peers,”  $z = -9.769$  and  $N = 337$ ; therefore, the R-value is  $-0.53$ . Based on Cohen criteria of  $0.1 =$  small effect,  $0.3 =$  medium effect,  $0.5 =$  large effect, the value of  $0.53$  is a large effect size (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). 53% of the variance in the perceptions of teachers as regards the adaption of SEN children with the group of peers is explained by participation in training sessions in the field of inclusive education with this topic.

The Mann –Whitney U test revealed a significant difference (Tables 3 and 4), in the factor of “Teachers’ perception as regards the participation of children with SN in managing the situation”, between teachers who were trained and those who were not. Thus, for teachers that were trained ( $Md = 24.00$ ,  $n = 164$ ) (Table 5) and this differs significantly from the perception of the teachers who were not trained ( $Md = 15.00$ ,  $n = 185$ ),  $U = 7106.500$ ,  $z = -8.588$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $r = 0.45$ ).

For the factor “Teachers’ perception as regards the participation of children with SN in managing the situation,”  $z = -8.588$  and  $N = 349$ ; therefore, the R-value is  $-0.45$ . This value would be considered a medium effect size using Cohen's criteria. 45% of the variance in the perceptions of teachers as regards the participation of children with SEN in managing the situation is explained by their participation in training sessions in the field of inclusion education.

The Mann –Whitney U Test is also used for the third factor. This test revealed a significant difference (Tables 3 and 4), in the factor “Teachers’ perception as regards the social participation of children with SN with their peers,” between teachers who were trained and teachers who were not trained. Thus, for teachers that have been trained ( $Md = 23.00$ ,  $n = 165$ ) (Table 5) and for teachers that are not trained ( $Md = 19.00$ ,  $n = 186$ ),  $U = 8499.500$ ,  $z = -7.230$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $r = 0.38$ ).

For the factor “Teachers’ perception as regards the social participation of children with SN with their peers,”  $z = -7.230$  and  $N = 351$ ; therefore, the R-value is  $0.38$ . This value would be considered a medium effect size using Cohen's criteria. In this case, 38% of the variance in the perceptions of teachers as regards the social participation of children with SEN with their peers is explained by participation in the training sessions, in the field of inclusion education.

## Discussion and Implications

The main purpose of this study was to identify if there were any differences between the perceptions of teachers who received training in the last five years in the field of inclusiveness, compared to the group of teachers who did not receive training, in terms of the level of participation of SEN children in-class activities, as well as the level of socialization of the SEN children with their class's peers. Based on these statistical results, the importance of PD of teachers in the field of inclusiveness can be argued. One of the most significant results of this study was the result that pointed out that teachers that have been trained in the last five years in the field of inclusiveness differ significantly from their colleagues who were not

trained, as regards their perception of the adaption of children with SEN to the group of peers, and 53% of the variance in their perception is explained by this variable. In addition, 45% of the variance in teachers' perceptions regarding the participation of children with SEN in managing the situation is explained by their involvement in training sessions in the field of inclusiveness. From the last result of the research, it can be concluded that teachers that have been trained in the last five years in the field of inclusiveness differ significantly from the teachers that have not been trained, as regards their perception of the social participation of children with SEN with their peers. 38% of the variance in their perception is explained by the training received in the last five years.

These results show that the training that teachers should receive in the field of inclusiveness has a very important role in improving their perceptions regarding the association of children with special needs with the group. In this light, studies have shown that the degree to which teachers understand inclusiveness often depends on their level of knowledge and skills (Lawson, Parker, & Sikes, 2006). In a certain respect, teacher training in inclusiveness concept as well as in education and care for SEN children should take a special place and become a priority (Cameron & Jortveit, 2014), in the agenda of those institutions which design in-service teacher training policies and strategies, because as supported by studies, having knowledge in inclusiveness after qualifying had a positive impact on teachers' attitudes to inclusion (Boyle, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2013). In such a way, teacher training and PD in these specific topics will not be provided sporadically and at ad-hoc bases, but in a unified agenda and systematic approach across the country. The training can address different issues, such as designing special needs instruction; promoting children's participation in learning and teaching; reducing exclusion, discrimination, and barriers to learning and participation; developing cultures, policies, and practices to promote diversity and respect for everyone equally; developing practical skills for educating children of diverse abilities (Cologon, 2012), and learning from best practices. Furthermore, regardless of what can be perceived as quite difficult, the implementation of inclusive education in practice is achievable (Buli-Holmberg & Kamenopoulou, 2017).

At the end of this article, it is important to highlight some implications that should be taken into consideration:

Leading institutions of education should establish mechanisms, to facilitate and encourage the employment of young teachers, who were either graduated or are certified as specialized teachers for SEN children.

The in-service teacher training curriculum, as well as the tests used in Qualification Tests for the in-service teachers, should necessarily include literature and questions that relate to special needs education and the education of SEN children. This action becomes a must for every teacher regardless of the subject s/he is specialized to teach, for as long as s/he is either teaching or will be soon teaching SEN children in the class.

All Teaching Universities in Albania should unify the curriculum for the pre-service teachers' children, to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach in special needs classes. Theoretical concepts and practical hands-on

methodologies should be combined in a balanced way, to be fully beneficial for future teachers.

### Conclusions

As a summary, at the end of this paper, some conclusions could be presented. The survey and data collection were conducted in 38 cities and towns in Albania. The sample consisted of 351 teachers, all of them teaching in inclusive classes. The sample selection was made through the stages sampling method. This sample was divided into two subgroups, based on their participation in training sessions on an inclusive education topic, in the last five years. A level of statistical significance of 0.05 was set, to evaluate the results of all statistical tests. Statistical analysis of the data revealed significant differences in the scores of teachers that were trained in the last five years and those who were not trained in the field of inclusive education, as relates to the three factors of the study. Thus, teachers who were trained differ significantly from the teachers who were not trained, as regards their perception of the adaption of SEN children to the group of peers, and 53% of the variance in their perception is explained by participation in the training sessions on an inclusive education topic, in the last five years. As regards teachers' perception of the participation of SEN children in managing the situation, 45% of the variance in their perception is explained by receiving training in the last five years. Last but not the least, as regards teachers' perception of the social participation of SEN children with their peers, 38% of the variance in their perception is explained by receiving training in the last five years.

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