

The Views of Primary Education Teachers of The Municipality of Prizren and Pristina Regarding the Adaptation of The Didactic Environment for Children with Special Needs

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Abstract

The inclusiveness of children with special needs in regular schools made necessary studies that focus not only on the changes in approach and variety in teaching, but also on the creation of environments, tools and appropriate materials that approximate the differences of children in the process of learning, including children with special needs. The study in question aimed to shed light on the state of didactic environments in primary education, with a special focus on its adaptation to children with special needs.

The problem has been addressed in the theoretical but also in the empirical aspect. Through the theoretical analysis, namely the use of the most contemporary literature, instructions have been given for the adaptation of didactic environments, tools and materials with a special focus on children with special needs. While through semi-structured interviews, we have reflected how the situation is in reality of the adaptation of didactic environments, tools and materials, with a special focus on children with special needs. After the analysis of the results, as well as the findings of the study, based on the defined variables, we gave the necessary recommendations to the relevant institutions in order to change the situation in terms of the adaptation of didactic environments, tools and teaching materials with a special focus on children with special needs.

Keywords: Didactic environment, teaching materials, teaching aids, quality learning for all.

1. Introduction

In societies, and respectively in different cultures, the approach towards children with special needs varies. It changes according to the level of cultural development within a specific society. In more advanced cultures, the approach is somewhat more promising compared to what happens in provincial and backward cultures. Therefore, facing such stereotypes makes life more difficult for different groups than we might think, hence the support, treatment, and approach should be better than they currently are. Fundamentally, by special needs, we indicate what a person under normal circumstances should be able to do without difficulty, whereas a person with special needs cannot do it, or if they do, they do it with difficulty, compared to their peers. With the changing global order, the importance of fair treatment and approach towards children with special needs is being increasingly observed. The part that needs the most equal opportunities in education is individuals with special needs. It is possible for individuals with special needs to become active members of society by taking measures such as minimizing the limitations of the environment they live in. These and similar statements have highlighted the concept of a less restrictive educational environment (Sucuoğlu & Kargın, 2010).

For the children with special needs, to become equal members of society, they should continue their education in the same classes as their peers. but for such an approach to yield satisfactory results, inclusion practices must be carried out systematically and fairly. This involves undertaking preliminary preparations, adjustments, adaptations, as well as adhering to general principles and fulfilling basic criteria (Kargin, 2004). In this context, of particular importance is to consider individual differences and based on them, develop appropriate educational activities for individuals with special needs in the classroom, supported by a suitable physical environment, both outside and within the facility, using appropriate didactic materials and tools that enable the narrowing of the differences among children with special needs in the learning process (Sarı & Ilik, 2018). To enhance the success of children with special needs, in addition to the factors mentioned above, it is necessary to make changes in the teaching methods as well (Sucuoğlu, 2006). Such a didactic environment equipped with multidimensional aids

enables children with special needs to use multiple sensory organs, making learning easier and more comprehensible for them (Senemoglu, 2004). All types of tools such as tables, cabinets, projectors, computers, laboratory equipment, and other auxiliary tools, including the variety of games in an educational environment, are necessary and essential for facile learning by all groups, including children with special needs (Sahin, 2010).

2. Research aim

The research aim is to depict the actual state of the instructional environment in schools, with a particular focus on its adaptation for children with special needs.

To achieve the defined aim, precisely, to illuminate the state of the instructional environment in schools, particularly focusing on its adaptation for children with special needs, the following questions were presented to the teachers:

What are your perspectives on the physical environment that schools provide, tailored to the individual needs of children with special needs?

- a. Regarding outdoor spaces and school environments, as well as
- b. Indoor school spaces

As an educator in an inclusive school, what are your perspectives on the didactic environment, specifically regarding the provision of materials, tools, and assistive devices that enable facilitation?

- a) Considering the individual characteristics of children with special needs;
- b) Addressing the individual needs of children with special needs;
- c) Enhancing the success of children with special needs in the learning process;
- d) Boosting self-confidence;

3. Research methodology

3.1. Methods and instruments

For the study of the research problem, specifically the adaptation of didactic environments for children with special needs, for its theoretical treatment, we utilized:

- The method of theoretical analysis, through which we examined the studies of internationally recognized authors who have addressed the issues of inclusive education for children with special needs; and
- The method of comparison, through which we made comparisons to the studies of authors who have focused on inclusive education for children with special needs, specifically the adaptation of didactic environments.

For the empirical treatment of the study, we have used:

- We employed the qualitative research method, specifically using a semi-structured interview as a tool for data collection. Through this method, we examined the perceptions of elementary school teachers in the municipalities of Prizren and Pristina regarding the external and internal physical environment, the adaptation of didactic settings, and the tools and materials for children with special needs.

