



Qendra Burimore për Mirëqenien
e Fëmijëve dhe Familjes



Save the Children

INCLUSION PRACTICES IN ALBANIAN PRESCHOOL SYSTEM

Situation Assessment Report

Tirana, 2014



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TIRANA, 2014

This publication is published in the framework of Save the Children project: "Technical support in the preparation of National Action Plan for Early Childhood Care and Development" Grant Funding from Save the Children Norway (SCN).

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Ky botim publikohet në kuadër të projektit "Mbështetje teknike në përgatitjen e Planit Kombëtar të Veprimit" financiar nga Save the Children Norvegji (SCN)

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Acknowledgments

The researchers would like to thank the Regional Education Directorates of the seven cities (Durrës, Elbasan, Vlorë, Gjirokaster, Peshkopi, Burrel, Korce) for their readiness and support during this study. Furthermore, a special acknowledgment is for the participants of this study, parents, teachers and preschool directors for their motivation and interest in taking part to the study. Finally, a special thanks for the coordinators of the study, Mrs. Ema Kasapi (Save the Children in Albania).



“Inclusion practices in Albanian preschool system”

Situation Assessment Report

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Acronyms

MoES – Ministry of Education and Sports
MoSWY – Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth
MoLSAEO – Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities
RED – Regional Education Directorate
EO – Education Office
NGO – Non – Governmental Organization
INSTAT - Institute of Statistics
LSMS – Living Standards Measurement Survey
ECD – Early Childhood Development
GoA – Government of Albania
FGD – Focus Groups Discussions

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Executive summary

The inclusive education approach is based on an essential principle: all children should learn together, besides their differences and challenges. Inclusive preschools should acknowledge and react to the different needs of children, e.g. adapt all levels of learning and ensure that a quality education is offered through adapted curricula, organizational structures, teaching strategies, community partnerships and other services that fit to the needs that children face at school. Access, participation and support are all necessary to ensure that the needs and priorities of preschool children are met.

The legal framework of the Albanian education system warrants the right for public education for every child regardless from their needs and abilities. The preschool education in the country counts for a stable number of enrollments in the last years, after the dramatic fall in numbers after the '90s. In comparison with the total number of children, the percentage of preschool attendance is in rise, based on the data gathered by Regional and office directories of Education in each district/region to be reported to the Ministry of Education and Sports related to preschool. The data relate mainly to number of institutions, preschool attendance, ratio of teachers, etc. However, limited information is available regarding service in general in preschool. Moreover, in depth qualitative analyses are lacking to explore the specific dimensions of inclusion in preschool.

The aim of this study is to explore *the inclusive practices* implemented in the Albanian preschool education system *focusing in access, participation and support*. The specific objectives of the study derive from its aim and consist in:

- Identification of perceptions for inclusion of the professionals working in the preschool education systems: pre – primary education teachers, parents, kindergarten administrators and experts of the preschool education at a local government level;
- Assessment of the implementation of inclusion in everyday practice of the pre – primary teachers;
- Exploring best practices and their possibilities of implementation in other contexts within the preschool education system in Albania;
- Evaluation of the levels of access, participation and support in the preschool education system in the seven cities included in this study;
- Identification of the gaps and challenges in terms of inclusive practices and holistic development;
- Giving specific recommendations in order to embrace the inclusive practices and holistic development of the child in the preschool education.

Participants of the study, teachers and parents as well as representatives from RED and kindergartens' managers, were part of kindergartens where Save the Children had previously intervened. The kindergartens were located in Durres, Elbasan, Korce, Peshkopi, Burrel, Vlore, Gjirokaster.

Main findings

- Pre – primary schoolteachers had not been adequately trained for inclusion and inclusive practices; they commonly lack the knowledge of creating and working based on an individualized plan for children with special needs;
- Participants had not a clear understanding of what inclusion is;
- Procedures and financial burden were two important reasons hindering the initial enrollment of children, thus hindering inclusion right at the start;
- The methodologies of assessing children needs at this level were merely a formal tool of assessing, having almost no impact at the teachers' or parents' perception of inclusion and/or development;
- Institutions did not reflect inclusive policies and inclusive

- working culture with staff and other actors interested in children. Currently, preschool institutions seemed to operate in isolation, and not in a collaborating environment;
- There was a lack of a support system that reflects a continuum of services/practices and supports that respond to the needs and characteristics of children with varying types of needs
 - The majority of the preschools included in this study did not possess the appropriate/adequate infrastructure (physical, materials and supplies) conditions to make possible inclusion;
 - The teacher/children ratio remains a major problem for every education institution in Albania, including here the preschools.

Introduction

Inclusive preschool education

Nowadays, there are different theories about early childhood which inform approaches to children's learning and development. Early childhood teachers draw upon a range of principles in their work, which may be based on:

- developmental theories, that focus on describing and understanding the processes of change in children's learning and development over time
- socio-cultural theories that emphasize the central role that families and cultural groups play in children's learning and the importance of respectful relationships and provide insight into social and cultural contexts of learning and development
- socio-behavioral theories that focus on the role of experiences in shaping children's behavior
- critical theories that invite early childhood teachers to challenge assumptions about curriculum, and consider how their decisions may affect children differently
- post - structural theories that offer insights into issues of power, equity and social justice in early childhood settings.

Drawing on the range of perspectives and theories can challenge traditional ways of perceiving children, teaching and learning. It can encourage pre-primary schoolteachers, as individuals and colleagues, to continuously investigate why they act in the ways they do; to consider the consequences of their actions for children's experiences and most importantly find new ways of working fairly and justly in order to improve the sense of children belonging and wellbeing.

The general principles underpinning the preschool standards in Albania are focused on assisting all children to make progress in relation to the Learning Outcomes. On the other hand, little is known or practiced in relation to the concept of inclusion or holistic approach towards child needs in the Albanian context. It is a generally new approach in policy documents and daily practices. Additionally, inclusion practices in the preschool education in Albania have not so far been the subject of any assessment/research, making this study even more important.

Aim and objectives of the study

There are several areas of focus on this study as well as many contributing factors in relation to program quality, including the organization of physical space, appropriate and adequate supply of materials, teacher qualifications, programming variables, instructional strategies, collaboration among staff and families as well as individualized plans and necessary adaptations within daily routines. *The aim of this study is to explore the inclusive practices implemented in the Albanian preschool education system, focusing in access, participation and support.* The specific objectives of the study derive from its aim and consist in:

- Identification of perceptions for inclusion of the professionals working in the preschool education systems: pre – primary education teachers, parents, kindergarten administrators and experts of the preschool education at a local government level;
- Assessment of the implementation of inclusion in daily practice of the pre – primary teachers;
- Exploring best practices and their possibilities of implementation in other contexts within the preschool education system in Albania;
- Evaluation of the levels of access, participation and support in the preschool education system in the seven cities included in this study;
- Identification of the gaps and challenges in terms of inclusive practices and holistic development;
- Giving specific recommendations in order to embrace the inclusive practices and holistic development of the child in the preschool education.

Definitions of inclusion

A single definition of inclusion within an early education context is not yet accepted. Inclusion has been defined in many ways; however the absence of a standard definition can impair communication across agencies, professionals, and families.

