

## Inclusive education: Proclamations or reality (primary school teachers' view)\*

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with 2 focal points of inclusive education, which is the integral segment of the current education reform in the Bosnia and Herzegovina: its position in various proclamations and in primary school teachers' reality, i.e., legislative aspects vs. everyday situation in primary schools. The survey research was carried out through the 5-level Likert scale, on the sample of 105 primary school teachers working in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton (specific for its education reform implementation). The aim was to examine the attitudes of the direct implementators of the education reform and the inclusive education (2003-2009)—primary school teachers, with particular reference to: teachers' acquaintance with inclusive education requirements; their involvement in its designing, planning and organization; relevant professional education; school preparedness for inclusive education; level of partnership with relevant subjects; and evaluation of the inclusive education implementation. The results obtained have indicated exactly the lack of the mentioned as the main issues of the implementation of inclusive education within compulsory primary schools in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. Therefore, this paper gives a kind of guidelines for the improvement of the inclusive education, derived directly from the teachers' everyday experiences, problems, proposals, notes and suggestions.

**Key words:** inclusive education; education reform; primary school teachers; proclamations; teachers' reality; partnership

### 1. Introduction

The education reform is a dynamic, complex, delicate and creative process, requesting prior screening of the current situation within education, continuous monitoring and prompt evaluation in order to obtain an overview of the reform intervention and implementation.

Divided and fragmented approach to the primary school reform in FBiH (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the lack of adequate pedagogical standards and criteria still have, as a consequence, a number of issues to be solved, one among them is particularly complex and delicate—inclusive education implying the well-being for both children with and without special needs.

In this paper, the author focused on the inclusive education as the integral part of the current education reform in HNC (Herzegovina-Neretva Canton), divided in 2 parts, specific for the start of the education reform in

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\* The case of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton (the part of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). This paper is based on a broader survey research made in the HNC in the first half of 2009.

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2004 and 2008 respectively and, thus, inclusion process<sup>1</sup>.

## **2. Inclusive education in proclamations**

Bearing in mind that many studies and books have been written on what inclusion and inclusive education mean and what benefits they bring not only to the children with special needs, but also to all the children in general, the author is not going to talk about it here, but rather present the results of a survey research on attitudes of primary school teachers in HNC, carried out in 2009.

The three documents represent the core of the education reform legislation in HNC. The author hereby will summarize the points relevant to the inclusion issues.

Prior to passing the Framework of Law on Primary and Secondary Education (2003), the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) document entitled *Education Reform* (2002) had been brought, with precise deadlines for accomplishment of the promises and many proclamations listed in it:

... incorporate the principle of inclusive education for children with special needs in all aspects of legislative and pedagogical reforms... ; ...including children with special needs at all levels of the education system... assess the number of children with special needs... in order to determine the challenges that impede their inclusion into the general classroom (deadline: December 2003)... develop a plan to educate community (including school boards, teachers, parents and students) with respect to the inclusion of children with special needs at all levels of the education system... (deadline: August 2005); ...develop and implement a program of pre-and in-service-teacher training for children with special needs at all levels of education... (deadline: 2003-2004); ...revise the current classification system for children with special needs to ensure that contemporary principles of inclusive education are followed... (deadline: 2003) (Council for the Peace Agreement Implementation, 2002)<sup>2</sup>.

The Framework of Law on Primary and General Secondary Education in BiH<sup>3</sup> (passed in June 2003) also emphasised that the implementation of this as well as single cantonal laws should begin not later than June 2004. So, organisational, staff and other prerequisites should have been accomplished in a year only. Here are some parts of that law:

Equal access and equal possibilities imply the assurance of equal conditions and opportunities for all, to begin and continue their further education... (Art. 3); Children with special needs shall be educated in regular schools and according to their individual needs. An individual program, adapted to their possibilities and abilities shall be made for each student... planning and working methods, profile, training, professional development of personnel working with children with special needs shall be regulated more closely by entity, cantons... (Art. 19); The school promotes and develops permanent and dynamic partnership of school, parents and local community... concerning all the issues important for realization of school's function, interests and student's needs (Art. 37) (Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2003)<sup>4</sup>.

The law clearly lists the requests, as it always does. But, school reality says something else. The underlined (by author herself) syntagmas speak for themselves.

The same is more or less stressed in the so-called Concept of the Nine-year Primary Education, issued by the

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<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the education reform issues are interwoven in this paper in the context of their relevance to the inclusive education implementation in HNC.

