

Challenges faced by teaching assistants while supporting an 8-year-old child with Social Communication Disorder (SCD) and Attention/Deficit Disorder (ADHD) in inclusive primary education _____

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Abstract

Inclusive education in Albania is in the process of development, especially when dealing with children with overlapping developmental disorders such as Social Communication Disorder (SCD) and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This article has the main focus on the challenges that an assistant teacher has to face on a daily basis while working with an 8-year-old child who is diagnosed with SCD and ADHD in an inclusive private elementary school. Based on real-world experience and insight from existing research, this article explores five challenges: (1) difficulties in communication and social interaction, (2) the management of attention and behavior issues, (3) working effectively with teachers, (4) adjusting teaching methods and the literature to meet each child's needs, and (5) coping with professional stress and emotional burnout that the assistant teacher has to go through. The findings reflect broader systemic issues such as lack of training, unclear

definition of the role of the teaching assistant, and limited institutional support. The article also discusses cultural challenges specific to Albania, where inclusion is still in the process of being structured. This paper recommends introducing formal training programs, strengthening collaboration among educators and other stakeholders, and developing clear policy guidelines to better support teaching assistants in their roles. By highlighting the daily challenges and broader system gaps, it adds valuable insight to the ongoing conversation about effective inclusive practices for children with diverse developmental needs.

Keywords: *teaching assistant, social communication disorder, ADHD, inclusive education, Albania, classroom support, behavioral intervention*

Introduction

Inclusive education is now a priority for education systems worldwide, emphasizing the importance of including children with disabilities in general classrooms. In Albania, this type of effort is still developing, especially for children who have overlapping neurodevelopmental conditions like the child mentioned in this paper, who is diagnosed with Social Communication Disorder (SCD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). According to the *American Psychiatric Association* (2013), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most prevalent mental disorders among children. The symptoms of ADHD include impulsivity (hasty, unplanned actions), hyperactivity (excessive movement inappropriate for the situation), and inattention (difficulty maintaining focus). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5) introduced Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder (SCD) as a distinct diagnosis to better identify individuals who experience persistent difficulties in the social use of verbal and nonverbal communication. According to the *American Psychiatric Association* (2013), these challenges can significantly interfere with an individual's ability to communicate effectively, participate in social interactions, build and maintain relationships, and succeed academically or occupationally. This diagnosis highlights the importance of recognizing communication difficulties that do not stem from structural language deficits or autism spectrum disorder but nonetheless have a substantial impact on daily functioning. These students often need personalized support that many mainstream teachers are not yet fully prepared to deliver. Teaching assistants – support professionals who work one-on-one with children in mainstream settings – have become an essential but understudied element of the inclusive model. This article has the main focus on the challenges that an assistant teacher has to face on a daily basis while working with an 8-year-old child who is diagnosed with SCD and ADHD in an inclusive

private elementary school. The case provides a practical view of barriers to behavior, learning, and collaboration within the classroom.

The aim of the paper is to contribute knowledge to the broader discourse on educational inclusion, especially in contexts like Albania, where the system still does not provide clear structures and training for assistant teachers.

Theoretical Background: Social Communication Disorder (SCD) and attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), Social Communication Disorder (SCD) involves ongoing difficulties in using verbal and nonverbal communication in social settings (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This can make it hard for a child to engage in conversations, interact appropriately with others, and adjust their communication to fit different situations. On the other hand, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is marked by problems with attention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity challenges that can greatly affect a child's ability to learn and behave effectively in the classroom. When these two disorders co-exist, the child's educational needs become very complex, requiring behaviorally focused interventions and ongoing one-on-one individualized support throughout the school day.

Methodological Approach

Context and participant

The study was conducted in an elementary private school in Albania where the inclusive education model is implemented. The child was included in a class with his peers, receiving permanent support from the assistant teacher – the author of this article – who at the same time also had the role of the child's therapist. The intervention and supervision were carried out over the course of one school year.

Child profile:

- Age: 8 years old
- Diagnosis: Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder and ADHD
- Difficulties: Social interaction, problematic behavior, difficulties concentrating during a task, pragmatic communication, and academic performance.

Concrete data collection model

To collect qualitative data systematically, five main instruments were used:

Used instrument	Purpose	Frequency of use
Daily records (diary notes)	Documenting behaviors and interactions	For every school day
Reflective notes in the field	Personal analysis and reactions to classroom situations	2–3 times a week
Informal teacher evaluations	Discussions on progress and challenges	Once a week
Child's work	Assessment of academic progress and concentration	Every week
Behavior charts (tracking)	Measuring the frequency and intensity of behaviors	For each incident/day

Behavior Tracking Chart

Date	Observed behavior	Frequency	Intensity (1-5)	Circumstances prior to the behavior	Interference	Result after intervention
18/10/2024	Pushed a classmate	3	3	Game during lunch break	Verbal interference and withdrawal from friend	Apologized
23/10/2024	Harsh language towards classmates	4	4	During P.E.	Verbal interference	He apologized and continued the game clearly
24/10/2024	Tore up the reading book	2	4	Next in turn to read	Taking the book out of his hand and verbally intervening	Tried to paste it and read the part

The Role of the Teaching Assistant/Therapist in Supporting Students with Social Communication Disorder and ADHD

The chart below presents the multidimensional role of the teacher assistant (also therapist) in the context of inclusive education.