For example, according to the Salamanca Statement, inclusive education refers to *“the educative environment that enables access, accommodation and support for all students”*. In relation to this, the inclusive education approach implies that schools at all levels should be adapted, in order to fulfill the needs of all children, beyond their physical, intellectual, emotional, linguistic and other abilities. According to this declaration the inclusive education approach is based on an essential principle: all children should learn together, besides their differences and challenges. Inclusive schools should acknowledge and react to the different needs of children, e.g. adapt all levels of learning and ensure that a quality education is offered through adapted curricula, organizational structures, teaching strategies, community partnerships and other services that fit to the needs that children face at school¹.

The legal framework of the Albanian education system warrants the right for public education for every child regardless from their needs and abilities: *“The placement of children with disabilities in special educational institutions is generally short – term. Inclusion and integration of children with disabilities at typical preschools and schools of the primary education is a priority”*². Moreover, the law ensures that support will be provided and access to special sources in order to fulfill the needs of every child for quality education.

For the purpose of this study, **inclusion relates to the values, policies, and practices that foster belonging and respect the individuality and diversity of children, promoting children learning, development and general wellbeing**³. The dimensions

1 The Salamanca Statement And Framework For Action On Special Needs Education. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0009/000984/098427eo.pdf> accessed on October 2014

2 Law 69/2012, On Pre-university Education.2012

3 Catlett, C. (2009). What do we mean by early childhood inclusion: find-

of diversity of children needs are related but not solely to: origin, culture, ethnicity, language, physical and intellectual abilities, race, and social economic status of the family.

Access, participation and support are all necessary to ensure that the needs and priorities of preschool children are met. Specifically,

- **Access** - a defining feature of high quality early childhood inclusion is access to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments.
- **Participation** - Some children will need additional individualized accommodations and support to participate fully in play and learning activities with peers and adults.
- **Support** - An infrastructure of systems-level support must be in place to undergird the efforts of individuals and organizations providing inclusive services to children and families⁴.

In an effort to fulfill the above objectives Save the Children in Albania and the Resource Center for the Wellbeing of Children and Families have undertaken a research focused on the assessment of the situation of the preschool education institutions in seven different cities in Albania. The study put a special emphasis to the inclusive environment and practices and to actual best practices.

ing a shared definition. National Association for the Education of Young Children. Retrieved from http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/DEC_NAEYC_EC_updatedKS.pdf accessed in November 2014

4 DEC/NAEYC. (2009). *Early childhood inclusion: A joint position statement of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute

Context - Regulatory framework for organization of preschool

The current regulatory framework regarding children, including 3-6 years old in Albania is well developed. Law 10 347, date 4.10.2010, "For the protection of children rights" sets the ground, supported by the Action Plan for Children (2012-2015) drafted and approved by the ex - Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities (currently the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth), are guiding political documents for children in Albania. One of the strategic goals of the Action Plan for Children (2012-2015) is inclusive and quality education for all children. It calls for the inclusion of Roma children in preprimary education and their smooth transition to first grade. The Plan also calls for inclusion and individualized work with children with special needs. However, it is mainly the sectorial laws and policy documents that govern the organization and service delivery of specific services.

Law no. 69/2012 "For the pre - university education system in the Albanian Republic" regulates the pre - university education system. Preschool education, according to Law 69/2012 aims the social, intellectual and physical development of the child; as well as their preparation for the basic school education. It covers children of age 3-6 years old.

The only remaining policy document "The national strategy for the development of the pre - university education 2004-2015" has been guided by the principles of "Quality and Equity in Education". The expired Albanian National Education Strategy 2009-2013, focused on the Integrated Early Childhood Development, underscores the empirically – based importance of the early years to children's readiness for school, their long-term outcomes, and refers also to the economic development of the country overall.

The Law 8653 "For the organization and functioning of local government" municipalities/communes has exclusive functions for the design of local preschool policies, and common/

shared functions with the central government (kindergarten infrastructure).

Infrastructure and construction standards for kindergartens' facilities exist, set forth by the MoES. They require preprimary schools to provide 20 to 25 square meters of space per classroom at both public and private preschools.

At the kindergarten, fees are only applied for meals (only in cases of full day preschools) . All other expense are subsidized by local government units, apart from teachers salaries, a contribution of MoES.

Law No. 62 in 2012 calls for free and mandatory education, but the law applies only to children aged 6-16. Preprimary school is not mentioned in the law. The Government's vision is to mandate the last year of kindergarten by 2017.

Access and Quality of Preschool Education

According to Census of 2011 the total number of children 3-6 in the country has been 135,412, representing 4.8% of the total population⁵. The preschool education counts for a stable number of enrollments in the last years, after the dramatic fall in numbers after the '90s⁶; however it remains low in comparison with other countries in the region. This is related to low fertility levels, migration and attendance level.⁷

5 INSTAT (2012). Population and housing census 2011.

6 Musai, B., Dharmo, M., Muka, P. & Rapti, E. (2006). The prospect of teacher education in South East Europe: National Report, Albania. Retrieved from http://www.see-educoop.net/education_in/pdf/workshop/tesee/dokumenti/book/Albania.pdf accessed on November 2014.

7 INSTAT (2014). Albania Population and Population Dynamics: New Demographic Horizons?

Children enrolled in Kindergarten⁸	
Year	Number
2008-2009	75454
2009-2010	74914
2010-2011	76389
2011-2012	80488
2012-2013	81865
2013-2014	81448

Reported net enrollment rates range depending on the source, from 33% (Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS), 2012) to 76% (Institute of Statistics, 2013). According to the 2012 LSMS data, the main reasons parents report as to why they do not send their children to preschool relate to their beliefs that their children are too young or they prefer to keep them at home. Based on the same report, more than two-thirds of parents of children 3-4 years old who were not attending preschool thought their children were too young, suggesting that perhaps early learning experiences are not appropriately catered to the younger age group. Nearly one-quarter of parents of all preschool aged children (3-6 years) reported that they preferred to keep their children at home⁹.

Wide disparities between rich and poor exist in the sector. Almost a quarter of the poorest quintile of Albanian children attends preprimary school, while 60% of children from the richest quintile children do. The gap in prevalence of learning materials for children at home is even wider, with just 15.5% of Albanians from the poorest quintile providing learning materials at home, compared to 52.3% of the children in the wealthiest quintile. The gap in adult support learning is also substantial: 68.1% of Albanians in the poorest quintile supported learning, while 96.2% in the wealthiest quintile did¹⁰.

8 Mingat, A. & Hoxha, E. (2010). The development of preschool in Albania: perspectives, policies and costing. UNICEF Albania

9 INSTAT (2013). Living Standards Measurements Survey 2012.

10 Nurja, I., Sado, L., Dumani, B., Spaho, A. & Thomo, L. (2011). Socio – demographic changes of the family and child development in Albania. Regional Research Promotion Program for the Western Balkans

In comparison with the total number of children, the percentage of preschool attendance is in rise. However, these are the figures reported, but they do not necessarily represent the reality, where many children are enrolled at the private kindergartens.

Attendance level in preschool education (in %) ¹¹			
1992	2005	2009	2013
34	48.8	50	54

The child-to-teacher ratio is high and there is no standard for the minimum number of hours a pre - primary school must remain open. There is no official ratio for preschool-aged children, but a MoES directive allows for a ratio of between 10:1 and 25:1, depending on whether the children are urban or rural¹².

Year 2013-2014	Urban	Rural	Total
Ratio child/educator	17.4	19.4	18.3
Average of children in a group	25.2	19.1	21.9
Number of hours per week	30	30	30

The total number of children with disabilities enrolled in kindergarten for 2013-2014 has been 319¹³. In 2013, MoES allocated 3 billion Lek to kindergarten, representing 7.2% of the total education budget. Fees are levied for kindergarten services in education for tuition and meals¹⁴.