<sup>2</sup> As far as the author knows, the promised has never been accomplished in HNC, and that will be evident from the results of the author's research.

<sup>3</sup> The law points out 2 main issues: Compulsory primary education lasts nine years and children start it with 6 years computed. Furthermore, it introduces inclusion, i.e., inclusive education in the schools.

<sup>4</sup> As it can be seen, the law emphasizes the co-operation of all for the children's/pupils' well-being.

Ministry of Education of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2004.

There are many questions yet to be posed regarding the written in proclamations and done in school/educational reality. People still have been implementing top-down instead of down-top model of education reform.

Many promises had been given. Were they realised?—It is still a rhetorical question. However, people of the reform tends to forget that education reform and hence the inclusive education, being its integral part, does not imply revolution but rather evolution of education system. Therefore, it is important to study what is happening in schools in order to understand how they are coping with education (and political) changes and how they are succeeding to overcome everyday challenges and difficulties they face with every day.

### **3. Methodology**

The aim of the author's research<sup>5</sup> was to examine the attitudes of primary school teachers in HNC towards the implementation of the inclusive education, through their everyday experiences in school setting.

The survey research was carried out on the strata sample (teachers in urban, suburban and rural schools, teachers of the first, second and third classes, length of working in school, etc.) of 105 primary school teachers (N=105) in HNC, through the 5-point Likert scale (35 items).

The author will hereby present just a few of the most indicative issues resulted from this research<sup>6</sup>, thus giving an insight into the inclusive education quotidianity in the primary schools in HNC.

### **4. Inclusive education on the crossroad of the written and done in HNC**

When reflecting on education reform through “should-is” comparison, Gudjons (1994) emphasized that, “reform of the whole structure failed” (Gudjons, 1994, p. 119), so, “today rules statement of integration” which comprises individual (“What is desired”), institutional (“What is used”) and political (“What is required”) component. The same can be said for the inclusive education in HNC, according to the results of this research.

Minima paedagogica (Hentig, 1994) said that primary school cannot and must not be “just a teaching place; it should be a setting for living, learning and experiencing, as well” (Richtlinien, 1985; Gudjons, 1994, p. 120), people should pose a question that whether those who had signed many declarations, contracts, etc., had taken this into consideration, especially when reflecting on inclusive education.

Different researches (Henderson, 1997; Monsen & Haug, 1998; Bevanda, 2004; Pehar, 2007) show that many prerequisites are indispensable for the education reform and, thus, the inclusive education itself. If they are not created, they can be easily transformed into many obstacles to the reform at different levels (educand, teaching personnel, collaboration in a broader societal setting, organisational and legislative).

Table 1 shows that more than 80% of primary teachers in HNC are neither prepared nor educated enough for the implementation of the inclusion in their schools<sup>7</sup>. This becomes even more indicative when more than a half (58.09%) of teachers who attended seminars and workshops, held in the last 6 years, claim not to be prepared for the inclusive education. Any further comment would be unnecessary. It is also indicative that almost a half of primary school teachers in HNC (49.52%) strongly agree that schools are not prepared for the inclusive education. Their

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<sup>5</sup> So far there has not been any research focused on the attitudes and opinions of the primary teachers on inclusive education in HNC.

<sup>6</sup> The integral research is available by the author of this text for all the interested.

<sup>7</sup> “I don't think that the prerequisites (in-service training of teaching staff, infrastructure, equipment, professional assistants for pupils with special needs, etc.) have been accomplished to make inclusive education successful”, said a teacher, one of the author's respondents.

opinion is also shared by more than a third of teachers (37.14%). There is no wonder that more than 90% of teachers clearly say that they need additional education and training to be able to work with pupils with special needs<sup>8</sup>.

**Table 1 Teachers' education and school preparedness for the inclusive education implementation**

Attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusive education	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
I think that teachers are not prepared (educated) enough for the inclusive education implementation.	49	46.66	41	39.04	6	5.71	9	8.57	0	0.00
I am completely prepared for the inclusive education through seminars and workshops organised in the last 6 years.	2	1.90	18	17.14	24	22.85	31	29.52	30	28.57
I regard school is neither materially nor organisationally prepared for the inclusive education implementation.	52	49.52	39	37.14	9	8.57	5	4.76	0	0.00
I need additional education in order to work with pupils with special needs in regular school.	46	43.8	51	48.57	6	5.71	0	0.00	1	0.95

The author opens Pandora's box when talking about collaboration representing another crucial issue in the inclusive education implementation within regular school system in HNC.