The semi-structured interview provides the impression of an instrument that aligns with research in the field of education due to its standardization and flexibility (Kumar, 2017). On the other hand, one of the most significant components of the semi-structured interview for researchers is that it offers more systematic and comparable information due to the continuation of the pre-prepared interview protocol (Murati, 2010). This form of interview was developed by the researcher to ascertain the perspectives of elementary school teachers in the municipalities of Prizren and Pristina regarding the adaptation of external and internal physical environments, didactic settings, and materials for children with special needs. The interview-style questions, ideas, thoughts, and suggestions from the teachers aim to extract in-depth information. After analysing the data gathered from the respondents, conclusions have been drawn.

3.2. Sampling

The study's sampling comprises a total of 172 elementary school teachers, with 92 of them working in urban schools and 80 in rural schools of the municipalities of Prizren and Pristina. Teachers were provided with detailed information about the research process before participating. They were informed about the confidentiality and

anonymity of their participation in the interview. In this study, data were collected using a "s 3.2. semi-structured interview form" developed for this purpose.

4. Research results

1. *What are your perspectives on the physical environment that inclusive schools provide to support the individual needs of children with special needs?*

Table 1. The school outdoor spaces and environments are suitable for children with special needs.

The school outdoor spaces and environments are suitable for children with special needs	Prizren				Pristine				Total			
	Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural	
	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
The outdoor spaces and environments are suitable for children with special needs.	30	65.3	18	45	33	71.7	21	52.5	63	68.5	39	48.8
The outdoor spaces and environments are not suitable for children with special needs.	16	34.7	22	55	13	28.3	19	47.5	29	31.5	41	51.2
Total	46	100	40	100	46	100	40	100	92	100	80	100

In the question directed to the interviewed teachers regarding the suitability of outdoor school spaces for children with special needs, out of a total of 92 teachers in the urban schools, 63 or 68.5% of them assess that the outdoor spaces are suitable for children with special needs, while 29 or 31.5% of the teachers evaluate that the outdoor environments are not suitable for children with special needs. On the other hand, among the 80 teachers interviewed from rural areas, 39 or 48.8% consider the outdoor environments to be suitable, whereas 41 or 51.2% believe that the outdoor environments are not suitable for children with special needs.

Table 2. Indoor school environments

Indoor school environments	Prizren				Pristine				Total			
	Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural	
	f	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
The indoor school environments are suitable for children with special needs.	38	82.6	24	60	40	86.9	27	67.5	78	84.8	51	63.7
The indoor school environments are not suitable for children with special needs.	8	17.4	16	40	6	13.1	13	32.5	14	15.2	29	36.3
Total	46	82.6	40	100	46	100	40	100	92	100	80	100

Response to the question regarding the suitability of indoor school environments, out of the total of 92 interviewed teachers in schools from two urban areas, 78 or 84.8% have indicated that the indoor school spaces are suitable for children with special needs, while 14 or 15.2% of the teachers believe that the indoor environments within the school are not suitable for children with special needs. Among the teachers from rural schools, out of the total of 80 interviewed, 51 or 63.7% have responded that the indoor school spaces are suitable for children with special needs, while 29 or 36.3% consider the indoor school environments not suitable for children with special needs.

2. *As a teacher in an inclusive school, what are your perceptions on the didactic environment, specifically in terms of providing materials, tools, and assistive devices that enable the learning process?*

Table 3. The didactic environment provides opportunities to take into consideration the individual characteristics of children with special needs

The didactic environment provides opportunities to take into consideration the individual characteristics of children with special needs	Prizren				Prishtine				Total			
	Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	f	%		
Individual characteristics of children with special needs are considered;	32	69.6	18	45	36	78.3	21	52.5	68	73.9	39	48.8
Individual characteristics of children with special needs are not considered;	14	30.4	22	55	10	21.7	19	47.5	24	26.1	41	51.2
Total	46	100	40	100	46	100	40	100	92	100	80	100

In response to the question of whether the individual characteristics of children with special needs are taken into consideration, out of 92 interviewed teachers in schools from two cities (urban areas), 68 or 73.9% have stated that the individual characteristics of children with special needs are taken into account, while 24 or 26.1% of the teachers believe that the characteristics of children with special needs are not taken into account. Among the teachers from rural schools, out of a total of 80 interviewed, 39 or 48.8% have responded that the individual characteristics of children with special needs are taken into account, while 41 or 51.2% of the teachers believe that the characteristics of children with special needs are not considered.

Table 4. The didactic environment fulfills the individual needs of children with special needs.

