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ASSESSING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Abstract

In the last decade, the concept of inclusive education has been promoted and accepted as a new model of organized teaching and learning that implies creating an inclusive culture, building up an inclusive policy and developing inclusive practices in schools.

Assessing the educational development of children with special needs is very challenging for the teachers and they often express the need for accurate and precise guidance in applying the assessment practices in the inclusive classrooms. The Individualized educational plan for each student should be put in practice and include the necessary modification in relation to the assessment of knowledge as well as the specific goals that should be attained for each student individually. Assessment of student progress will be less tense and stressful process for everyone involved if a fair and acceptable system of knowledge assessment is agreed before the same happens.

Keywords: assessment, inclusion, students, special needs, IEP

INTRODUCTION

The process of educating all students of similar chronological age regardless of their individual differences or ability to progress, is commonly called “inclusion”. Inclusive environments are about more than just setting and delivery of services. They involve a philosophy of education in which professionals have a moral responsibility to educate every student, remove barriers that prevent full participation, and ensure that students reach their full potential. (Fewster, S., 2006). Inclusive process implies that the child with special educational needs goes to school with his peers; programs and methods of work are adapted according to its possibilities; the teacher is further prepared to work with the child. (Hrnjica, S. et al., 2007, pg.8)

Assessment, defined as systematic process for gathering data about student achievement is an essential component of teaching. Any type of assessment in educational context involves decisions on what is relevant evidence for a particular purpose, how to collect evidence, how

to interpret it, and how to communicate with the affected users. Under these goals we can support learning, summing up the achievements over a period of time and tracking the level of progress and success.

The best way to improve learning for a diverse range of learners is through appropriate, reliable and valid assessment in the classroom. This is especially important issue for Macedonian teachers because inclusive practice is accepted in all schools. Due to this educational change, the number of children with special needs in mainstream classes each school year becomes bigger and bigger. Teachers in an inclusive classroom are responsible for guidance and assessment of students with disabilities who attend the same lectures and should succeed as their peers. Such a process generates many concerns and dilemmas for which adequate and reasonable legal solutions need to be found.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM AND RELEVANT TERMS

In the contemporary literature relevant to this topic, different terms and concepts are used in different speaking areas in relation to people with disabilities and their social integration. Analyzing the relevant literature, we can find variety of terms that refer to people with disabilities, like the following: defect, handicap, somatopathy based damage, abnormality, behavioral disorder, social integration difficulties, psychophysical developmental disorders, developmental disabilities, special needs, special educational needs, etc. Related to our topic, the latest and most common used term is children with special educational needs. This term has also been used in the Report of the European Agency for Development of Special Education of January 2003.

According to the Report, it is important to emphasize that in the Republic of Macedonia is necessary:

- acceptance of the inclusion as an obligation;
- providing legislative support to the inclusive education
- building a system in order to evaluate a SEN student's success and improvements
- acceptance of children with SEN by their schoolmates as one of the basic preconditions in the inclusive education
- defining the special needs and giving an appropriate early intervention.

(according to Jachova, Z., 2004)

MONITORING, ASSESSMENT AND MEASUREMENT

Monitoring and measurement are terms that are closely related to assessment. Many authors define them differently, and they differ in their importance in the evaluation and the overall assessment of the educational work.

For the majority researchers monitoring is advanced and complex process and should be practiced as a continuous activity in which the teacher use appropriate techniques such as testing, scaling, recording and instruments. Monitoring implies a system of procedures and techniques for gathering information about the developmental levels on the achievement of the

intended goal and tasks of the educational work. As Vilotijević (1995) would say, monitoring is in the function of assessment and serves to collect data on all the levels, it express the quality of teaching achievement in relation to the stated goal. The measurement procedures are also included and significantly reduce the negative aspects of the subjective assessment.

Assessment of student learning is defined as “process by which we ascertain through data collection if students have learned the skills, content, and habits of mind that will make them successful; if students are not learning, we decide on changes in the curriculum or teaching strategy to improve learning.” (Dwyer, 2008)

Checking and assessing students' achievements are almost indivisible from one another. These are two types of activities that always run in the same order: each checking ends with some evaluation - each evaluation is preceded by a check. There is almost no check for itself, nor can anything be evaluated without first checking.

