



The Level of Understanding of the Teacher Key Competences for Inclusive Education by Kosovo Teachers

Original scientific paper

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was identifying the level of understanding of the teacher key competencies for inclusive education by Kosovo teachers. For this research it was used the quantitative method approach, identified 270 teachers as sample representatives and the questionnaire was used as the instrument. The findings show that the level of understanding of the teacher key competences for inclusive education by Kosovo teachers is at the low level. The t-test shows that the teachers with long work experience are more knowledgeable about inclusion than the teachers with short experience but on the other hand the teachers with shorter work experience are more supportive, collaborative and have more interest for professional development than teachers with longer work experience. The results also show that there are differences between teachers with bachelor and master degree, in their competences (knowledge, support, collaboration and professional development) as an inclusive teacher.

Keywords: *competencies, inclusive education, inclusive teachers, level of understanding, teachers*

The term “competence” has a poly-semantic nature (Blandul & Bradea, 2017). Competencies are skills and knowledge that the teacher must own to be successful (Cate et al., 2018). Competence includes the ability to adequately select, combine, and apply knowledge and skills so that the teacher can effectively solve problems and situations of

successful learning. They are interconnected with knowledge and skills but also with values, beliefs, attitudes, and motivations that make the teachers feel comfortable in their profession.

The education system in Kosovo for many decades has been characterized as a centralized and state-controlled where the

whole educational mechanism including schools, curriculum, textbooks, methods etc., has been controlled and uniform. This period of about five decades is characterized only by a static coherence which has not been followed by substantial changes in any aspect. A static situation with no substantial changes has also been in the professional development of teachers.

After 1999, reforms in all segments of education in Kosovo have begun. The education system has been engaged in ongoing reform aimed at developing student-centered environments in its public school systems. These aspirations were articulated in the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan, the National Curriculum and the Law on Pre-University Education (MEST, 2016).

Educational legislation now includes a revised *Developing Teacher Professional Practice Standards* that are intended to shape teachers' practices around the core elements of Learner Centered Education (LCE). Kosovo has been targeting education change at the level of teacher professionalism however, that led to, unintentionally, ignoring the domains of the social and historical background of teachers' work realities. Teacher competencies and professionalism must reflect certainly the skills and readiness to analyze all these circumstances and make judgments and adjust their practices to their particular situation (Saqipi et al., 2014).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) is responsible for the professional development of teachers in Kosovo, which projects the planning of necessary funds, accreditation of training programs, development of quality assurance standards and the creation of mechanisms for the implementation of professional development of teachers. Continuous professional development of teachers represents formal and informal activities, meaning the maintenance, the improvement and enhancement of teachers' knowledge and skills, through various forms and opportunities planned and organized within a system of activities, such as participation and certification in training programs, peer mentoring, participation in professional networks, professional publications in special journals and publications, participation in workshops, seminars and conferences, study visits, exchange of good practices inside and outside the school, and more (Saqipi, 2019).

The education system constantly needs teachers who are competent and motivated to know how to include all students in regular classes. Achieving the inclusive competence means that teachers should have a synthesis between knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to treat all students equally. The task of the teacher is not only to transfer knowledge and to help students as a philosopher and guide, but a teacher should help as a reformer in inclusive education. The teacher is responsible for the educational planning, teaching, assessment, reporting and adjustment of the curriculum for each student in particular (Kusuma & Ramadevi, 2013).

Understanding the level of understanding of the teacher key competences for inclusive education by Kosovo teachers will help the Ministry of Education as a policymaker, the Directorate of Education and mainstream schools in Kosovo to have a better view of the preparedness of teachers in the theory and practice of inclusive education in our schools, and the recommendations of this article will help to determine what further steps should be taken during implementation of inclusive education, and what can be done to get improved in practice in this field.