The didactic environment fulfills the individual needs of children with special needs	Prizren				Prishtine				Total			
	Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural	
	f	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
The didactic environment meets the individual needs of children with special needs.	24	52.2	14	35	27	58.7	17	42.5	51	55.4	31	38.7
The didactic environment does not meet the individual needs of children with special needs.	22	47.8	26	65	19	41.3	23	57.5	41	44.6	49	61.3
Total	46	100	40	100	46	100	40	100	92	100	80	100

In response to the question of whether the didactic environment meets the individual needs of children with special needs, out of 92 interviewed teachers in the schools of two cities, 51 or 55.4% have answered that it meets the individual needs of children with special needs, while 41 or 44.6% of teachers have responded that it does not meet the individual needs. Among the teachers from rural schools, out of a total of 80 interviewed, 31 or 38.7% have answered that the didactic environment meets the individual needs of children with special needs, whereas 49 or 61.3% of teachers consider that it does not meet the individual needs.

Table 6. The didactic environment where you work enhances the success and strengthens the self-confidence of children with special needs.

The didactic environment where you work enhances the success and strengthens the self-confidence of children with special needs	Prizren				Prishtine				Total			
	Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural	
	f	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	F	%
The didactic environment where you work enhances	30	65.2	16	40	33	71.7	18	45	63	68.5	34	42.5

the success and boosts the self-esteem of children with special needs.

The didactic environment where you work does not provide opportunities for success and self-confidence enhancement for children with special needs;	16	34.8	24	60	13	28.3	22	55	29	31.5	46	57.5
Total	46	100	40	100	46	100	40	100	92	100	80	100

In response to the question about the didactic environment where you work enhance the success and the self-confidence of children with special needs, out of a total of 92 interviewed teachers in schools from two cities (urban areas), 63 or 68.5% have stated that the environment where they work enhances the success and boosts the self-confidence of children with special needs, while 29 or 31.5% of teachers have indicated that the environment where they work does not enhance the success and self-confidence of children with special needs. As for teachers in rural schools, out of a total of 80 interviewed, 34 or 42.5% have responded that the didactic environment where they work enhances the success and boosts the self-confidence of children with special needs, while 46 or 57.5% have answered that the environment where they work does not enhance the success and self-confidence of children with special needs.

5. Research findings

The findings or results of this study are presented below:

Regarding the outdoor environment provided by schools to support the individual needs of children with special needs;

- It has been found that the outdoor spaces and environments in urban schools are suitable for children with special needs, while in rural schools, the physical spaces and environments are not suitable and do not sufficiently meet the individual needs of children with special needs.

Regarding the suitability of the physical environment within the school building for children with special needs:

- It has been found that the physical environment within the school building in urban institutions is suitable for children with special needs, and the same situation applies to schools in rural areas. In other words, the indoor school environments are suitable for children with special needs.

Based on the research findings regarding the physical environment provided by schools to support the individual needs of children with special needs, the differences are pronounced only in relation to the outdoor environment. In schools located in rural areas, the outdoor environment is not suitable for children with special needs.

As for the didactic environment, the tools and materials that create possibilities to consider the individual characteristics of children with special needs are considered.

- It has been found that in urban schools, the internal didactic environment, including the tools and materials, is tailored to the individual characteristics of children with special needs. However, in rural schools, the didactic environment, including the tools and materials, is not satisfactorily adapted to the individual characteristics of children with special needs.

The didactic environment, including the auxiliary tools and materials, meet the individual needs of children with special needs?

- Regarding the didactic environment and the auxiliary tools and materials in terms of meeting individual needs, it has been found that teachers in urban schools have shown a moderate level of satisfaction with the didactic environment, including tools and materials. On the other hand, teachers in rural schools observe that the didactic environments, tools, and materials do not adequately fulfill the individual needs of children with special needs.

The didactic environment where you work enhances the success and boosts the self-confidence of children with special needs.

- It has been found that in urban schools, the internal didactic environment satisfactorily enhances the success and boosts the self-confidence of children with special needs. Specifically, the tools and materials are

tailored to the individual characteristics of children with special needs. However, in rural schools, the didactic environment, including tools and materials, does not adequately match the individual characteristics of children with special needs.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study "Adapting the Didactic Environment for Children with Special Needs" is one of the rare studies conducted in our context. It sheds light on the current state of adapting didactic environments for children with special needs, relying on the responses and experiences of teachers. The data derived from the research represent opportunities and interventions for positive changes by competent authorities regarding the provision and adaptation of both external and internal environments, as well as assistive tools and materials that enable the creation of conditions for quality learning for children with special needs. The benefits of such changes in equipment and the adaptation of didactic environments, including assistive tools and materials, would be advantageous for all children, particularly those with special needs, parents, and our society as a whole. These changes would make the societal goal of providing quality education to every citizen, regardless of individual developmental differences, a reality.