The level of wages for employees in some ECD services is high, but not for others. The MoES pays pre - primary schoolteachers a minimum of 96% of what primary schoolteachers make. However, employees of community-based childcare centers are not paid by the government, but instead are paid by different non-state organizations, such as Save the Children¹⁵.

11 World Bank (2014). Report of Systems Approach for Better Education Results: Early Childhood Development in Albania.

12 Anex III/1. Education indicators analysis. Retrieved from http://www.parlament.al/web/pub/aneks_treguesit_arsimore_16988_1.pdf accessed on November 2014.

13 World Bank (2014). Report of Systems Approach for Better Education Results: Early Childhood Development in Albania

14 Ibid

15 Ibid

The GoA collects data on enrollment and usage of services in all four ECD sectors, but does not collect data on training of service providers. Standards for what children should learn exist, but there is no approved curriculum. In 2003, the Institute for Education Development established learning standards, called the Albanian Achievement Standards, for ECD – aged children that included physical health, approaches to learning, social and emotional development, cognitive and linguistic development, motor skills and artistic/aesthetic development. The Institute is in the process of developing a new curriculum framework that will replace an existing one, to be launched by 2015. Furthermore a new strategy for the education sector, including preschool is in the process of development¹⁶.

According to the World Bank Report on Early Childhood in Albania (2014), there is a high level of training required to become pre – primary schoolteachers and there is regular in - service training. Pre – primary schoolteachers must obtain a bachelor’s degree and pass an annual exam. Failing the exam or receiving low scores for five years results in the teacher losing his or her license. Credits and qualifications must be continually upgraded and preschool teachers must complete in – service training. However, there is no public authority in charge of pre – service fieldwork while fieldwork per se is not required.

A majority of pre - primary schoolteachers comply with teacher qualifications requirements. Almost 60% of public pre – primary schoolteachers and 78% of private preprimary schoolteachers hold a bachelor’s degree as required by MoES standards¹⁷.

The MoES is responsible for setting the standards in terms of infrastructure in kindergartens. According to the MoES preschools are required to have a 20 – 25 m² environment for class. Compliance with kindergarten infrastructure standards is unknown. No data are reported to track whether institutions meet construction standards. Local government units and regional education offices are responsible for monitoring compliance with

¹⁶ Interview with Director of Institute of Education Development, Gerti Janaqi

¹⁷ World Bank (2014). Report of Systems Approach for Better Education Results: Early Childhood Development in Albania

standards. A new regulatory framework is being developed, which is expected to clearly define the institutional roles in terms of infrastructure monitoring¹⁸.

Limited mechanisms exist for multi-sectorial coordination specifically for the 0 – 6 age group. There is currently no institutional structure for cross-sector collaboration to address the specific needs of children 0-6 years. Additionally, no specific manual or integrated service delivery guidelines exist for this age group. The existing mechanisms are being reformed and the State Education Inspectorate will be responsible for monitoring the standards' achievement in relation to the quality of education offered at the pre – primary level. Besides this structure, there are two other existing inspectorates: the health inspectorate and the infrastructure one.

18 Ibid

Methodology

The scope of the assessment is to better understand the inclusion practices in the preschool education in Albania, alongside the potential barriers in hindering such a practice.

A qualitative approach has been employed in order to achieve the purpose of this study. This approach was deemed as the most appropriate to better explore the practices, to identify how things happen, and get a greater variation of responses.

The research methods used in completing this assessment have been:

- *In – depth interviews*: the interviews, led by a semi-structured guide, have been conducted with Representatives of Regional Education Directories and Managers of Kindergartens.
- *Focus Group Discussions (FGD)*: FGDs have collected data using a semi-structured guide. The participants of these groups were teachers of kindergartens and parents of children attending the kindergartens.

A multi – site study

The participants of the study came from kindergartens where Save the Children had previously intervened. The kindergartens were located in Durres, Elbasan, Korce, Peshkopi, Burrel, Vlore, Gjirokaster.

Sampling and Screening Criteria

This study employed a qualitative approach, thus its purpose was not to generalize the findings, but to explore the factors that stimulate or hinder inclusion in pre – primary education institutions. Therefore, *a purposive sampling* was used for the participants of *in - depth interviews*. This method was selected

because the research team needed to obtain views from individuals representing the decisions-makers (representatives of the Regional Education Directorate, RED), and managers of the kindergartens. The number of the participants in decision – making were 14 (7 kindergarten managers and 7 RED representatives).

Interviews	Korca	Durres	Elbasan	Pesh-kopi	Vlore	Burrel	Gjiro-kastra	Total
RED	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Managers	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Total								14

For the FGDs a *purposive and convenient sample* was obtained. Regarding the teachers’ selection an effort was made to include a maximum number of them, keeping in mind that the participants should be of different age – groups, experiences in the education system and of different classes. In relation to the parents’ FGDs the inclusion criterion was to have a child attending kindergarten. Effort was also made to have parents of both genders, age – groups and education level (were possible). The sample size for each FGD ranged between 3 to 8 participants. The total number of FGDs is shown at the below table, where parents participants were 74 (in 15 FGD), while teachers were 78 (in 17 FGD).

FGDs	Ko	Dr	Elb	Pe	VI	Bu	GJ	Total
Parents	2 (11)	2 (10)	2 (12)	3 (14)	2 (8)	2 (10)	2 (9)	15(74)
Teachers	3 (9)	(3) 9	2 (15)	3 (15)	2 (10)	2 (11)	2 (9)	17 (78)
Total (participants)	5 (20)	5 (19)	4 (27)	6 (29)	4 (18)	4 (21)	4 (18)	32 (152)

Participants have been approached after explaining the purpose of the study. An oral consent form was read to them. In case of acceptance, the participants were notified on the time of the interview/focus group. They were usually conducted in a quiet and comfortable place.

Data Collection

Data of this study have been collected through the use of different instruments developed by the research team, approved by Save the Children and field tested/validated before formal data gathering commenced. These included:

- Semi structured interviews with Regional Education Representatives.
- Semi structured interviews with the Kindergarten Manager.
- Semi structured FGD guide for teachers at kindergarten
- Semi structured FGD guide for parents

Data analysis

A thematic data analysis approach was used for data analysis. Major and minor themes have been coded during multiple readings, examining interconnections and relationship. The data analyses summary underwent an independent, secondary review, after which research team resolved minor discrepancies during research group meetings. The final topics resulted are presented at the next section.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented according to the themes identified in the content of the interviews and the focus groups, in line as well with the theoretical background underpinning the development of the guides.

Perception on Inclusion

The participants of interviews and focus groups have been asked about the notion of inclusion in a preschool setting. Generally, the notion of inclusion was familiar to most of the participants. Teachers highlighted the inclusion of children regardless of abilities, personality traits, family origin, and ethnicity. As some related inclusion to equity, others related it rightly to individualized work with children based on their needs. It is worth noticing that some of the teachers had had trainings in inclusive education, focused mainly in education for children with special needs. These teachers usually had a substantial experience in pre – primary education.

As a preschool teacher points out:

"I consider inclusion as working with children regardless of the result you may have with them".

Others perceived inclusion as play or music, which for them meant that these were the means they used in order to achieve inclusion, particularly in challenging situations.

