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IN-SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMMES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SERBIA – OFFER AND IMPLEMENTATION

Abstract

The initial education and in-service training of all educators, particularly teachers, play a vital role in strengthening competences necessary for implementing inclusive educational practice. This paper analyses offered and implemented in-service training programmes for educators in the field of inclusive education or, more precisely, for working with children with disabilities in the period 2012-2014. The findings of the analysis indicate that the programmes aimed at all categories of children with disabilities are prevalent; most of the programmes address teaching and learning strategies and are intended for various profiles of educators at different education levels; approximately three quarters of the offered programmes were implemented. The paper also tackles unresolved issues about strengthening competences for implementing inclusive practice.

Key words: inclusive education, in-service training programmes, Serbia

Introduction

As part of the education reform taking place in Serbia since 2002, the education authorities prioritised the wider access to education and the creation of conditions for providing quality education for all students. Inclusive education is adopted as a concept which can contribute to the achievement of these goals and as an approach ensuring that the needs of all students in the mainstream education system are met and all children are provided with the opportunities to learn and prepare for life.

The principles of inclusive education in Serbia have been enshrined in the legal regulations since 2009. Apart from the general principles defining the equal right to quality education for all individuals, the Law (*Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja*, 2009) also defines specific procedures and measures ensuring the conditions for unhindered learning and development of children/students: provision of additional support to those needing it; individual education plans; adaptation of the achievement standards; removal of physical and communication barriers; introduction of pedagogical assistants; changes in the modes of financing institutions supporting the inclusion of children into the education system, etc. (*Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja*, 2009).

The implementation of inclusive education in Serbia started in the school year 2010/11. Following the introduction of the inclusive practice, schools and teachers were faced with different demands and changing roles. Teachers, as the key actors in education, are expected to have competences related to understanding and accepting individual characteristics of students as well as creating adequate conditions for learning and social participation for all children.

This paper provides the analysis of in-service training programmes for educators in the field of inclusive education, more precisely, programmes aimed at working with children with disabilities. While choosing this group of children we had in

mind the fact that until the introduction of inclusive education, teachers in Serbia rarely had the opportunity to work with this category of children and were therefore faced with an entirely new experience.

Teachers' competences for working in inclusive settings

The initial education and in-service training of all educators, particularly teachers, play a vital role in strengthening competences necessary for implementing inclusive educational practice. However, it seems that there are certain difficulties in this segment of the education system in Serbia, which is supported by the results of numerous studies conducted in the last few years. The majority of pre-school teachers, class and subject teachers think they are not adequately prepared to work in inclusive settings and that they are not sufficiently trained to provide students with disabilities with adequate support in learning and social participation (Đerić & Pavlović, 2011; Gašić Pavišić & Gutvajn, 2011; Gutvajn, 2014; Procena kapaciteta i potreba učitelja za razvoj inkluzivnog obrazovanja, 2010).

Such results come as no surprise given the fact that the topic of inclusive education is not adequately addressed during the initial education of pre-school teachers, class and subject teachers. For instance, the analysis of the study programmes intended for class teachers showed that in the majority of cases there was only one course relevant for inclusive education (which is most frequently related to the work with children with disabilities and which predominantly employs the so-called "defectology" (medical) approach) and that there is no cross-curricular approach to inclusive education (Macura-Milovanović, Gera & Kovačević, 2011). The results of a comprehensive study carried out at the time of the introduction of inclusive education corroborate these findings and indicate that barely half of the teachers (out of 811) had a special course at which they acquired knowledge about how to work with children with disabilities and that only one sixth of them think they received adequate knowledge for working with these students (Procena kapaciteta..., 2010). Besides, almost half of the examined teachers had no training in this field but still most of them expressed the readiness and the need to develop professionally, particularly addressing the topics such as individualisation in the teaching process, the developmental characteristics of children with disabilities and individual education plans.

The situation with subject teachers is even more critical since their initial education takes place at the faculties devoted to a particular academic discipline where the share of teacher training courses is generally very small. It was not until 2012 that teachers became obliged to attend courses providing the minimum of 30 ECTS credits from psychological-pedagogical and didactical-methodological fields and 6 ECTS credits from practical training.