It is estimated that 1 in 10 children are born or experience a serious injury during their lives, for which, if not taken care of, there is a high probability that their development will be hindered. This number increases if we also consider other factors that operate throughout life, thus resulting in 20% of students during the schooling period having varying degrees of special needs (Woolfolk, 2011). Therefore, based on the specific needs of each group of children with special needs, in the time of their inclusive education, regular schools, in order to achieve success with these groups must not only change their approach and teaching methods, but also pay special attention to the physical characteristics of the classroom environment, where teaching will take place.

Having limited abilities is not a barrier to learning. The pace of learning for each individual varies. The most important thing here is to understand what the learner can do and to provide appropriate guidance for what they cannot do.

It will be useful to plan overall functioning more effectively, reduce negative behaviours that may be observed in students, and use time efficiently. In the phase of physical environment adjustment, the number of students in the class should not exceed the number that the teacher can handle. Adjustments made before teaching will enhance the effectiveness of instruction. For these adjustments to be successful, the teacher must be familiar with the characteristics and learning style of the children. Effective teaching is closely linked to understanding the characteristics of the learner, especially children with special needs. The adjustments that can be made in the general classroom can vary depending on the type of disability. If the teacher has detailed information about the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional characteristics of the child with special needs, activities such as games and motivating activities make instructional adaptations easier (Sucuoğlu, 2006: 34). In order for teachers to effectively teach all students, they must make adjustments considering the students' needs. Regardless of all the adaptations made in the classroom environment, individuals with special needs require individual adjustments and guiding adaptations. Instructional adaptations include the materials to be used in teaching, the allocated time for instruction, the content of the subject, and the tasks given to the children. To conclude, adaptations in the learning environment are necessary measures to increase the participation and success of children with special needs (Friend, Bursuck, 2006).

Some recommendations for adapting the learning environment:

- During the adaptation of the environment, the teacher should consider the number of children and the size of the classroom.
- The height of the tables should be set according to the height of the children.
- Students should be informed about the changes that need to be made in the classroom and given time to adjust.
- A separate area for special tools (wheelchairs, and so on,) used by individuals with special needs can be designated in the classroom.
- Classroom doors should be positioned to allow passage for wheelchairs.

- Visual cues indicating break times can be added to the classroom and school environment for children with hearing impairments.
- To create a positive classroom climate, specific routines should be established in the classroom, daily plans should be shared with children, and classroom rules should be set with children.
- Adapting given instructions during teaching. When a child does not understand a given instruction, fulfilling the required task becomes challenging. For this reason, care should be taken to provide short and clear instructions, one at a time, repeat instructions using the same words when necessary, and explain unfamiliar words or idioms.
- If a child with special needs struggles to grasp a subject, a variety of resources should be used to facilitate comprehension of the content. Selected teaching materials should be appropriate for the developmental level of children with special needs.
- Teaching should be supported with as many materials as possible, and the child should be allowed to use the materials.
- Adapting the teaching method and creating study groups in classrooms where integration practices are present are among the adjustments to be made regarding the teaching method.
- Teaching in large groups causes children with special needs to lose motivation to learn, it negatively affects their performance, and exhibit problematic behaviours. Therefore, teaching should take place in small groups and through individual work.

Organized classrooms in accordance with the aforementioned guidelines will ensure that teaching is aligned with the needs of all children in the class and will serve to enhance the success and unity of everyone, especially children with special needs in the class. After completing the preparatory work for environmental adjustments, the things to be done for successful inclusion continue during and after the teaching process. Instructional adaptations in the classroom that teachers need to make in the teaching process for children with special needs include:

- *Preparing the instructional environment;*
- *Identifying learners' characteristics;*
- *Adapting the curriculum content;*
- *Adapting assessment tools for evaluation.*

Some recommendations for education policymakers and decision-makers:

- Invest in the regulation, expansion, and adaptation of both outdoor and indoor physical environments, especially in rural schools.
- Invest in various educational technologies (tools) in all schools (visual, auditory, audiovisual).
- Operationalize pedagogical and psychological services within schools.
- Improve the efficiency of teacher training systems, especially for working with children with special needs.
- Provide effective training for teachers to develop materials, as diverse material offerings enrich special education practices.
- Offer training to teachers to enhance positive interactions among students in inclusive learning environments.
- Conduct research on teachers' perspectives regarding inclusive learning environments.

For this purpose:

- Provide financial incentives and encourage teachers to pursue training to enhance the quality of their work with all groups of children, especially those with special needs.
- Engage them in training that focuses on pedagogical and psychological themes, including inclusion.
- Allocate funds for publications aimed at teachers, addressing inclusive challenges and individual work with children with special needs.

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