On the other hand, younger and less experienced teachers rather confused the term or concept of inclusion as only focused on children with special needs and learning difficulties. The lack of a definition at the official documents they used probably contributed to these misperceptions. Some of the teachers, even though trained, had a lack of knowledge about the different

categories and components of diversity and inclusive practices. During the probing questions, a teacher that was asked about children in chronic poverty responded:

“So what am I supposed to do? Feed them more?”

Few of them reported a clear concept of inclusion for all children, coming from different backgrounds and having different abilities. Some of them did identify different categories that have required special attendee in their pre – primary school experience, including:

- Children facing physical and mental development problems
- Children with specific personality traits (this term was usually used for hyperactive or aggressive children, or very passive and shy)
- Children with learning difficulties

Only a small percentage of the participants identified the broader context of inclusion and the many faces of diversity, which included:

- Children coming from rural areas (poor children, having language accent)
- Children that do not attend regularly, or have been gone for a long period due to disease, etc.
- Children going through difficult situation in families, e.g. divorce.
- Children of families returning in the country from emigration.
- Children from residential institutions (orphanage)
- Newcomers, especially children of first group 3-4 years who do not come from nurseries etc.

Parent’s perceptions of inclusion were not at all clear. The best cases were parents that had heard of it at the media and they were few parents that were indeed aware of inclusion. Even this category of parents related inclusive practices only to children with special needs. They didn’t report any other categories of children, even when using probing questions.

Having an accurate perception of inclusion is a very important first step towards a greater understanding and implementation of inclusive practices. The misperception of the concept from the very start can contribute 'at best' to more non – inclusive practices, or at worse to professional malpractice, which can result from this inaccuracy and confusion.

Access

A plethora of literature has emerged recently, which looks at the inclusive education from the educational reforms perspectives. Schools should respond to the diverse needs of all children and fit themselves in children's learning styles and needs, and not the other way¹⁹. All children have the right to enroll, access and participate in schooling which meets their educational needs. Access is related to offering a wide range of learning possibilities, activities, settings and environments.

Inclusion means ensuring that all children have access to basic education of good quality. This implies creating an environment in pre - primary and in basic education programs in which children are both able and enabled to learn. Such an environment must be inclusive of children, effective with children, friendly and welcoming to children, healthy and protective for children and gender sensitive²⁰.

Registration procedures

The registration procedures are reported to be open to every child. The conditions are related to the presentation of the required documentation for registration. But most importantly, the registration is conditioned by the capacity of each kindergarten to provide care and education of the children. The staff of the participant kindergartens reported working over their capacities. It has been impossible to have a report from the staff regarding their perceptions about the number of children excluded from registration. A required criterion for the registration is that the family should reside to that zone.

19 Jha, M.M. (2002). *School Without Walls: Inclusive Education for All*. Oxford: Heinemann

20 UNESCO (2005). *Ensuring Access to Education for All: Guidelines for Inclusion*.

*“Who comes first is served first’ is how registration works out”
Manager of Kindergarten*

An important obstacle for registration and access to pre – primary education is the fee paid for this service (the fee for meals in full day preschool). Many teachers reported that low – income families and families that live with the social assistance allowance face enormous economic difficulties and they are hindered from sending their children in kindergarten. There aren’t any incentives or financial support schemes in place from the central or local government, in order to ease the economic burden for these families. The majority of the families keep their children at home and they never attend preschool. Parents with a low socio – economic background report to they are sacrificing something else in their everyday life, in order to have their children at kindergarten.

“This is a very poor city, it is left behind from the government... more than half of the people here are unemployed. When we take the statistics of the parents we usually don’t have any mother employed and even fathers sometimes” Teacher, Burrel.

On the other hand, for some parents having to register their children since the beginning of the year is somewhat challenging. Some children are considered from their parents not to be ready for kindergarten, and they expressed their desire to have another chance during the year to enroll their children. It could be a matter of days or sometimes months until parents feel that their child is ready for kindergarten. But, the obligation of enrolling the child at the beginning of the year impinges the inclusion of every child. In contrast, teachers think that if enrollment was going to be in an ongoing basis they would face difficulties with the new children, so if this was going to happen it would be a necessity to create further arrangements in the pre – primary school classes.

Overpopulation of classes is another challenge reported as problematic to be handled by teachers and managers of preschools.

Even though registration is only a first step to kindergarten, it seems that it can also pose difficulties for some families and children. As mentioned earlier, children from the poorest quantile were the ones that didn't attend mostly the pre – primary education. Based on these findings the economic burden hinders access for these children, therefore inclusion.

Infrastructure

Physical infrastructure conditions have been reported to hamper inclusion of children. Buildings' conditions, inner and outdoor space differed a lot across preschool facilities. Inner space ranging from spacious areas, divided for the main activities (sleep, eating, program) to one common space for all activities. The outdoor space was available, but not arranged for play or to be used by children. In all cases it was protected by fences. In two out of the seven kindergartens visited, the construction and furnishings conditions were completely depreciated. In Gjirokastra, the kindergarten was part of an old building (built in 1940); the first floor was the nursery and the second one the kindergarten. Children had only one environment, and they didn't even have a place to sleep: teachers reported that they kept children awake until their parents came to pick them up and sometimes they fell asleep at the tables. Toilets didn't have doors but only curtains and a barrel with water was there. The "outdoor" space was the corridor, where there was only a slide for them to play.

"This environment is totally inappropriate, the toilets are outside and this building was not designed for kindergarten, it is from the time of the Second World War... we do not have no place for children to sleep, neither do other kindergartens in Gjirokastra...children cannot stay without sleeping and sometimes they fall asleep at the table, because their parents cannot come to pick them up earlier, because they are at work"
Teacher, Gjirokastra

In another city, Burrel, the classes were not reconstructed for the last 25 years or more. They had old tables and plastic chairs bought by parents. Overall, investments are rare; even the painting of the walls in most cases is done with the resources collected by the contribution of parents.

As one parent pointed:

"The conditions here are terrible....what can you expect as a parent? The toilets are outside, so one teacher should always be with the child that goes to the toilet." Parent, Gjirokastra

Moreover, the furnishings conditions were very depreciated; tables were playing the role of centers, buffets were not changed for the last three decades etc. Fortunately, the current furniture arrangement allowed for staff supervision of children. Toys and materials were displayed on low shelves and arrangement of furniture did not block an adult view of children. Thus, children's observation was not difficult in most of the settings. But, difficulties were arising when using the toilet.

Furnishings were not always appropriate for young children, e.g. there were tables with corners that children could easily hit, chairs were inappropriate, the stoves used for heating in winter were not protected, so children could be burn, etc. On the other hand, most furniture were child-sized and there were in most cases adequate number of chairs/tables to allow all children to participate. There was no provision of any kind in the infrastructure and adoptive furnishings for children with physical disabilities.

As a RED representative pointed:

"There isn't any budget for these arrangements and there is not a chance to have these reconstructions for children with special physical needs, at least not for now"

General health and safety procedures are implemented throughout the classroom. However, this is conditioned by the infrastructure depreciation status of the buildings, e.g. the electrical cords that were accessible or their outlets were not covered. Child sized sinks were in some of the kindergartens, but not all of them had the child appropriate toilets.

Infrastructure is one of the most important prerequisites for access and inclusion, a sine qua non. It cannot be expected to

have inclusive practices with different kinds of activities and learning environments when the basic needs of the children and staff are not met.

