

# *The Approach of Support Teachers Towards Children with Autism in Inclusive Education in Albania*

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## **Abstract**

*This baseline study explores the approach and experiences of shadow teachers in supporting children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive education in Albania. Using a mixed methods methodology, the study relies on the analysis of a 5-point Likert-type questionnaire completed by 281 support teachers nationwide and on thematic analysis of five semi-structured interviews, following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). According to the survey's findings, 84.3% of respondents had prior experience dealing with children with autism but only 48.4% have received specialized training. About 92.2% of participants indicated that they would prefer further training in topics like behaviour management, communication, and useful techniques like Applied Behaviour Analysis, (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). Furthermore, 89.7% consider the role of the support teacher as crucial for the effective inclusion of children with autism (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). However, UNESCO (2020) reports that the most frequently cited problems include classroom overload, a lack of resources, a lack of institutional coordination, and inadequate training. From the thematic analysis of the made interviews, five main ones were selected: (1) the responsibilities of the support teacher, (2) collaboration and cooperation, (3) the impact on student inclusion, (4) professional development and training, (5) issues and deficiencies of the system (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition to highlighting the need for ongoing institutional support and the ambiguity*

*of their responsibilities, participants saw their work as essential to providing academic and emotional support to students with autism (Cook & Schirmer, 2003). This study highlights the importance of an integrated and well-supported approach to strengthening the role of support teachers in inclusive education in Albania. The findings suggest the need for sustained policy interventions, including regular training programs and the improvement of collaborative structures among actors involved in the education of children with autism (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Loreman, 2007).*

**Keywords:** *support teachers, autism, inclusive education, Albania, professional training, thematic analysis.*

## **Introduction**

For education systems around the world, including children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in public school poses both a difficulty and an opportunity (UNESCO, 2020). Children with disabilities are increasingly attending public schools in Albania as a result of inclusive education initiatives (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). Within this context, the role of the teaching assistant—often referred to as the “support teacher”—has become essential for providing direct and continuous assistance to children with ASD (Giangreco et al., 2010). This baseline study explores the approaches, perceptions, and challenges of teaching assistants working in inclusive educational settings across Albania. In order to create meaningful learning experiences, teaching assistants collaborate closely with classroom teachers and families to support children’s academic and social development, and encourage active involvement in class (Cook & Schirmer, 2003). However, study and documentation regarding their position, the difficulties they encounter, and the institutional assistance they receive are still severely lacking in Albania (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). By investigating the firsthand experiences of teaching assistants working with autistic children in Albanian public schools, this study seeks to close that gap. This study analyses current practices, training and resource needs, and suggestions for improving inclusive education policy by integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews and a comprehensive online survey (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Loreman, 2007).

At a time when effective inclusion requires coordination among various educational actors, the proper approach of teaching assistants is an important step toward a more inclusive, empathetic, and equitable education system for all children (UNESCO, 2020).

## Literature Review

Studies and research conducted on the work of support teachers (assistant) in inclusive education for children with autism have been conducted in many countries and have provided different results regarding the impact of support, the methods used and the benefits for children. Most studies have focused on improving academic performance, social integration, and the development of behavioral skills for children with autism.

According to the study by Pijl, Frissen and colleagues (2015), 62% of teachers reported that the support of support teachers had a direct impact on the academic performance of children with autism. Meanwhile, 58% of the support teachers used adapted teaching strategies, including the use of visual materials and assistive technology. Only 45% of teachers in common classes reported a positive impact on social integration from the help of support teachers.

Odom and Wolery (2017) found that 72% of interventions led by aide teachers were effective in improving behavior and engagement in learning activities. Structuring instruction and using visual techniques were rated as 80% more effective in improving academic performance. Social and academic performance improved by 60% as a result of behaviour control strategies like rewards and assistance in dealing with recurrent behaviours.

In a longitudinal study conducted by Nilsen and Langer (2020), over a 5-year period, 68% of children who received support from aide teachers in inclusive classrooms showed significant improvement in social and academic skills. Compared to children who did not get direct support, those who did had a 47% higher chance of finishing academic assignments.

According to Smith and Lamb (2022), 83% of educators who believed that children with autism could be successfully taught employed more structured and individualised methods. 55% of support teachers reported direct contribution to improving children's engagement in academic and social activities, while 40% of children showed increases in positive behavior and teamwork skills.

Grant and Montgomery (2019) found that 60% of children with autism who had regular help from support teachers showed improvements in communication and collaboration skills. 65% of them reported that techniques like visual aids and step-by-step instruction improved their ability to participate in group activities and hone their social skills.