Inclusive Education in the World and in Kosovo

In recent years, inclusion has been subject of numerous and dominant debates in the field of education. This concept is controversial both in theory and in educational practice. Inclusion is considered a challenge as an idea and an action (Haug, 2017). Inclusion or inclusive education is treated as a complex and multi-dimensional concept and disputable (Lindsay, 2003). Given that inclusion is considered a complex multidimensional phenomenon, definitions are also difficult, because they are, among the other factors, highly dependent on the cultural contexts and pedagogical traditions of different countries.

Various authors define inclusive education as an opportunity in education and society in general, to identify and challenge discrimination and exclusion on an international, national and local level (Armstrong et al., 2011). The authors Salvia et al. (2017) defined inclusive education as an educational approach that facilitates

learning of all students, including those with and without disabilities, within the same environment. The authors Dudley-Marling and Burns (2014) defined as a fundamental way of realizing quality education for all. Based on the authors Braunsteiner and Mariano-Lapidus (2014) inclusive education is a fundamental right of all children and adults to fully participate, and contribute in all aspects of life and culture, without restriction or threat of marginalization. According to the author Mitchell (2014) inclusive education is a complex and controversial approach to educating learners with special educational needs. Inclusive education is seen as a process of school transformation and focus on a children's entitlement and access to education (Schmidt & Vrhovnik, 2015). The author Volpe (2016) is leaving behind the idea that only a few learners have "special needs" that all students as individual learners present their peculiar characteristics and have their own specific educational needs. Thus, inclusive education is defined as a process to challenge discrimination, to avoid exclusion, as a right to education for all, as an educational approach to facilitate the learning of all children without distinction, with active participation in inclusive classroom.

Inclusion is a matter of a worldwide treatment and depends on the construction of the beliefs formed by teachers during certain periods. Inclusion is based on the conviction that students with special needs should be integrated into regular classes and schools. Their involvement is facilitated in terms of physical, social and teaching aspects. Physical integration assumes that students with special needs be placed in class together with their peers, the social aspect means the need to integrate students with special needs to be an integral part of the social structure of the classroom, and instructional integration presupposes that students with special needs will learn based on their specific needs and not according to the standards set out in the curriculum (Friend & Bursuk, 2006).

The literature reports that all US public schools are responsible for mentoring students with special needs (Friend & Bursuk, 2009). For instance, about 75% of

students with special needs spend all or part of their school day in general education classrooms with other students. The rest of the students with special needs receive academic instruction in open classes, on their own, or placement in hospitalization (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). For instance, in Finland, the level of inclusive policy and its implementation is organized at the national level. Additional support requirements are first determined by the teacher/parent observation. After consulting with the special education teacher and the school psychologist, the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team determines the necessary services along with parents and students as part of the IEP process (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011). According to the previous research (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011) the funding approach is defined based on the assessment of the particular needs. Students eligible on support for full-time may expect to receive 1.5 times basic funding and a relatively small percentage in proportion with severe special needs students that can receive 2.5 to 4 times basic funding. Each municipality and each school independently decides how they use the funds. It is typically used for the employment of special (inclusive) teachers, and assistants teaching.

In Kosovo, inclusive education is developed based on special education. For this reason, in Kosovo, there are three approaches: 1. Special education, 2. Special Needs Education, and 3. Inclusive Education. Inclusive education policies in Kosovo, as in many countries around the world, has been developed based on special education. The laws, strategies, administrative and professional guidelines developed by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MEST) are based on international documents and are tailored towards promoting inclusiveness, ensuring equal conditions for the education of all, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, gender, or any other distinction, including impairments of a physical, psychic, emotional nature etc. This is also evidenced by the improvement of laws and other educational documents, which have transformed segregation policy from special education to inclusive education (Zabeli et al., 2021).

Teacher Key Competences for Inclusive Education

Teaching is a complex process and contemporary environments of 21st Century education systems need teachers who are competent and motivated to know how to include children with special needs (and those from other marginalized groups) in a inclusive classroom (Lewis & Bagree, 2013). The inclusiveness of children with special needs into regular schools presents a challenge, and then this is a significant signal for teachers around the world and at any level of education.