Supplies/Materials

Managers, teachers and parents identified the absence of toys, books, blocks and many different supplies children could use during play or education part of the day. Only in some of the kindergartens, where "Step by step" approach was introduced years ago, there were still defined interest areas, the so – called centers. These included: art, drama, math, language, nature and science. Teachers reported that the supplies they had from the implementation of the program a few years ago were sometimes maintained with many efforts from their part. In other cases, the kindergartens didn't have any different areas and they tried to adjust and arrange their limited environment and possibilities according to the program and needs.

"It would have been easier if we had toys or materials to help accommodate and promote varies learning abilities and levels"
Kindergarten's manager

"Children need to see, touch and feel things to learn better. We expose them to so little", Teacher Durres

Parents were very unsatisfied with the situation. They reported that they contributed as much as they could. Some of them were facing financial difficulties and could not afford to contribute financially for these necessities of the kindergarten. According to them, very little is provided by the local government.

Teacher / child ratio

The majority of kindergartens in the study had big groups of children (from 20 – 35). The high ratio of teacher/children hinders the individual and holistic interaction between the two parties. In the case of children with special needs, the situation gets further complicated.

"I have 35 children in my class and one of them is autistic. What can I do with him? He starts screaming and I don't know what to do...I try to calm him down, but the other children are sometimes afraid, and this is inclusion....According to the law for every child with a disability they have in class teachers should have 5 children less than 25, thus 20 and an assistant teacher!" Teacher, Durres.

This was the attitude of all teachers that had children with special needs in their classes. The majority of them reported facing enormous difficulties in their overcrowded classes, let alone having a child with a disability. According to them, the other children suffer from the co – existence of overpopulation and children with special needs in the same class.

"I remember last year had 38 children in my class, 3-4 years. My colleague and I constantly tried to keep children safe because they moved all the time. There wasn't any chance of inclusion or holistic development in that class. Fortunately, this year we are far better: only 28" Teacher, Korca.

The support staff, such as social workers or psychologists is not very present due to the high number of children and students they have to cover in the district. But these professionals could not solve or even ease the problem, in relation to the children with special needs. Teachers believed that only the presence and help of an assistant teacher would facilitate the situation, and some of them reported practices from other countries or from the earlier years of their experience, when they were implementing another program.

Even though the teachers focused on their challenges in relation to children with special needs, many of them were open and not discriminative towards children with special needs. In previous years, where an assistant teacher was present and there wasn't any overcrowded group, a more holistic approach was embraced and had been successful. Therefore, measures should be taken to fully "equip" kindergartens with the appropriate and qualified staff for a more inclusive and holistic environment.

Participation

Teachers had a not so clear perception of participation. They usually had information in terms of parents' participation in the kindergarten's life, but they did not identify it, in most cases, with understanding the needs of the children and adopting their practices according to them. A contributing factor to this perception could be the lack of information that they had for what « participation » is in inclusive practices. They could not refer to a regulation in relation to participation. When asked further and explained from the researcher, they mentioned the most common practices that they use in their work.

Regarding the participation of children and the ways inclusion takes places during play and learning activities managers and teachers have reported and identified the barriers, as well as approaches mitigating them. These practices and barriers included: the initial assessment, curricula, approaches towards inclusion, involvement of other children and staff motivation.

Child Needs Assessment

Teachers were asked about the ways they collect information about the children needs, talents, interests etc. Different approaches were reported from them including:

- Observation in the activity centers with the scope to understand what children like most, or are talented about.
- Communication with parents – this is done more intensively at first month of child preschool enrollment, than throughout the year, through daily conversation of staff and parents.
- Completing the observation notebook and registers, identifying the progress of children in the 6 areas of development defined by standard of achievements.

Although teachers were familiarized with these approaches in child needs assessment, very few of them could identify them with participation. Besides that, it seems that all these practices are rather formal and act as an "obligation" or a "bureaucracy"

for teachers, rather than as a tool for improvement and for more inclusive practices towards the holistic child development. For example, teachers have to complete the register with the progress children's development in three different periods during the year: at the beginning, middle and end of the year. Notwithstanding this, it could be a valuable tool for the teacher's inclusive practices, but currently it is only another obligation and bureaucracy for them.

"I know very well my children. I don't have to write it in two or three different documents" Teacher, Elbasan.

In terms of parents' information the teachers had two different approaches. On the one hand, in some kindergartens they placed the file of the child at his/her shelf, in order for parents to have a chance to take a look of the child's activities and progress, and this was considered a very positive practice. On other cases, the teachers not only did not have the file in a place where the parents could see them, but they had closed the outer door and didn't allow the parents to go into the kindergarten, except when they wanted to talk to the teacher. This brought dissatisfaction to parents.

Regarding child assessment, teachers reported that in rare cases they used the "Observation Sheet" as a tool, when they wanted to consult with a psychologists or social worker. This was usually the case of children with special needs and it was a requirement that commonly came from parents. This sheet was also perceived as a burden and another bureaucracy for them,²¹ most of teachers reported that they were very aware of the needs of the children and did not need a written document for that. On the other hand, they had a positive perception and reaction when asked about its value in terms of partnership and good communication with parents.

Finally, during the whole assessment, children themselves were left outside of the direct assessment process. Neither parents nor teachers mentioned that children were ever part of the assessment.

²¹ The teachers have to complete the "Observation Sheet" two times in a month for every child, when they randomly do an observation of the child.

Curricula

The current most implemented approach for the pre – primary education in Albania is the teacher - centered. The child – centered methodology is part of the teacher’s qualification, but it is not widely implemented²². Another known methodology is the Montessori, while there was a tentative piloting project of the Reggio Emilia approach by UNICEF in Albania²³. However, most of the kindergarten’s had been previously part of the program «Step by Step», supported by SOROS foundation. Teacher’s reported to be very satisfied with this approach and some of them felt that it had better outcomes for the children, though they could not base that in documented cases neither on longitudinal studies.

In 2003, the Institute for Education Development established learning standards, called the Albanian Achievement Standards, for ECD – aged children that included physical health, approaches to learning, social and emotional development, cognitive and linguistic development, motor skills and artistic/aesthetic development. All the above methodologies are based on the the same curricula, developed by the Institution for Education Development. The traditional teacher – centered programs are based on some main standards, like health caring and physical development of children; learning and education work, based on their needs and interests, in relation to the natural and social phenomena and with enriching the every day life of children in kindergarten; specifics of working with children with special needs²⁴.

Preschool education is based on lessons, usually held between 9.30 to 11.30 - alternations were present subject to different organization of work in preschools. Usually the preschools offer 240 teaching hours (lessons) per year. Teachers participating in the study were informed on the curricula and the methodology

22 Institution for Education Development (2010). Professional development program for attaining the levels of qualifications of the pre – primary school teachers.

23 UNICEF (2003). Piloting in Albania the Reggio Emilia experience in preschool education.

24 Educational Institutions (2014). Retrieved from <http://data.planetar.edu.al> accessed on November 2014

they were implementing in most cases, besides some young and new teachers. The more experienced teachers had very good knowledge of the curricula, but it seemed that they were just reporting something they knew by heart, when asked about the curricula and the standards. It cannot be concluded on the use and instrumentality of the curricula from the teacher's attitude towards it.

“Step by step” approach is recognized as being very useful to provide a child oriented learning experience, but the lack of materials/supplies hinders its best implementation.