- Teacher Assistant / Therapist
- Academic support

- Adaptation of teaching materials
- Assistance in concentration and organization of tasks
- Behavioral intervention
- Observation and functional analysis of behavior
- Applying strategies to help children manage their emotions and behaviors on their own.
- Using positive reinforcement and effective crisis management techniques to maintain a supportive and accepting environment.
- Integrating individual students' needs into the classroom setting.
- Incorporating visual ways to support understanding and communication.
- Establishing clear routines and smooth transitions to create consistency and reduce anxious situations.
- Finding solutions to provide social and emotional support through positive interactions.
- Encouraging relationships between classmates and fostering inclusive play and collaboration.
- Managing conflicts or misunderstandings between classmates to promote healthy communication.
- Collaborating closely with the staff of the school to ensure coordinated support.
- Engaging in daily reflection and documentation to monitor progress and improve the methods of practice.
- Daily reflection and documentation

Analytical approach and thematic analysis

Using a thematic analysis approach, the required data were examined to uncover important themes related to the assistant teacher's experiences and the child's responses to various interventions. The process included several steps:

- Repeatedly reviewing the data to gain a deep understanding of the content.
- Highlighting and operationalizing important elements, such as identifying situations that trigger challenging and problematic behaviors and the strategies used to manage them.
- Organizing codes into broader themes that captured recurring patterns and insights.
- Reviewing and refining these themes in light of existing literature to ensure accuracy and relevance.

Main themes identified

Subject	Description	Example from practice
Challenging interaction with peers	The child exhibited withdrawn behavior, verbal aggression, or lack of initiative	Refused to cooperate on pair tasks
Difficulty concentrating on academic tasks	Constant interruptions of activity, distraction, frequent movements	Left the table several times in an hour of reading
The need for task adaptation	Tasks should be shorter and with clear separation of steps	A 5-step task simplified into two separate steps
The multidimensional role of the teaching assistant	Support in organization, motivation, interaction and behavioral assessment	Visual cards were used for structure and motivation

Conclusion of the methodological part

The reflective approach and thematic analysis revealed that the role of the assistant teacher is very important not only in providing practical assistance to the child, but also as a bridge of cooperation with the classroom teacher and as a key element in the implementation of personalized interventions. The challenges mentioned – such as managing behavior, adapting materials, and building social relationships – need specialised professional preparation and institutional support.

Ethical considerations

All observations were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of confidentiality, consent, and the best interests of the child. The case mentioned is anonymous and all identifying information has been removed to secure privacy.

Challenges facing assistant teachers

Communication Barriers

Children with SCD face difficulties managing social cues, initiating interactions with peers, and understanding the pragmatic aspects of language. The assistant teacher must constantly manage the interactions between the child and others, often without formal training.

Behavioral and Attention Difficulties

The symptoms of ADHD required constant redirection, behavior management strategies, and positive reinforcement to prevent behavior escalation. This consumed a significant portion of the assistant teacher's attention and often relegated academic support to the back burner.

Collaboration with Classroom Teachers

Assistant teachers are mainly perceived more as external helpers rather than as an integrated part of the educational team. In this case, the lack of co-planning and clear communication with the classroom teacher created inconsistencies in the provision of instruction.

Instructional Adaptations

Modifying tasks to match the cognitive and behavioral level of the child was essential, however, the necessary human and material resources were not provided. The assistant teacher had to rely on his or her own efforts to make decisions in real time.

Emotional stress and professional 'burnout'

The intensity of individual support, together with highly volatile expectations and the lack of institutional support, contributed to emotional exhaustion. This is a recurring theme in the literature on support workers in education (Giangreco et al., 2011).

Discussion

The challenges described are consistent with findings in the international literature on the marginalization of teaching assistants and the lack of sufficient training on neurodevelopmental disorders (Broer et al., 2005; Butt, 2016). In Albania, these issues are compounded by the fact that inclusion is still in the early stages of formal implementation. Teaching assistants often operate without job security, professional supervision, and access to continuing professional development – making it difficult to provide effective and sustainable support.

Recommendations

1. Formal Training Programs – Creation of certified courses for teaching assistants with a focus on autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, and behavior management strategies.
2. Collaboration Protocols – Mandatory collaborative planning between all classroom and teaching assistants.
3. Emotional and Professional Support – Creation of structures for supervision, mentoring, and support groups for teaching assistants.

Conclusion

Teaching assistants play a very important part in supporting children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, but their contribution often remains unvalued and unformalized (Government consultation on the SEND and alternative provision system in England : March 2022). This article that is based on practical experience of the author and the cited literature, highlights the urgent need for change in reforms of the Albanian education system. By addressing the challenges experienced by these professionals, educational institutions can better serve both their staff and the children they support.

The revision acknowledges the study's limited generalizability but stresses its importance as a foundation for further research and professional development.

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