There are various times when teachers who deal with children with special needs in regular classrooms may feel their inclusion as a difficult and complex issue. Therefore, it is necessary to state that working with children with special needs requires lifelong education of educators and teachers, including ongoing seminars and follow-up of professional and scientific literature (Zrilic, 2013). The teacher's job is not only to transfer knowledge and help students as a guide, but he/she must help as a reformer in inclusive education. Many researchers (Bouillet, 2011; Igric, 2015; Zrilic, 2013) state that teachers need to develop further professionally and acquire new competencies to successfully integrate a child into a regular educational system. The teacher must be an expert and to know well the pedagogy, didactics, methodology and psychology, should have imagination, to be creative and to create a pleasant emotional atmosphere, without ignoring students as bio-psychosocial beings.

The teacher plays a central role in the inclusiveness process. In order to develop the skills, experiences, and the confidence to be inclusive for all children, teachers need to learn and practice inclusion during their initial preparation. They should also be given the opportunity to continue in the service of professional learning throughout all their careers. With more reliable and qualified teachers, the inclusive education program will have a positive impact on community awareness. This would increase the enrollment of children with special needs in school and would be the light of education for all and more for children with special needs, working and contributing to the growth of society (Kusuma & Ramadevi, 2013).

Efforts have been made to identify the competencies that teachers of regular schools need to work effectively with different students. A string range of respondents, including students with and without special needs, parents of children with special needs, the schools' principals, special and regular teachers, are analyzed and identified these competencies. Several lists of vital teacher competencies have been created (Rose & O'Neill, 2009). The researcher Majoko (2019) examined the teaching competences perceived by teachers to be essential for inclusive education found that participants perceived screening and assessment, differentiation of instruction, classroom and behavior management and collaboration to be the key competences required of teachers for inclusive education. The researchers Blandul and Bradea (2017) suggested that the teacher's competences are structured in three types: 1) scientific/professional competence which means knowledge of the subject taught and excellent cooperation capacity with other experts, 2) Methodical competences which means having the capacity to know students and their requirements, as well as their individual characteristics in the process of planning, the capacity to communicate and motivate students to learn, also to help them to understand the subjects and 3) psycho-pedagogical/psychosocial competences that means having the capacity to optimize the interpersonal relationships required in the didactic process the diversity of styles used to make the students aware of the necessity of learning, as well as to establish effective relationships with beneficiaries, parents, communities and other institutions.

For a teacher to work by following and applying the principles of inclusion, it is important to master the following competencies based on the profile of the inclusive teacher. There are involved the policy makers which are responsible for teacher education and inclusive education, as well as general and specialist teacher trainers from 25 European countries have developed a competency Framework for Inclusive Teachers which include principles and competences that a teacher has to master such as: the mastery of knowledge for inclusive education, the support for all students, collaboration with parents, families, and other professional staff in the education field, also continuing professional

development etc (Baldiris-Navarro et al., 2016).

Based on the literature review, there are a lot of different groups of the teacher key competences for inclusive education that the researchers have found. This research includes a combination of these teacher key competences which are grouped in four groups: the knowledge for inclusive education, collaboration, support for all students, and professional development. These four groups of competences were analyzed in this research to examine the level of understanding among Kosovo teachers regarding inclusive education.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to identify the level of understanding of teacher key competences for inclusive education by Kosovo teachers and potential differences between longer and shorter teacher work experience and the level of teacher education in their knowledge for inclusive education. Descriptive statistical analysis showed the level of understanding of key competences, It also depicts eventual differences between extensive and lack of teaching experience in teacher supportive attitudes.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the level of understanding of the teacher key competences for inclusive education by Kosovo teachers?
2. Is there any difference between longer and shorter teacher work experience and the level of teacher education in their knowledge for inclusive education, in supporting all students, in collaboration and in their interest for professional development?

