

skills in team games but also for children who have a tendency to continue the elite sport is good opportunity to capture some skills at this age, which are then impossible to achieve. Physical education develops students' competence and confidence to participate in a range of physical activities that become a central part of their lives, both inside and outside school. A high quality Physical Education curriculum enables all students to enjoy and succeed in many types of physical activity. They develop a wide range of skills and abilities to use compositional tactics, strategies and ideas to perform successfully. When they perform, they think about what they are doing, analyze the situation, and make decisions. They also reflect on their own and others' performances and find ways to improve them. As a result, they develop the confidence to participate in various physical activities and learn about the value of a healthy and active lifestyle.

They work as individuals, in groups and in teams, developing the concepts of justice and personal and social responsibility. Through the range of experiences that physical education offers, they learn how to be effective in competitive, creative and challenging situations. This teamwork teaches the importance of working together, learning students' strengths and weaknesses and how to work within the parameters of the team concept. These important benefits help lifelong learners work with others to achieve the desired result both individually and within the group. Physical education programs can only offer these benefits if they are well planned and implemented. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that children have at least one hour of physical activity each day, which should include strengthening muscles and bones because it is the most fundamental part of an individual's overall development. Supporting schools to establish physical education on a daily basis can provide students with the ability and confidence to be physically active throughout life. Therefore, it is very important that physical education and profiling are seen with great importance by state institutions!

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The importance of improving the education and singular-child-focused services by the support/assistant teachers for increasing the inclusiveness of the special need children, especially the children with autism, in the preschool and primary education system

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Abstract

The support/assistant teachers, who work with special needs children in preschool and primary education, play an important function in the integration and inclusion of these children in the mainstream education system. Last years the number of these support/assistant teachers has been growing, especially in the preschool institutions of Tirana. When recruiting in the service, assistant teachers some issues would be raised by the principals, administrators, psycho-social staff in the preschool institutions, education experts, etc: "Are there enough support/assistant teachers to provide support and services for all the children with disabilities? Are they trained as well as to be prepared for in-service working? How they offer they services and which are the results of their work?"

Key words: *child education, assessment, abilities*

Introduction

The professionalism of support/assistant teachers is determined by the ability to adapt to four challenges: (1) Personal interest in professional development, (2) Assessing/ Accepting children's diversity, (3) Supporting the child (4) Working with others. (European Agency, 2012)¹. Based in the manual of the Pre-university Quality Assurance Agency (ASCAP) (2020)² the role of the inclusive teachers, duties, and responsibilities are clearly defined. According to him, the inclusive teachers should provide advice and resources for the class teacher which will help them in the assessment process. Some of the tasks for support/assistant teachers in the classroom are:

- Assess the skills and requirements of the child in the education process.
- Builds the individual plan together with the other actors
- Collaborates with parents and pedagogical staff to carefully check the child's progress.
- Evaluate the child's abilities
- Builds didactic tools adapted to the needs of the child.
- Keeps notes and data on the child's progress
- Monitors the child's behavior and builds an intervention plan if he/she considers it reasonable.
- Finds different activities to teach children skills such as (drawing, drama, etc.)
- Manages crises in the classroom and resolves conflicts.
- Prepares students for the transition to the next grade.
- Informs parents about the child's performance and potential.
- Collaborates with other professionals who work with children with special needs.
- Collaborates with the class teacher and the principal of the institution.

In the report published by ASCAP, "Needs for professional development of support/assistant teachers in education" they note that 60% of support/assistant teachers work and support 1-2 children with disabilities. About 25% of these teachers support and work with more than three children with disabilities/children with special needs in schools. We observed that support/assistant teachers attend a higher number of children with disabilities than the teachers that work in schools. In kindergartens, an support/assistant teacher offer his/her service for 1

¹ European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012. Teacher Education for Inclusion. Profile of Inclusive Teachers.