Manager and teachers identify play as the best teaching/learning opportunity for inclusion of children. Free play or free choice occurred throughout the day, nevertheless it was not reported that children choose activities indoors or outdoors. However, play is generally not child-directed/initiated. In few instances, teachers reported having “failed” the teaching part of the day, to adapt to the children's needs. This was an advantage of the “Step by Step” methodology.

“I remember once I had a really boring topic to discuss and children were going ‘uff aff’ and they weren't staying still. So, I asked them: what would you like to do? They said: dance. And I stopped the teaching/discussion and we all danced and sang”. Teacher, Korca

Nonetheless, inclusion is challenged by the high number of children in a group or high ratio of teachers/children. Thus, supervision to facilitate children's activities and play, making sure all are involved, guiding children when necessary towards an activity or actively participating to help them gain additional learning can be hampered.

*“It is difficult to supervise all of them. I am only one with 30 children”
Teacher, Elbasan*

*“When we implemented the Soros program, with this approach everything functioned. Back then, we were 3 -4 teachers in a class”
Teacher, Durres*

The daily schedule of activities is reported to reflect activities within recurrent routines that provide structure for the children's day.

Teachers followed the self – prepared daily program, based on the topics from the standards of achievements. Nevertheless, they reported difficulties in developing this program in a creative way, due to lack of support materials, trainings, and materials to implement the program.

"It is difficult to expose children with fun experiences of learning and play if you have not appropriate books or materials to help you with at least some methodology or ideas" Teacher, Peshkopi

Teachers indicated that the traditional program and the standards of achievement should be reviewed, giving more emphasis to play, or learning through playing, rather than learning per se in a traditional didactic way. Their opinion was that the current curricula is very demanding, putting a lot of pressure to children, but also teachers. One of them pointed out:

'The standards of child development, that are at the curricula usually start with mathematics and science. If we asked children about them, they would start with the artistic and social part, because these are the ones that like the most. I find myself asking many times: why aren't they like this, in the opposite order? Why not start with the artistic development?' Teacher, Korca

Despite the difficulties that Albanian pre – primary schoolteachers are facing, some of them have developed worthwhile and good practices, based on a curricula that enables that. It is very important to bear in mind how children's holistic development can be incorporated to the forthcoming curricula.

Approaches towards inclusion

Participants reported that teaching staff and children are intensively involved in communication and learning activities, such as conversations, singing, plays and other activities. Teachers provided opportunities for children to work together,

especially in the thematic division of work, following the step by step learning approach.

Although the teachers reported some successful inclusive practices, it is worth mentioning that this were based on informal processes rather than institutionalized. There were not any specific guidelines in place in the current curricula on how to develop and establish inclusive practices. The term “inclusion” is mentioned in these documents, but without any further specific suggestions as to how teachers can achieve inclusion in their classes.

Notwithstanding the above critical issues, it is important to underline the current practices that teachers employed. They reported e.g. having flexible/adoptive program according to the situation created during education program.

“If I see a child who is not getting involved, I stop what I am doing, and find a way to engage him/her and then resume with the rest”
Teacher, Elbasan

They also provided additional learning opportunities throughout the day.

“If the child has not attended for a long time, we work to catch up with the program even during the afternoon hours.” Teacher, Peshkopi

Collaboration with parents

“In case the child does not progress well, we ask parents to work with the child at home about specific things” Teacher, Burrel

Nevertheless, teachers report that this is conditioned by the time parents have to work with children, and their capacity to do so. Teachers and managers invite parents to be part of the preschool life; however, there were not many parents willing to respond to this invitation. When a few of them did so, they shared positive feedback, and resulted in improved collaboration among parents and children, with positive impact in children.

Parents appreciated the approach generally taken by teachers. They recognized the overload teachers were facing and other difficulties in infrastructure and resources, and acknowledge how these impacts ultimately their children, as well.

Other parents reported the need for a more close collaboration with the teachers, as they felt "excluded" from the life of their child at kindergarten, especially when receiving the everyday feedback, which was mostly focused on: "eating and sleeping". Parents, particularly younger ones, wanted more information for their children's life in kindergarten, e.g. information about specific activities and difficulties or successes of their children, emotional and social development that goes beyond the typical "he/she is a well/misbehaving child" etc. Contradictory messages came from the two parties: on the one hand the teachers reported that many parents are indifferent of their children's life in kindergarten and very often felt that their work wasn't appreciated; on the other hand, parents reported that the teachers were only giving feedback on the child's basic activities, like eating and sleeping, or on the learning achievements and they had forgotten the other aspects of his/her development. To be noted is that, at the kindergartens that teachers had the children's file open to an easy access from the parents, there were not many complaints from the parent's part. Thus, this can be a positive factor for bridging the gap between parents and teachers. These best practices can offer valuable knowledge that can be transferred to other contexts. International practices and evidence from research can serve as a good example and information, too.

Competences and skills

According to World Bank (2014) a majority of pre - primary schoolteachers comply with teacher qualifications requirements. Almost 60% of public pre – primary schoolteachers and 78% of private preprimary schoolteachers hold a bachelor's degree as required by MoES standards²⁵. In this study, most of the teachers had a considerable experience. Few of them were new in this profession, having from 1 – 3 years of experience, while others

²⁵ World Bank (2014). Report of Systems Approach for Better Education Results: Early Childhood Development in Albania

had more than 10 years (until 35 years' experience). Experienced teachers seemed much more confident in their opinions, but they were on two different directions: there were experienced teachers that found it difficult to adapt to the new practices and they could hardly wait to retire, but there were others, also close to retirement that were very pleased with the new approaches and eager to incorporate them in their practice. However, younger and less experienced teacher were not always confident in their practices and faced difficulties with the planning of the activities.

Although there is a continuous learning program for the teachers of the pre – primary education, this is not supported by ongoing in – service trainings. Teachers reported that they have little opportunities to take part in trainings, while based on the actual system they should participate in training and collect at least 3 credits per year. These were mostly offered by private agencies (with fee) or NGOs. It can be assumed that this puts more pressure to the daily practice of them.

Teachers and managers pointed out the need to improve their skills/competences in working with children. They had received some basic training on inclusion, but they reported that they needed much more trainings and practical consultations regarding inclusive practices.

“We can observe, but we are not always aware of the kind of help the child should receive from us.” Teacher, Burrel

“For children with special needs, such as autism, I need an individual plan to work with. But I don't know how to do it.” Teacher, Gjirakastra

The staff is composed of experienced and new graduates. However, the two categories similarly recognize the necessity to learn more and practice better. Capacity development needs are expressed regarding the inclusive practices focused on some practical recommendations, child development concepts, teaching methodology, class management, tips and communication with children with special needs, effective communication, etc. Managers and teacher confirm their limited participation in

training and other capacity development activities, regardless of their identified needs to do so.

"We are informed by EI (education inspector) of the district about the training opportunities. Only a few times this has happen. In most cases teachers cannot participate due to financial requirements."
Kindergarten's manager,

Learning processes within the institutions are not practices. The situation is the same in relation to work self-assessment in the institution. Teachers considered important the interaction that should take place within the team, but that is only taking place with teachers of the same group. Some good practices reported included: open hours, where teachers went to another class within the kindergarten to share and receive experience in teaching a topic and informal communication for issues that concerned them.