According to Ryan and Sampson (2016), 75% of parents and teachers who took part in this this interview reported improvements in the inclusion and social skill development of children with autism, underscoring the significance of parent-teacher collaboration. 78% of children who received structured support from this collaboration showed academic and social improvements.

According to Sutherland and Cihak (2019), 68% of kids who received constructive behavioural help behaved in a more appropriate and reliable manner. 72% of kids reported improved social and academic engagement as a result of using rewards and behaviour management techniques.

Finally, Pijl and Frissen (2018) showed that 77% of teachers in inclusive classrooms reported greater commitment and confidence to work with children with autism after special training. 53% of teaching assistants reported that inclusive support helped them better manage challenging situations and improve children's development.

These studies, conducted in different places and times, highlight the importance of supporting teaching assistants in improving the academic performance, behavior, and social integration of children with autism in inclusive classrooms. Studies confirm that:

- Individual and regular support from support teachers is essential for the development of children with autism.
- Teacher training and the use of adapted methods (such as visual strategies, step-by-step learning and behavior management) are crucial for the success of inclusive practices.

The number of support teachers in Albania has increased significantly, from 0 in 2013 to around 2,100 in 2024–2025, according to the Decision of the Council of Ministers no. 511/28.07.2022 (Republic of Albania, Council of Ministers, 2022).

## **Methodology**

In order to give a thorough and in-depth account of the experiences, viewpoints, and difficulties faced by assistant teachers in inclusive education for children with autism in Albania, this study used a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques. While the qualitative technique seeks to emphasise individual themes and experiences, the quantitative approach seeks to quantify and analyse participants' attitudes and perspectives.

### *Sample*

The study involved 281 teaching assistants employed in preschool, primary and secondary education across Albania. Participants were chosen via a convenience sampling method. This group represents a significant sample of teaching assistants working with children with special needs, including those with autism.

## *Instruments*

**Quantitative questionnaire:** A Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was created, which included questions focused on:

- Understanding autism in inclusive education
- Understanding social skills of children with autism in inclusive education
- Challenges shadow teachers face in inclusive education
- Professional Development and Training needs

**Qualitative interviews:** Extensive interviews were conducted with a small group of 15 teaching assistants, who were voluntarily and representatively selected from several different districts. To highlight teaching assistants' experiences, difficulties, and best practices, the interviews were designed using open-ended questions.

## *Data Collection*

We shared the questionnaires in a couple of ways—some were handed out in person, while others were sent out online. For the interviews, which lasted about 30 to 45 minutes, we made sure to get the participants' consent before recording them.

## *Data Analysis*

### **Quantitative data processing and aggregation**

Since the original individual data were not available in the full Google Forms format, the statistical analysis of this study was based on the final summarized data, which were exported and manually transcribed into a text document (Word). These data contained the final percentages of participants' responses to each question of the questionnaire, which now represent a preliminary aggregation performed automatically by the Google Forms platform.

At this stage, the data were reorganized and systematized in summary tables according to research themes, being divided into response categories (e.g. "Strongly agree", "Agree", "Neutral", "Disagree"). This process aimed to visually and analytically present the results in a clear and understandable way.

Descriptive processing of the data, which examined the broad patterns of participants' attitudes and perceptions for every theme, was part of the further analysis. By identifying places where there was a greater degree of agreement or disagreement, this technique allowed the researcher to make consistent inferences about the overall trend among the group's thoughts.

## **Data Validity and Reliability**

For a number of methodological reasons, the data's validity is unaffected even though it was used in summary form:

- First, the Google Forms platform automatically generates the percentages, ensuring numerical correctness in response processing and minimising errors in human calculations.
- Second, the data accurately reflect the participants' answers, maintaining the confidentiality of the information supplied without outside interference.
- Third, when the objective is to comprehend broad trends rather than inferential statistical analyses, the summation of percentages permits a descriptive analysis that is appropriate for exploratory and baseline investigations.
- Lastly, to ensure the accuracy of the original results' depiction, the data was meticulously transcribed and arranged by hand to prevent any interpretational deviations.

Thus, the aggregated data obtained from Google Forms provide a valid and reliable basis for descriptive analysis, contributing to the understanding of the trends in the perceptions and attitudes of the participants in relation to the research purpose of the study.

## **Ethics**

The research adhered to ethical guidelines. Participants gave their voluntary agreement, were kept anonymous, and were made aware of the study's goal. At any time, they might leave without incurring any fees.

## **Results**

### *Quantitative Results*

The Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was distributed to 281 assistant teachers across Albania.