² ASCAP, 2020, The need for professional development of inclusive teachers in pre-university education.

hour or 1 hour 30 minutes for a child with developmental disabilities and supports 4 to 5 children each day. From the data provided by ASCAP about 50% of the support/assistant teachers are novices in the profession and have less than 3 years of experience as teachers, 8% of them had less than one year of work.

Another problem till now underestimated is that in kindergarten a few of support/assistant teachers have completed bachelor studies for pedagogy plus a master in special pedagogy or psychology, while most of them have completed studies in pedagogy and have not previously working experience with children with disabilities or special needs. We also noted that only a few of them attend training related to the field of development and disability, while the rest do not have opportunities and information about such training in their city. They are trained in areas related to education and curricula and not in disabilities or difficulties in learning, for symptoms and interventions for autism, etc. Some of the support/assistant teachers due to lack of experience have shown difficulties in establishing relationships and interactions with special needs children or even felt incapable for helping these children adjust and learn.

The interventions of the support/assistant teachers to children with special needs in tirana's public kindergartens as a good practice

The statistics collected by the Municipality of Tirana show that the number of children with special needs in 2020³ was 110 children of whom 55% (61 children) diagnosed or suspected with autism spectrum disorder, 20% of them have hearing, vision, physical and language problems. 12% (13 children) have a diagnosis in mental retardation. In the year 2021⁴, the number of children with disabilities reported in kindergartens of the municipality of Tirana has increased compared to 2020 in 123 children who have a diagnosis or manifest a difficulty or disability. In 2021 the number of children who have a diagnosis of autism/suspected of autism was 74 (60%), the number of children with hearing, sight, physical, and language problems/difficulties was 19%, and 9% (12 children) had a diagnosis/suspected for mental retardation. This descriptive evidence is based on statistical data reported monthly by kindergarten principals but is important to point out that the attendance of children with disabilities in the preschool and primary education institutions changes continuously. The support/assistant teachers in public kindergartens of Tirana attend and offer their support to 4-5 children with disabilities. They regularly follow a PEI (individual educational plan), which is developed by the teachers in collaboration with the institution's psychologist, inclusive teachers, and parents.

³ Children with special needs in kindergartens, Municipality of Tirana, open data,2020

⁴ Children with special needs in kindergartens, Municipality of Tirana, open data,2021

The presence of support/assistant teachers in kindergartens is a necessity due to the high number of children in the class and also for good consequences of early interventions in the children's development. It also seems necessary for support/assistant teachers to be further trained and qualified in the areas of development, disability and autism. Experience has shown that a child diagnosed with third-degree autism needs the support of support/assistant teachers for more than two hours a day. The intervention of the support/assistant teachers is necessary for the adjustment, the integration of the child with the class, for attending the educational program, playtime, and activities that take place in the classroom.

The support/assistant teachers in kindergarten do not work individually with the child by separating him/her from the class but they try to integrate and stimulate the child to interact with peers. The support/assistant teachers work individually with the child only in a specific situation based on the traits of the disorder. The approach of interventions with the child in Tirana's kindergartens is focused on analyzing, knowing the needs and interests of children and respecting them by: achieving trust and a positive relationship with the children, understanding the interests of the child and his favorite play/objects, intervenes in behavior and cognition using the interests of the child, improving socialization with peers, integrating the child with the schedules, routines, rules, and curriculum that teachers implement in the classroom.

It is important to build a positive relationship during work with special needs children. In children diagnosed with autism, affection is an important element to consolidate this relationship. From the statistical data mentioned above, we noticed that more than half of the children with disabilities who attend public kindergartens are diagnosed (or suspected) with autism spectrum disorder; therefore it is important for support/assistant teachers to be trained and get the necessary information about this disorder. The work of support/assistant teachers is constantly monitored and supervised by psychologists and social workers in kindergarten; however, there is a need for deeper knowledge in this field. Inclusive teachers who heaved no previous experience with children with disabilities find it difficult to develop a positive relationship with these children. The build of affective relationships with children usually takes more than three weeks. Teachers, psychologists, and social workers can help support/assistant teachers building this relationship. There is a difference between the support/assistant teachers who have the appropriated education or have previous experiences with children compared with the support/assistant teachers who have no previous experience in this work and just the training from the universities. More experienced teachers find it easier to gain the child's trust, establish healthy relationships with them, manage children's crises and emotional outbursts, and prevent the generation of inappropriate situations that a child's crisis can lead to.