There are several types of checking and evaluation according to the purpose and timing of the performance:

1. Diagnostic testing and assessment

One type of diagnostic check is done at the beginning of the school year. It is a check and assessment of the quality of knowledge from the previous education which is considered to be the necessary basis on which new knowledge from a certain field will be upgraded. This also includes entrance exams and qualifying exams. Diagnostic testing is not related only to the beginning of the school year. It is also performed during the year - before the implementation of each new stage of learning.

2. Formal checking and evaluation

Formal ongoing testing and assessment in the true sense of the word should be understood as a continuous process of monitoring and checking (controlling) the performance of students' achievements in teaching, in order to collect data for evaluating them. Formal assessment and verification must be carried out continuously so that it can also intervene over the course of the event process. Formal checking starts from the individual attributes (subjective and objective) of each student, and therefore teaching must be adapted to those possibilities. Formal checking does not end with an assessment, especially with an officially summative assessment and registration of the numeric grade.

3. Summative checking and evaluation

It is carried out at the end of certain stages or periods of the teaching process, such as so-called classification periods, such as semester or end of the school year. The purpose of this checking and assessment is to fully understand the results of the students, i.e. summarizing the achievements and assessing their quality. Depending on when and to what purpose the summative check is carried out, one can speak of the following types:

- Micro-summary checks and evaluations;
- Formal stage micro-summary checks and evaluations;
- Final checks and evaluations.

There are also types of verification and assessment according to who performs them:

- Internal testing and assessment

Checking and assessment performed by teachers themselves who teach at school is called internal checking and assessment. It is a regular and dominant practice present in all countries. Internal checking and assessment has a number of good sides and advantages apart from external checking and evaluation. Above all, it is continuous and is performed as an integral part of the teaching process.

- External checking and evaluation.

It is a check and assessment performed by outsiders (experts, supervisors, inspectors). As a rule, it is performed at the end of the school year and has the character of final summative checking and assessment. However, it can be performed at any time of the school year depending on the purpose of the checking. (Popovski, K. 2005)

William and Thompson (2008) proposed the terms “formative” and “summative” assessment, given the reason to differentiate the role of evaluation. Formative assessment is introduced as an ongoing process of evaluating students’ learning, providing feedback to adjust instruction and learning, improving the curriculum (2008). Summative assessment, on the other hand, is bound to administrative decisions and assigning grades to the tests. Summative assessment is intended to summaries student attainment at a particular time, whereas formative assessment is intended to promote further improvement of student attainment. (Crooks, T., 2001)

The research on formative assessment is compelling and shows us explicitly how formative assessment works to improve learning - by helping students internalize the features of good work, by showing them specifically how to improve, by developing habits of thinking and a sense of competency, and so forth. An understanding of how these formative assessment processes are tied to standards-based reform in each of the disciplines makes it possible to coordinate and integrate reform efforts so that they need not be assembled as a laundry list of new approaches. Benchmark and interim assessments can also be very helpful to teachers as program evaluation tools and as a mean to identify students who need special help, but professional development may be needed to avoid interpreting the results to mean reteach everything. (Shepard, Lorrie A., 2005)

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATIONAL PLANS AND ASSESSMENT

The basic characteristics of the individualized educational plans included in the Code of Inclusive Practice are:

- careful focusing on the specific child learning difficulties;
- take into account what the child has achieved by following the curriculum;
- to set clear goals that a child needs to master over a period of time;
- to ensure the participation of parents and the child (if the child’s condition allows it) in the development of IEP;
- to include specialists in the preparation of IEPs. (Jachova, Z., 2002)

Across a variety of nations, educational policy for students with disabilities is intended to lead to greater access to the curriculum and grade level standards for students with disabilities.