### AXIS I: Understanding Autism in Inclusive Education

Aspect	Agree / Completely agree(%)	Disagree / Completely disagree (%)	Trend
Understanding autism characteristics	76.8%	2.2%	Strong theoretical knowledge
Adapting teaching approaches	22.3%	53.9%	Some difficulty remains, but ¼ yes
Understanding sensory experience	47.4%	28.6%	Greater sensitivity needed
Understanding sensory experience	14.6%	65.4%	Unclear differentiation
Understanding sensory experience	26.6%	54.3%	Requires didactic specialization
Communicating with autistic children	30.7%	43.9%	Nearly half feel uncertain
Access to resources	54.5%	21.2%	Insufficient materials
Collaboration with teachers	40.1%	36.6%	Limited teamwork

Summary: Support teachers demonstrate a good conceptual grasp of autism but struggle with practical interpretation, collaboration, and resource access.

### AXIS II: Understanding Social Skills in Autism

Aspect	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Trend
Understanding social skill deficits	85	3	High theoretical understanding
Differentiating delay vs. behavior	21	50	Conceptual confusion
Recognizing social initiative	15	68	Major practical challenge
Supporting non-verbal children	24	51	Need for alternative communication
Teaching implicit social norms	34	37	Partial competence
Explaining social issues to peers	19	65	Insufficient sensitivity
Creating social opportunities	27	49	Requires hands-on training
Teaching empathy	63	10	Good conceptual awareness

Summary: Teachers understand autism's social dimension but need applied training in social facilitation, peer mediation, and structured play interventions.

### AXIS III: Classroom Challenges

Aspect	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Trend
Adequate classroom resources	18.9	59.3	Severe lack of resources
Balancing student needs	37.1	28.8	Challenging for most
Preparedness of classroom teachers	36.4	35.3	Uneven training levels

Aspect	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Trend
Institutional support	56.3	17.1	Positive but inconsistent
Social stigma	36.6	26.4	Still evident
Coordination with parents/specialists	39.8	30.1	Needs structure

Summary: Inclusive classrooms still face resource shortages, space limitations, and poor coordination among education stakeholders.

#### **AXIS IV: Professional Training and Development Needs**

Aspect	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Trend
Lack of specialized knowledge	26.2	48	Deeper expertise required
Uncertainty about best practices	29.1	42.2	Widespread uncertainty
Lack of continuous training	43.3	33	Broader training needed
Knowledge of social strategies	70.3	5.4	Good theoretical base
Adequate practical training	53.6	13	Moderate results
Insufficient training on social skills	33.6	36.5	Structured practice needed
Desire for professional growth	74.3	4.7	Strong demand
Lack of national training infrastructure	57.7	20.1	Systemic gap

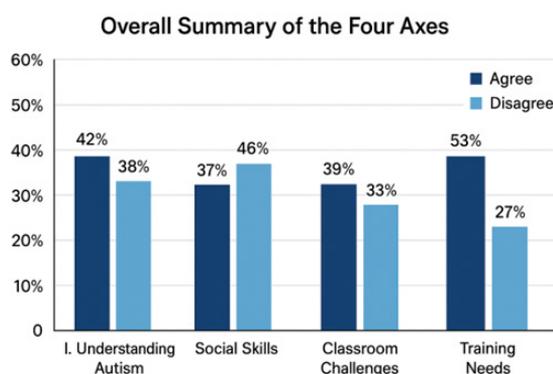
Summary: Teaching assistants express a strong need for continuous, practical, and social-skill-oriented training. There remains a gap between theory and classroom application.

#### General Summary of the Four Axes

Axis	Average percentage who agree/strongly agree	Average percentage who oppose/strongly oppose	Challenge level
I. Understanding Autism	42%	38%	Average
II. Understanding social skills in autism	37%	46%	High
III. Classroom Challenges	39%	33%	Average - High
IV. Training Needs	53%	27%	High (training needed)

## Interpretive Summary

The survey results indicate that while support teachers in Albania have a solid theoretical understanding of autism and its impact on social development, there are significant gaps in practical application, resource availability, collaboration with other educators and use of effective strategies in the classroom. Continuous, hands-on professional development is crucial to lessen the distance between theory and practice and to ensure effective support for children with autism in inclusive classrooms.



### *Qualitative results*

**Thematic Analysis according to Braun & Clarke (2006)** In their work, Braun and Clarke (2006), explain that a thematic analysis is a qualitative technique for finding, examining, and summarising patterns (themes) in data. It offers an adaptable and user-friendly method for evaluating qualitative data, including transcripts of interviews, and is especially helpful in psychological and educational research. Thematic analysis offers a comprehensive, intricate, and sophisticated description of the data and helps researchers understand how participants interpret their experiences.