Both teachers and managers accept their needs to improve their skills and this is also identified by the state, when asking for every – year credits. These needs should be supported by an ongoing training support for them, that would be, at least partially, subsidized by the state. Moreover, it is worth identifying the specific needs of the different teachers on an ongoing basis, as they can be very dynamic, and fulfill them through the offered trainings.

Engagement of other children

Teachers spot out the model behavior they influence/diffuse among children, so they can support other children. This took place especially in one kindergarten where there was a class, the so – called mixed group, in which children were not divided according to the age categories. Each group had a combination of newcomers with others attending longer. This facilitated the learning of children among themselves.

"We talk intensively to children from rural areas, who have more difficulties in adaptation with the new environment. We also encourage older children to talk to them the same way, so they are modeled all the time". Teacher, Peshkopi

The mixed group has children of different ages and was more typical in areas where preschool registration had different patterns than the major cities. In this group there were usually children of different ages and groups. Including all children in a single class gave greater opportunity to the teachers to implement inclusive practices. This can possibly be a positive approach towards inclusion, and should be further explored in other researches.

Staff motivation

Through interviews and focus groups, it was attempted to collect information regarding staff satisfaction of work. In a way, the organizational culture and staff motivation can have an impact at the inclusive practices. If classes continue to be overloaded and teachers so, they should at least, have personal or institutional motivation. This can be a stimulating as well as an impeding factor towards inclusion. There were few approaches reported to be used to motivate staff, including staff exchange of information, feedback and more occasionally participation in training.

Teachers complained about the overload of work, and the challenges that they faced in providing a positive learning and development environment for children due to large groups of children, lack of supportive materials/supplies, knowledge and lack of infrastructure conditions. High level of dissatisfaction and de – motivation was reported due to the pending situation of not approving the staff composition/structure of preschool institution. The teachers' continuous worry of losing the job triggered tension.

Managers and teachers occasionally reported contradictory requirement from the RED/EI regarding the 'Step by Step' approach. The same is the situation with the basic education program and teachers' expectations: the first grade teachers are very achievement and learning oriented, and this creates tension with these pre – primary education school teachers. The reason for this is the "Step by Step" program, according to which children should have more time playing and learning through play. This approach builds character to children, but the primary

education teachers expect that children should know reading and writing before entering school!

"We initiated a discussion with the first grade teachers and RED/DI office last year, in order to explain them what is our goal and how far we can go and what isn't. At the end, they still had the same expectations: first grader with reading and writing abilities! We are always to be blamed about everything." Preschool teacher, Gjirokastra

The confusion of different requirements and lack of orientation, as well as instruments to assess children specific needs and follow up progress are identified as influencing barriers in the teachers' practices.

From an organizational point of view it is very important to have policies in place to motivate the staff. That requires a certain stability and low turnover rate of teachers, but also the presence of intrinsic and extrinsic incentives for motivation.

Support

Another important aspect of inclusion is support, which can and should be offered to the pre – primary education institutions from community or other institutions, aiming at fulfilling every child's needs and providing a quality education. An infrastructure of systems-level supports must be in place to undergird the efforts of individuals and organizations providing inclusive services to children and families. Questions were asked to assess these issues.

Preschool and parents

The initial contact of parents with kindergarten is at the time of child registration, mainly concerning documentation and other related inquiries. It is during the initial months of the child enrolment that a relationship is established between parents and staff, focusing on the adaptation of children in preschool. The daily communication of parents with teachers takes place based on the child daily general wellbeing. Parents are invited in the meetings, 3 over the year. The meetings are collective, and

mainly informative of the responsibilities and contributions of parents as well as the information for the general progress of children. Parents are invited and allowed to stay with children during the day, although a few practice this. However, in one preschool this practice was not allowed. Parents were asked to stay outside the facility.

“We are very unhappy with this rule. We need to have more information daily about children. The cleaning lady is mainly the person we meet every day” Parent

Special open learning days have been organized by kindergartens that have good infrastructure to facilitate the activity. In these days, parents are invited to take part in the activity areas, to see how children do in different fields. Parents are invited in ‘parties’, ‘concerts’, where children perform a program prepared by teachers. In one preschool, Facebook was used by the manager to present to the parents the activities done at preschool. However, this was an initiative based on and supported by only the individual motivation of the manager and some teachers.

Parents are organized in boards that mainly administer, in collaboration with the preschool manager, the financial contribution of parents. There are no procedures identified in the board selection/establishment to ensure inclusion and better representation of parents. When a Roma mother expressed the desire to be part of the preschool board and to run for president, there was resistance from other parents, but not from preschool staff who encouraged her engagement, because of her being a devoted and engaged mother, whom had supported the kindergarten when needed.

Teachers consider parents in many occasions as the barrier to practice inclusion. Parents may not accept the problems/difficulties their child faces. They refused to name or accept them. This makes it more difficult for teachers and children. Again here, the help of support staff is recognized for children, staff and parents; as well as the improved knowledge and skills of parents in child-rearing and positive parenting.

Another aspect were parents' high expectations from teachers and children themselves, especially for high performance in math and language.

In other occasions, to the teacher perceptions, parents fail to carry out their responsibilities to expose children to learning opportunities outside the kindergarten settings.

"Parents leave all the responsibility to us for the child to learn. But this is not fair to us and to the children." Teacher, Vlora

Teachers require a more active collaboration with parents. There are parents that put pressure of performance on children; same do the teachers of basic education. Parents recognize that they need to know more regarding holistic development of children and inclusion practices at family settings. They identify the preschool staff as the resource people for this information sharing.

Regional Education Directories/Education Offices

Staff has pointed out previous good experiences in collaborating with RED/EO, when they assisted with support materials/documents, as well as negotiated with NGOs to support kindergarten. However, such practices are not taking place on a regular basis. Staff recognized these institutions more in their monitoring role, rather than supportive. In districts were RED and preschool staff was not collaborative but in conflict, staff reported high level of frustration and low motivation. The collaboration among these institutions was influenced by the staff changes (almost all staff changed lately at RED of many districts).

Participants were asked if they could identify collaboration practices with the *local government unit/municipality*. They report the relationship, in terms of monitoring from the Education Department of Municipalities. Apart from the dissatisfaction of not being provided with support, they confirmed that they were not aware of the child protection units operating at the municipalities.

Regional/Public Health Directories were reported to monitor hygiene conditions, or visit the preschool case of epidemics. Health center staff, which is the primary health institution responsible to attend the health related issues of preschool were not reported to have ever visited or collaborated in any kind with the preschool staff.

Managers and teachers recognize the potential of help among these actors, such as training of parents and staff on different health and development components of children. However, they are not able to identify who should be coordinating such activities.

Local NGOs have been recognized as supportive actors. Preschool institutions are still using materials/furnishing provided by SOROS, UNICEF or other organizations that have supported them. They confirm that the attention of NGOs towards kindergartens has been lacking in the past years.

“NGOs have been good partners of ours. We are willing to collaborate with them” RED inspectorate

Collaboration amongst the different stakeholders of a kindergarten is crucial. It is important to diffuse it from the “top” and to incorporate it for all the actors. The Municipality, RED/EO, other agencies and service providers, parents and community based NGOs should have ongoing coordinated activities based on memorandums or protocols, where the responsibilities and competences of each part would be clearly stated.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Early learning experiences are crucial to the future well-being of children, and establish the foundation for the acquisition of knowledge and skills that will affect later learning and behavior. The findings of the study reveal that inclusion practices are not mainstreamed in the daily activities/life of preschool in Albania. Although inclusion positive deviant practice of teachers is diffused among staff, there is not yet in place a systematic and holistic approach of child-focused service.