Results of some research (La Salle et al., The Relationship of IEP Quality to Curricular Access and Academic Achievement for Students with Disabilities) shows that IEP quality is not a significant predictor of test performance or curricular access). Researchers suggest that IEP practices do not consistently impact students' access to or involvement in the general education curriculum. The promotion of the standards-based IEPs in policy and regulations only increases the need for additional research and professional training to support quality IEP goal development. (La Salle, T.; Roach, A.; McGrath, D., 2013)

Cooperation with the parents of children with special educational needs is of particular importance for the progress of the child in the education process. Parents should be involved in all phases starting from the identification of special needs, the acquisition of specific educational services, to the evaluation of the commission. According to the analysis made by Jachova , Z. (2002) the most frequent weaknesses of IEP are:

- imprecise terminology;
- insufficient participation of the student;
- incompatibility with other test procedures and student registration.

The five strongest points on IEP are:

- based on the true knowledge of the student;
- they are made according to the real abilities and interests of the students;
- predict real time limits;
- related to school resources;
- parents are involved at a certain stage of their work.

General and special educators sometimes fail to collaborate effectively to coordinate the general grading system with the accommodations and modifications required under a student's Individualized Education Program. Even when a head teacher wants to individualize a grading system for a student with a disability, other teachers often lacks knowledge of how to do it. Thus, many students with disabilities receive inaccurate and unfair grades that provide little and meaningful information about their achievement.

The steps for implementing grading adaptations improve communication and trust among the student, parents, special and classroom teachers who participate in developing student personalized grading plans. Parents and teachers clearly view grading adaptations not as a gimmick for raising grades, but rather as an efficient practice that meets the needs of individual students. (Munk, D., D & Bursuck, D., W., 2003)

Inclusion raises four particularly important sets of issues in assessing students:

- issues of identification and classification;
- questions about the appropriate use of accommodations;
- the problem of disabilities that are related to measured constructs; and
- issues pertaining to test design. (according to Koretz,M.D, 2003)

The theory behind setting achievement standards remains the same for alternate assessment as it is for general assessment. Methods that are used to set scores on alternate assessments are slightly different compared to the methods used in general assessment. Both types of assessments should have well-written performance level descriptors. Yet, there are challenges to developing “alternate achievement standards” that do not exist when developing achievement standards for the general assessments. There are relatively few students participating in the assessment and the students are arguably more diverse. The assessments have greater flexibility built into them. Knowledge and skills typically are assessed within a context of independence and generalizability. Yet, the same level of rigor and standardization in the procedures is required to set valid alternate achievement standards for this 1 percent as to develop achievement standards for the remaining 99 percent. (Perie, M., 2007)

Bauer and Brown (2001, p.190) emphasize the importance of assessment and adaptation when it comes to students with disabilities and their assessment in inclusive conditions, stating that:

- the goal of the assessment is to help the teacher collect information and facilitate the decision-making process;
- a fair assessment allows each student to show what he knows;
- the student's knowledge can be assessed in a number of ways;
- students with disabilities can engage in standardized tests offered to all students, may use different accommodation conditions, or use different estimates that measure their success.

They also suggest that student assessment is not fair if:

- they are not given the same opportunity to demonstrate what they know;
- they are judged on their abilities and needs by using biased assessments;
- are limited in their educational opportunities due to the assessment data.

Finally it can be said that assessment is the most important tool when it comes to students with special needs. The assessment determines the adequacy of programs and services, measures the achieved success and focuses on the new teaching directions.

Some teachers feel they did not get enough help from their co-teacher, and, in fact, the quality of implementation varied from team to team (and sometimes from teacher to teacher within a team). Furthermore, not all teachers are confident about their ability to accommodate students with disabilities successfully. Teachers are also concerned about grading and the fairness of using different criteria to evaluate different students. They are reluctant to adjust their evaluation methods but also detest giving included students poor grades. Finally, in many cases, teachers are comfortable to include students with learning disabilities, but are not prepared to include and work with students with more severe difficulties like mental or emotional disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Teachers in the educational process have difficulty in their efforts to assess the knowledge accurately and adequately when it comes to students with special educational needs, especially those involved in the inclusive classrooms. In the absence of specialized policies and recommendations, many teachers apply informal, individual assessment and adaptations to students with disabilities.

Our intention with this text is to point out to the importance of the issues related to the assessment and evaluation of achievements of the children with SEN and to the need of developing curricula for teacher training for improving the skills to work in inclusive classrooms, taking into account diversity of children.

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