Table 2 shows that 46.66% of teachers claim that partnership between schools and parents is insufficient. A third of the participants in this research strongly agree with them.

More than a half of primary school teachers have no support or help by educational advisors and Institute for Education in the implementation of inclusive education (35.23% strongly agree and 33.33% agree with this).

Although 90% of teachers need appropriately qualified assistants in their classroom, more than 80% of them do not have such a support in their everyday work with pupils with special needs (among them, 53.33% do not have at all).

**Table 2 Cooperation of the primary school teachers and the relevant subject**

Attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusive education	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
I have no support by educational advisors and Institute of Education in inclusive education implementation.	37	35.23	35	33.33	19	18.09	11	10.47	3	2.85
Partnership between school and parents is not sufficient in the inclusive education implementation.	35	33.33	49	46.66	17	16.19	3	2.85	1	0.95
I have no assistant although he/she will be indispensable in my work with pupils with special needs.	51	48.57	35	33.33	9	8.57	5	4.76	1	0.95
The appropriately qualified assistant who would be helping the teacher is indispensable in the classes where there is a pupil with special need.	56	53.33	39	37.14	6	5.71	4	3.80	0	0.00

Table 3 shows that slightly more than 40% of teachers agree (42.85%) and other 40% strongly agree that they have been neglected in the planning and implementing the inclusive education in the schools. A half of the

<sup>8</sup> The respondents of this research said: "We need additional education through practical training and visiting other similar schools ..."; "We need more practical education to work with children with special needs ...".

teachers claim that inclusive education has been imposed by ministers and Institute for Education<sup>9</sup>.

Therefore, more than 40% of teachers regard that some individuals misuse the concept of inclusion for the purpose of their own interests and profit<sup>10</sup>.

**Table 3 Teachers' involvement in the inclusive education preparation**

Attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusive education	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Teachers have not been asked about the inclusive education implementation at all.	42	40.0	45	42.85	11	10.47	8	7.61	0	0.00
I regard that ministers and Institute for Education have imposed inclusive education onto us.	27	25.71	27	25.71	34	32.38	14	13.33	3	2.85
I think that inclusive education has been used for a purpose of personal interests of certain individuals thus neglecting crucial issues of school and pupils with special needs.	17	16.19	32	30.47	38	36.19	17	16.19	1	0.95

However, teachers evaluate the inclusive education implementation in regular schools with passing grades (see Table 4): good (3) (44.76%) and sufficient (2) (34.28%), while 8.57% gave: insufficient (1).

**Table 4 Teachers' evaluation of the inclusive education implementation**

Attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusive education	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	5		4		3		2		1	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
I would give the following mark to the inclusive education implementation in our regular schools.	1	0.95	10	9.52	47	44.76	36	34.28	9	8.57

Table 5 shows that 82.84% of primary teachers (of which 43.80% strongly) are worried about what will happen with pupils with special education needs when they get into higher classes (second and third cycle of primary education) where the teachers within individual subjects are neither informed nor prepared/trained to work with this pupils' population.

**Table 5 Inclusive education and middle school**

Attitudes of primary school teachers towards the inclusive education (generally)	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
I am worried about what will happen to the pupils with special needs when they begin to attend middle school, since middle school teachers are not trained to implement inclusive education.	46	43.80	41	39.04	15	14.28	3	2.85	-	0.00

<sup>9</sup> "Inclusion is imposed onto schools and teachers, it has been implemented too fast, without concerning current situation in schools, and all of these in order to make a kind of the experiment ..."; "No one has ever asked us—teachers or parents, being in direct contacts with children, how to plan and carry out inclusive education. It has been imposed by some people who are too far from children's reality, who cannot understand children's abilities, needs, or at least, do not want to do so"—notes made by the respondents.

<sup>10</sup> "Let's be honest: Children with special needs and schools have been used for profit of certain individuals in our country", one of many similar notes of the respondents.

## 5. Discussion

Originally, inclusive education was offered as a protest, a call for a radical change to the fabric of schooling. Increasingly, it is being used as a means for explaining and protecting the status quo. (Graham & Slee, 2008)

The concept of integration and inclusion are often used interchangeably without their clear understanding in the school and legislation. Although inclusive education has its *raison d'être* in the education reform in BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and in general, it is often misused by those ("armchair" ministers, counsellors) having mere notion of its complex, profound, delicate and thorough meaning, while the teachers and relevant subjects still remain on its margins. Increasingly, it is being used as a means for explaining and protecting the status quo (Graham & Slee, 2008). Therefore, interdisciplinary and holistic approach, dialogue and meeting, understanding and collaboration, mutual acceptance and respect of all the relevant subjects represent "*sine qua non*" of the education reform and inclusion as well. Inclusive education implies the appropriate screening, planning, preparing, organising, implementing, monitoring, (continuous) evaluating and feedback.