The main findings indicate that pre – primary schoolteachers have not been adequately trained for inclusion and inclusive practices, they sometimes lack the knowledge of creating and working based on an individualized plan for children with special needs. They also not always perceive the many faces of diversity, thus relating inclusion only to children with special needs.

Kindergartens of this study had the formal registration procedures employed by all kindergartens. Some of them, e.g. the obligation to register only at the begging of the year, not having financial incentives for the low – income families, are found to hinder inclusion.

In terms of participation, the pre – primary institutions had very depreciated furnishing, lack of supplies and materials and, in some cases, were in old buildings. Considering this, access for all children, let alone children with physical special needs, is not possible. The teacher/children ratio remains a major problem for every education institution in Albania, including here the preschools. Teachers faced many challenges in an effort to

manage the classroom, but also develop some good practices for inclusion and holistic development, thus creating a stimulating learning environment.

The methodologies of assessing children needs at this level were merely a formal tool of assessing, having almost no impact at the teacher's or parents' perception of inclusion and/or development. For teachers it served more as a monitoring and control tool for the EO or for the parents. However, teachers reported their need to have more flexible tools and fewer bureaucracies.

Inclusion of children cannot take place if institutions do not reflect inclusive policies and inclusive working culture with staff and other actors interested in children. Currently, preschool institutions seem to operate in isolation, and not in a collaborating environment. Other challenges faced by them related to the need for an ongoing in – service training, in order to acquire the credits required, but also to be updated and informed for the new and different practices.

Regarding support, as a third axis of inclusive practices, teachers pointed out that many times they felt underestimated and even targeted by the parents. Of course, this is not the case in all situations and settings, but it came as a concern of them. Furthermore, they had overcrowded classrooms with children with special needs and no support form a psycho – social staff or from an assistant teacher. The role of the RED and EO was more considered as a supervising or monitoring rather than supporting for them.

Recommendations

1.1.1 Concept of inclusion

- The necessity is clearly identified to develop a program philosophy on inclusion, containing the values, beliefs, and most effective ways to promote inclusion. This agreed-upon definition of inclusion should guide managers and teachers to shape practices aimed at ensuring that children and their

families are full members of preschool institution and of larger community; and that children have multiple opportunities to learn, develop, and form positive relationships;

- There is still a need for more information in relation to inclusion. Thus, raising awareness activities are suggested to take place, targeting teachers, parents but also the public in general. Inclusion needs to become an internal value of institutions of all levels and inclusion practices to be promoted as part of institutional development and service improvement.

1.1.2 Access

- The initial aspect of access in many education and other institutions in Albania is the infrastructure one. Thus, it is suggested to adjust the inner and outer infrastructure in order to make possible the access of more children and most importantly accommodate the needs of all children and fulfill them accordantly to their education and development needs;
- Access is also perceived in terms of registration procedures and financial facilitations. Measures and practices should be in place in order to ensure that all children, even them from low – income families, have the opportunity to access the pre – primary education system. Registration procedures should be reviewed and replaced with an ongoing registration process;

1.1.3 Participation

- Methods and tools for assessing children are merely perceived as formal ways of monitoring teachers. Therefore, there is an expressed need for a more thorough but flexible mechanism of assessing the children's needs, which will be focused on the real progress of the child, related not only to learning achievement, but also to their social and emotional aspects of development;
- The definition/guideline of inclusion could be used as the basis for revising program and professional standards

to incorporate high quality inclusive practices. Because existing preschool standards primarily reflect the needs of the general population of young children, improving the overall quality of an early childhood classroom is necessary, but might not be sufficient to address the individual needs of every child. A shared definition of inclusion could be used as the foundation for identifying dimensions of high quality inclusive programs and the professional standards and competencies of practitioners who work in these settings.

- Furthermore, the guideline/definition of inclusion could be used as an advocacy tool to influence institution accountability in resourcing for preschool.
- Measures should be taken to reduce the teacher/children ratio, in order to raise participation in the class of the existing enrolled children;
- Policies and procedures should be in place to ensure a more active participation of parents in the preschool life. The existing practices can be even more stimulated or establish new ones, based on the international best practices;
- Children themselves have little to say on their own perception of preschool life: it is recommended to establish a more child – friendly and sensitive preschool, where children should be at the center of it;
- In many cases the physical arrangements, furnishing, supplies and materials were the first milestone to overcome, in order to achieve inclusion. There is an immediate need to provide *the means* to accomplish the main function of children education and development in preschool;

1.1.4 Support

- Inclusion targeted interventions should encompass all actors that relate to children, families and communities that children are part;

- Inclusion is not going to happen unless a system of support is established for that purpose within the preschool institution and beyond them. Such a system must reflect a continuum of services/practices and supports that respond to the needs and characteristics of children with varying types of needs. The goal of such a system should be to provide infrastructure and resource opportunities, to support teachers and parents with methodology, training/development opportunities, to include incentives for inclusion, such as adjustments to staff-child ratios to ensure that program staff can adequately address the needs of every child and achieve the desired results related to inclusion.
- There is an immediate need for improved capacities of psycho – social staff and assistant teachers for children (regulations, staff, trainings, working guidelines, etc.), especially in support for those with special needs.

In conclusion, a ‘healthy preschool’ that promotes and practice inclusion should embed high quality program and instruction, a healthy physical environment, a supportive social space and strong community partnership.

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Annex - The semi-structured interview guidelines

Semi-structured guide for preschool teachers

- Generally, in which ways do the supporting/orientation documents that you use in your daily practice the principles of child inclusion?
- How can you describe the procedures and practices of children registration to meet the needs of the community? How do they ensure access of children with different needs?
- How can you describe the infrastructure (physical and materials available) in the framework of promoting the inclusion and meeting the needs of every child?
- How does the process of children needs identification take place? How are these needs met? How does the process of monitoring and evaluation of progress take place?
 - o Prompting questions: Who are the actors engaged in the process?
 - § What are the instruments?
 - § The facilitating process and inhibiting ones?
 - § The level of flexibility in adopting interventions, strategies?

Please describe positive/successful cases of child inclusion practices.

- From your experience, how does the interaction with colleagues, managers and other associates of the institution influences the implementation of the inclusion practices and their outcomes?
- How do you interact with parents- channels of communication, messages, and frequency of communication?

- Which are the actors outside of the kindergartens that you identify important to implement successful inclusion practices?
- How do you describe your needs for capacity development and types of activities appropriate to engaged into?
- To conclude, in the future, what needs to be improved/changed to facilitate the inclusion of children in the preschool setting and beyond?

Semi-structured guide for preschool managers/RED/EO representatives

- How is the principle/value of 'inclusion' communicated within and outside the institution you represent?
- How is inclusion reflected in the guiding and support documents the institution uses? How is it practiced in the daily activities of the institutions by all actors?
- How can you describe the approaches/activities you undertake to develop and motivate staff to establish/provide an 'inclusion' environment for children?
 - o Training activities
 - § Thematic selection
 - § Frequency
 - § Staff selection
 - o Monitoring/evaluation of interventions/activities that aim inclusion
 - o Support/motivation of staff (Incentives)
 - o Provision of support materials
 - o Other activities?
- How is the success or accomplishment of these activities facilitated or conditioned/challenged?
- How are the actors you mostly collaborate to ensure a supportive environment for the development of preschool children?