Sample

Teachers from seven Kosovo municipalities were selected to participate in the survey: Prishtina, Mitrovica, Peja, Prizren, Ferizaj, Gjilan, and Gjakova. The number of teachers was taken from the latest education statistics in Kosovo at MEST (MEST, 2019). According to these statistics, there are a total of 8,036 regular teachers at the lower secondary level in these seven municipalities. As a sample, 3% of teachers were chosen from the seven selected municipalities, and 270 primary school

teachers were surveyed. Demographic data shows that 216 female and 54 male teachers were surveyed. The teachers have a different level of education, 12 of them have finished higher pedagogical school, 162 of them have a bachelor's degree, 95 of the teachers surveyed have master's degree, and only 1 has a doctorate.

Procedure

Before starting the survey, permission was requested from the municipal directorates of education in each city to conduct research in the primary schools of these cities. School principals were also asked for permission to survey their primary school teachers. After permission was given by the directorates of each city and the principals of each school, the research began and lasted for about three months.

Instrument and Data Analysis

The questionnaire was used as a measuring instrument. The questionnaire was compiled based on similar topic research, conducted at the 'Jurja Dobrile' University in Pula, Croatia, and it has been translated and customized into the Albanian language (Goldin, 2017). To fulfill needs of this research, the profile of Inclusive Teacher prepared by European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, has also been taken into account where some teacher key competencies for the inclusive education (2012). The questionnaire consists of 34 questions in total and it has served to measure the level of understanding the teacher key competences for inclusive education by Kosovo teachers. The data consists of two parts. The first part includes demographic data and the second part includes their research attitudes. In the second part of the questionnaire, the teachers had the chance to respond through the 5-point Likert scale (1- completely disagree, 2 - partly disagree, 3 - neutral, 4 - partly agree, 5 = completely agree.

The ninth question in the questionnaire was an open-question, where it was requested from participants to describe some teacher key competencies for inclusive education. Data collection was done by distributing questionnaires to the seven municipalities, and also, an online questionnaire was

distributed, which facilitated the work of the researcher.

The reliability of the questionnaire in Table 1. was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient model, which has achieved a high level of reliability, Cronbach Alpha = .885. The data were described with the descriptive

method, and analyzed with t-test to find out the differences between longer and shorter teacher work experience in supporting all students, and differences between the level of education and teacher knowledge for inclusive education (Cohen et al., 2018).

Table 1

The Reliability of the Questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of questions
.885	25

Results

The descriptive results showed that a significant number of general education teachers do not understand the teacher key competences for inclusive education, and it is seen in Table 2. their answers to the questionnaire where 36.7% of teachers provided inappropriate answers, confusing the teacher key competences for inclusive education with the competences of students in the Kosovo Curriculum Framework, which is a big difference.

Only 14.8% of teachers think that the teacher should have the necessary professional training to work with students with special needs, 7% of them think that teachers should continue their professional development, 4.8% of the correspondents consider that good cooperation with professionals, parents and students is a key competence that the teacher must have, and 8.1% of them consider that the support of all students it is also the key competence that a teacher should master. Whereas, 28.5% of teachers did not answer this question.

Table 2

Knowledge of teacher key competences for inclusive education

	Competences	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Knowledge for inclusive education	40	14.8	20.7	72.0
	Professional development	19	7.0	9.8	81.9
	Collaboration	13	4.8	6.7	88.6
	Support for all students	22	8.1	11.4	100.0
	Inappropriate answer	99	36.7	51.3	51.3
	Total	193	71.5	100.0	
	Without answer	77	28.5		
Total		270	100.0		

Testing and Interpreting the Difference With T-Test

There are differences: i. between teachers with longer work experience (over 30 years) and those with a shorter experience (0-5 years) in their knowledge about inclusion, their support for all students, collaboration and in their interest for professional development, ii. Between teachers regarding their level of education in their knowledge about inclusive education, their support for all students, collaboration and their interest for professional development.