As the research showed, the legislation in vigor as well as other documents relevant to education reform and thus to inclusive education, did not correspond to the real situation in the primary schools throughout the Canton (and even the country, as well). Moreover, they did not correspond to or take into consideration the true situation at the time when they were passed by those who had never entered the schools and classrooms; who had not had a sheer notion of the basic guidelines of education science; who had never started from the children's needs and who had not considered teachers' opinions on school everyday issues.

Primary schools in HNC were not prepared for the inclusive education (in terms of their internal organization, personnel and material resources, partnership with the relevant subjects). It was imposed onto them over the night. There is no wonder that primary school teachers in HNC have negative attitude towards the inclusive education<sup>11</sup>. Barriers to its implementation are: lack of qualified staff/assistants at school level; lack of pre- and in- service training of teachers to work in inclusive setting; lack of cooperation and fragmentation in laws<sup>12</sup>; inadequate facilities; overcrowded classes, ... ; and last but not the least, quite a negative public attitude.

On the other hand, many children with special needs<sup>13</sup> still remain isolated and marginalised in the country despite different projects implemented in this field. Therefore, prompt and synergic performance at micro, mezo and macro level, i.e., at the level of the educand (including his/her family), teaching staff, school, local community, and the entire society is "*conditio sine qua non*" for the inclusive education improvement.

This also implies that people should reflect upon the regular classroom not as it is but as it should and could be. Therefore, are they aiming at inclusive education or at mere integration? With integration, the child fits into the school. On the other hand, with inclusion, the school adjusts to the child. Dare they talk about the inclusive education (viewing a school as a problem, not a child) or a kind of integration education (viewing a child as a problem, not a school)? Or rather, should they move, gradually, from integration towards inclusive education?! The message is rather clear—More attention should be paid to children and their needs as well to those working

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<sup>11</sup> Crossing the relevant variables and teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, through chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ), showed that statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) appears in negative attitude, i.e., teachers from smaller towns as well as those with over ten-year professional practice in school, have more negative attitude towards this issue. On the other hand, teachers' gender, degree of education and identification with school they work in, did not show any statistically significant difference.

<sup>12</sup> Education remains under the cantonal authorities. Each canton in Bosnia and Herzegovina has its own Ministry of Education and the differences in governance, laws and education standards can be noted between each.

<sup>13</sup> For example, in the HNC there has not still been any methodology, modalities or criteria fixed to detect children with learning disabilities, gifted children and autistic children.

directly with teachers. Furthermore, the point is not to evaluate the children only, but the community itself, the policy and the curricula as well. Time will show whether it is possible to achieve it successfully. However, it seems all is done in a hurry, “pro formae”.

It is clear that inclusive education without appropriately trained teaching staff, without support, without school and teachers' prior preparation, without the commitment of all the involved subjects, without staff (in-service) development, without clear vision and free division of the ideas, opinions and experiences, i.e., without partnership, cannot work. As the research has showed, the crucial issues of the implementation of the inclusive education within the regular schools in HNC result from the lack of many of the mentioned previously in this paper. However, the extent and the success of its implementation will be critically uttered in the years still to come, through the benefits for the schools, teachers, parents and, most of all, children with and without special education needs.

## **6. Instead of the conclusion**

You can only see things clearly with your heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye. (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 1990, p. 72)

When met the adults for the first time, the Little Prince wondered “grown-ups are decidedly very odd ... and will never understand the significance of this ...”. This is a kind of metaphor of the current situation of the inclusion education implementation within the primary school reform in HNC. The grown-ups are really strange especially when dealing with children.

When a grown-up man addressed to the Universe, in the well-known poem of Stephen Crane<sup>14</sup>: “Sir, I exist!”. “However”, replied the Universe, “The fact has not created in me a sense of obligation” (responsibility, either, the author of this paper takes freedom to add it).

Haven't people been doing the same with the inclusion process in the regular school system? Has inclusive education still been just a proclamation or reality internalised in people's hearts and minds?

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<sup>14</sup> The author quoted here the entire Crane's poem *A Man Said to the Universe*.

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