### **Why was the methodology of Braun & Clarke selected?**

The function of shadow teachers in Albanian inclusive education for autistic children is examined in this study. In light of the exploratory nature of the baseline study and the necessity of comprehending a range of experiences and perspectives, Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis is especially suitable. In addition to supporting an inductive approach and generating insights based on participants' own words, it enables a methodical yet flexible interpretation of data gathered from semi-structured interviews.

## **Putting the Six Phases of Braun & Clarke to Use**

According to the six outlined stages by Braun and Clarke, 15 semi-structured interviews with support instructors were analysed:

### **Phase 1: Getting to Know the Data**

All the interviews were transcribed and read several times to gain a deep understanding of the given content. Key observations and initial ideas were noted.

### **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**

The data were systematically coded to capture significant elements. Coding was at both the semantic level (exploring direct meanings) and the latent level (implied meanings). Examples of initial codes include: “daily routine”, “collaboration with the classroom teacher”, “emotional support”, “lack of clarity in roles”, “need for training”, “improvement in behavior”, etc.

### **Phase 3: Searching for Themes**

The codings were organized into broader themes. Codes such as “emotional and behavioral support,” “academic support,” and “daily structure” were grouped into a theme called “Core Duties of the Support Teacher.” Other themes included: “Collaboration and Teamwork,” “Impact on Student Involvement,” “Training and Professional Development,” and “Systemic Challenges and Gaps.”

### **Phase 4: Reviewing Themes**

To make sure the themes were externally distinguishable and internally coherent, they were examined in light of the coded data and the complete data set. A few codes were reclassified in order to increase coherence and reinforce thematic boundaries.

### **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

The themes were defined and named to reflect the essence of the data. Descriptions were developed for each theme to explain its relevance in relation to the research question.

### **Phase 6: Report Drafting**

A coherent narrative was constructed that linked the themes to important extracts from the data and illustrated the significance of the findings in the context of inclusive education for children with autism in Albania.

## *Identified Themes and Interpretations*

### **Theme 1: Fundamental Tasks of the Help Instructor**

Participants listed a variety of responsibilities, such as providing emotional support, controlling behaviour, advising the child academically, and making sure the youngster participates in class activities.

### **Theme 2: Cooperation and Cooperation**

Each participant emphasised how important it is to collaborate with teachers, parents, and school psychologists. However, the quality and intensity of this partnership varied.

### **Theme 3: Impact on Students' Inclusion**

Instructors noticed significant improvements in the social and academic engagement of autistic children, such as a decrease in troublesome behaviours, increased attendance, and involvement in group activities.

### **Theme 4: Training and Professional Development**

There was a common view of the need for more practical and ongoing training. While support was available in some cases, most training opportunities were inadequate and largely private.

### **Theme 5: Challenges and Systemic Gaps**

Participants mentioned several barriers, including lack of clarity in defining the role, excessive support from other staff, lack of resources and fragmented collaboration.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### *Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings*

The quantitative analysis data revealed considerable knowledge about autism and children's social skills, as well as positive perceptions of the impact of the support teacher on their inclusion in school activities. However, the data also highlighted the need for more adequate training and systemic challenges that affect the effectiveness of the support teacher role.

The qualitative analysis of the support teacher interviews highlighted key themes that explain these findings. The complex tasks of the support teacher (Theme 1) are closely related to the quantitative data on engagement in academic and social activities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While the influence on student inclusion (Theme 3) supports the quantitative findings demonstrating increases in social engagement and decreases in problematic behaviours, collaboration and teamwork (Theme 2) offer context for differences in perceptions of support and the efficacy of collaboration.

At the same time, the need for more practical training and systemic challenges (Theme 4 and Theme 5) reinforce the quantitative findings on the lack of proper opportunities for professional development and structural barriers that affect work effectiveness. This synergy between quantitative and qualitative analysis highlights the importance of clear policies, ongoing training, and sufficient resources to improve inclusive practices in Albanian schools (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2010; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). To sum it up, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data provides a complete picture of the role of the support teacher: quantitative data measures knowledge and perceptions, while qualitative analysis provides context and interpretation of real-world experience. This integration emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to supporting children with autism and strengthening inclusive education in Albania.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

- Universities and training centers should design accredited programs for the training of assistant teachers.
- Schools should adopt interagency collaboration models that include teachers, therapists, and families.

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