The results in Table 3. show that there are differences between teachers with longer (30 + years) and shorter (0-5 years) work experience in their knowledge about inclusive education, for the support that they give to all students, for the collaboration they have with parents, teachers and other professional staff, also for their interest in professional development. Teachers with longer work experience (30 + years) have are more knowledgeable about inclusive education (M=42.43), than teachers with shorter work experience (M=41.06), the

significance results to be Sig. = .537, which means that it is higher than the first limit of reliability $p < 0.01$, and it is not statistically significant.

Whereas teachers with shorter work experience are more supportive (M=28.82) than teachers with longer work experience (M=27.50). The significance results to be Sig. = .232, which means it is higher than the first limit of reliability $p < 0.01$, and it is not statistically significant.

Teachers with short work experience are more collaborative (M=24.76) than teachers with long work experience (M=24.56).

The significance results to be Sig. = .826, and it is higher than the first limit of reliability $p < 0.01$, which means it is not statistically significant.

Teachers with short work experience are more interested in professional development (M=4.70) than teachers with long work experience (M=4.12). The significance results to be Sig. = .004, which is lower than the first limit of reliability $p < 0.01$, and it means it is statistically significant. Results are shown in Table 3. below.

Table 3

Differences Between Teachers With Longer Work Experience (Over 30 Years) And Those With A Shorter Experience (0-5 Years)

Competencies (Items)	Work experience	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Knowledge inclusion	0-5 years	91	41.0659	7.82702	.82049
	30+ years	16	42.4375	10.01312	2.50328
Support inclusion	0-5 years	91	28.8242	3.73450	.39148
	30+ years	16	27.5000	5.64506	1.41126
Collaboration inclusion	0-5 years	91	24.7692	3.15199	.33042
	30+ years	16	24.5625	4.88493	1.22123
Professional development inclusion	0-5 years	91	4.7033	.64108	.06720
	30+ years	16	4.1250	1.08781	.27195

The results in Table 4. show that there are differences between teachers regarding to their level of education, and two groups were tested those with master and with bachelor degree.

Teachers with Master degree are more knowledgeable about inclusive education (M=42.75) than teachers with Bachelor degree (M=38.46). The significance results to be Sig. = .000, which means it is lower than the first limit of reliability $p < 0.01$, and it is statistically significant.

The teachers with Master degree are more supportive for all students (M=29.20) than the teachers with Bachelor degree (M=27.87). The significance results to be Sig. = .008, which means it is lower than

the first limit of reliability $p < 0.01$, and it is statistically significant.

Teachers with Master degree are more collaborative (M=25.43) than teachers with bachelor degree (M=24.30). The significance results to be Sig. = 0.10 which means it is lower than the second limit of reliability $p < 0.05$, and it is statistically significant.

And teachers with master degree are more interested in professional development (M=4.32) than teachers with bachelor degree (M=4.28). The significance results to be Sig. = .756, which means it is higher than the second limit of reliability $p < 0.05$, and it is not statistically significant. Table 4. below shows the differences regarding to the teachers level of education.

Table 4

Differences between teachers regarding their level of education

Competencies	Level of education	Level of education			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
Knowledge inclusion	Bachelor	162	38.4691	9.00529	.70752
	Master	95	42.7579	8.45855	.86783
Support inclusion	Bachelor	162	27.8704	3.98777	.31331
	Master	95	29.2000	3.65420	.37491
Collaboration inclusion	Bachelor	162	24.3086	3.43038	.26952
	Master	95	25.4316	3.19125	.32742
Professional development inclusion	Bachelor	162	4.2840	1.03040	.08096
	Master	95	4.3263	1.09585	.11243

Discussion

Research showed the reasons why teachers should exercise an essential role in leading the process of realization the inclusive education and that teachers need to own appropriate competencies to address diverse student needs (Baldiris-Navarro et al., 2016). This research showed that 65.2% of teachers surveyed did not provide adequate answers to their knowledge about teacher key competences for inclusive education, confusing them with the student competences in the Kosovo Curriculum Framework. Only 34.8% of the respondents had information about these competencies.