In the first few weeks, the support/assistant teachers are asked to develop a healthy affective relationship with the child. They should intervene with the child step by step so he does not get frustrated or anxious or frightened. The intervention of the support/assistant teachers for the child should be focused on the play and the child should feel satisfied during it and not as an activity that the child should do. During the building of this relationship and the observation of the child in the classroom, the support/assistant teachers keep notes for and understand which are the activities/ objects of interest for the child. The support/assistant teachers, following the training by the psychologists, use these privileged objects to approach the child.

When we talk about the interests of the child we are talking about those activities that the child does in the classroom and through which he gains a special pleasure (especially in autism subjects). These objects can be a toy, an activity, a song, books, etc, which we can use later to intervene and stimulate the child's development. We intervene with the child through this object. The inclusive teachers should keep systematic notes while observing the child in the classroom to understand what his/her interests are. We must keep in mind that the developmental characteristics of children are unique and also the interests and privileged objects are *singular* for each of them.

Kindergarten intervention in children is setted in the classroom, the environment where the child performs a large part of daily activities. An individual work plan is built for the children and is unique and special for each of them. This plan is compiled by the institution's psychologists in collaboration with the group teachers, the parent, and the support/assistant teacher. The intervention is focused on the child and his interests. Always support/assistant teachers should be adapted to the needs and features of the child, they make sure that the environment where the child stays suits his interests. When they notice that the child follows the teacher then they can try to integrate child behavior with the rules and routines of the class. Every process happens step by step, and you can make sure that the child has enough time that he needs to fulfill a task.

Do not give instructions that will lead to situations that you are not able to manage (for example: make him sit down, try to maintain eye contact, make him say hello and goodbye). In other words, do not ask anything if you are not prepared to manage the situation that could lead to the need for physical intervention. "Hurly-Burly (2012)⁵.

In a situation where inclusive teachers force the child to do an unwanted activity, then outbursts of anger and aggressive behaviors may occur. It is important to avoid situations that lead the child to such outbursts, especially when we are in the classroom and do not know how to manage them.

⁵ Hurly-Burly, the International Lacanian Journal of Psychoanalysis, May 2012, pg 180-185.

Recommendations

Even that the number of support/assistant teachers has been raised is the right time for the Ministry of Education and Sport to improve the policies and training for in-service and pre-service support/assistant teachers.

Although in public education institutions we can evidenced a grown number of support/assistant teachers, a better coordination and collaboration between school staff, parents, children and other stakeholders, there is a need to review and redesign the way the support/assistant teachers work and help children with special needs to turn the role of support teacher from a caregiver-to-special need child to a teacher that is part of the system teacher-parents-school psychologist-physician-principals that help the children in need, approaching this way the European experience in supporting and including the children with special need in mainstream education system.

Also, improving the pre-service education curricula/training/internship and unifying the curricula that trains the support/assistant teachers is another must step for improving the training of the teachers that enter in the service education system. The university curricula must include further information about mental, emotional difficulties and autism aiming to prepare better the support/assistant teachers. Summer schools, enhancing professional networks with clinical psychologists, psychiatrist, and pediatricians with help enhance their knowledge and skills. Emphasizing the singularity of children, their interests and needs is the best way to improve the adjustment and learning interest of children with special needs especially those with autism and this is the topic that the universities curricula/training has to develop for the support teachers in the pre-service preparation.

Strengthening the network of support/assistant teachers including the psychologists/social workers/nurse or physician of the kindergarten/principals and creating groups for discussing singular cases is one of the best practice to exchange knowledge and skills from experienced teachers and other mental health professionals and the best place to discuss the cases of children the support teachers help in the classrooms or schools.

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