On the other hand, research participants show a high percentage of knowledge about the teacher key competences for inclusive education (64.9% of teachers claimed to know teacher key competencies for inclusive education) which proves a discrepancy while identifying a misperception with the competencies that refer to students. This indicates the need for intervention in the creation of a genuine strategy and the gradual change of the culture of teacher professional development.

High percentages of results indicate that teachers feel that they have knowledge about some of the competencies such as knowledge of inclusive education, collaboration, desire for professional

development, the students support, the classroom management, but on the other hand, there is a low percentage of appropriate teacher professional training to work with students with various disorders, which is very important on achieving the success with these students. This is also evidenced in similar research results as teacher competencies are generally regarded as immediate for the implementation of inclusive practices, but for successful work with all students (Cate et al., 2018).

The t-test found there are differences between teachers with longer work experience (over 30 years) and those with shorter work experience (0-5 years), in the knowledge they have about inclusive education, for the support they give to all students, the collaboration they have with parents, teachers, and other professional staff, and also for the interest they have in professional development.

This means that the teachers with longer work experience are more knowledgeable about inclusion, because they have finished more training and had more experience with children with special needs during their work time. The teachers with shorter work experience are more supportive, collaborative and have more interest for professional development; this may be because they are new in this profession and have patience to work with all students no matter what kind of disabilities they possess. The results show that there is difference between the first three competences but they are not statistically significant, only the last one (interest for professional development) is statistically significant.

The results also show that there are differences between teachers regarding to their level of education, and two groups were tested those with master and with bachelor degree. The teachers with master degree are more knowledgeable about inclusive education, they also are more supportive and collaborative, and this is justified because they have completed higher education than those with bachelor degree, so they are more prepared for inclusion. On the other hand, the bachelor teachers they are more interested in professional development, it is also reasonable because the bachelor teachers need more information about inclusion and more knowledge about how to implement inclusion in their classes. The differences

between teachers with bachelor and master degree are statistically significant.

Conclusion

Findings in this research indicate that the level of understanding of the teacher key competences for inclusive education by Kosovo teachers is at a low level, considering that 65.2% (more than fifty percent) of teachers are not aware of these competencies. The teachers involved in the research feel that they have knowledge for some of the teacher key competences for inclusive education, such as knowledge for inclusive education, collaboration, the desire for professional development, students support, the classroom management, but on the other hand a small percentage of them claim that have the appropriate professional training to work with students with varying degrees of difficulty, which indicates that the level mastery of inclusive teacher is satisfactory, but not desirable.

The study also found differences between teachers with longer work experience and those with shorter work experience, in their knowledge about inclusive education, in supporting all students, in collaboration and in professional development. There are also differences between teachers regarding their level of education, and this difference is statistically significant. Teachers with a Master's degree are more knowledgeable about inclusive education than those with a Bachelor's degree. Considering that participants are not aware of the teacher key competences for inclusive education, this fact is a significant signal for all policy-makers of the education system (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Municipal Directorates of Education, school leadership) to act in this direction by creating a plan of work for preparing and training teachers for inclusive education, because it is still a new field in our country and it is still needed a dozen of work to do. Every teacher has to attend the inclusive education training, to prepare them to work with all kinds of pupils including them with special needs such as: pupils with autism, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, pupils with intellectual disability, down syndrome etc.

After completing inclusive education training, teachers should be assessed and

monitored by experts of this field every six months to see if they are capable to work in the philosophy of inclusion, and with pupils with special needs, these experts will give them advices if needed. Every school must have supportive teachers that are experts for inclusive education and that support teachers in their everyday work. Therefore, it is important to prepare all the teachers to teach all the students, regardless from their differences.

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