Alongside initial education, in-service training is a segment of professional development of educators that should lead to the development of competences for inclusive education. The results of the studies conducted in the past indicate that regardless of the field addressed within in-service training, there are certain problems when it comes to attending seminars. For instance, in the course of in-service planning, the needs of the educators the professional development programmes (seminars) are intended for are not adequately met (Marinković, 2010, as cited in Kundačina & Stamatović, 2012); the approach to the addressed problems

is generalised; the interests of the seminar participants vary; financial means are scarce, and so on (Kundačina & Stamatović, 2012). Consequently, similar difficulties can be expected in this segment of in-service training aimed at working with children with disabilities.

Important changes in Serbia in the field of the professional development date back ten years, when attending at least 100 hours of in-service training programmes within five years became mandatory (Pravilnik o stalnom stručnom usavršavanju..., 2004). In the meantime, the new Rules have introduced certain changes such as the obligation of educators to obtain 120 points (hours) of professional development, more precisely 100 points for attending accredited programmes and 20 points for participation at professional meetings (Pravilnik o stalnom stručnom usavršavanju..., 2012).

Following an open competition, the Institute for the Improvement of Education accredits professional development programmes and publishes them in the *Catalogue of Professional Development Programmes for Teachers, Pre-school Teachers and School Support Staff*. In the beginning the Catalogue was published every year and since 2012 every second year. The Catalogue is the official material based on which educators select of in-service training programmes (seminars) they want to attend. Educators rarely apply individually for attending of in-service training programmes but seminars are usually organised for all school staff. Local governments (municipalities) are responsible for financing in-service education and training. However, due to the harsh economic conditions in the country, in-service training financing is fraught with difficulties, which prevents educators from selecting those programmes which suit their personal professional needs or the needs of the school they work at.

Characteristics of in-service training programmes for working with children with disabilities

The analysis of in-service training programmes for working with children with disabilities has been undertaken in order to study their characteristics. The analysis covers the programmes accredited for the school years 2012/13 and 2013/14 (Katalog programa..., 2012). We have chosen to analyse the programmes from these school years because they were the most recent ones and because this Catalogue currently offers the greatest number of programmes for working with children with disabilities (6.99%).

The data were collected using the content analysis technique, while the content analysis protocol was relied on as an instrument. Several units of analysis were extracted: the percentage of programmes for working with children with disabilities in the overall number of accredited programmes; the target group of a programme in terms of whether its content refers to working with children with various kinds of disabilities or children with a single disability; the educators the programmes are intended for; the timeframe needed for a programme to be carried out. The description of a programme in the Catalogue was treated as a unit of context; in other words, it served as a whole within which the abovementioned units were analysed.

Programmes for working with children with disabilities have been included in every issue of the Catalogue of Professional Development Programmes in the past

ten years, between the school years 2006/07 and 2015/16. The share of programmes aimed at working with this category of children in the overall number of accredited programmes ranges between 3.6% and 7%, in different school years (Zavod za unapredjivanje obrazovanja i vaspitanja, 2015). The percentage of these programmes in the total number of accredited programmes has obviously seen a continuous increase of about 1% on an annual basis over the period between 2009/10 and 2014/15 (which, however, stagnated in the 2011/12 school year). Moreover, the findings show that the percentage of such programmes in the overall number of accredited programmes has ranged between 6% and 7% in the period between 2010/11 and 2014/15. The said trend can be accounted for by the following factors: the legislative changes which were introduced in 2009 and which have helped underpin the inclusive approach to education; the introduction of this approach to schools in 2010; the fact that in the 2010/11 school year the Minister of Education set down priority areas for professional development over three-year periods, inclusive education being one of the priorities.

With regard to how general a programme is – whether it is aimed at all categories of children with disabilities or only children with a single disability – the findings of the analysis indicate that there are twice as many general (48) programmes compared to the specific ones (22). An in-depth analysis of the content of the general programmes has made it evident that they encompass a wide range of various issues. Among the most frequent ones are the following: legislation; general tenets of the inclusive approach; stereotypes about inclusive education; characteristics of children with disabilities; pedagogical profiles of students, individual education plans; teaching and learning strategies; cooperation with parents and other stakeholders. Among specific programmes the prevailing ones are those intended for working with children with various learning and behavioural disabilities and difficulties such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, hyperactivity, attention disorders as well as children with autism.

Considering the target group, the accredited programmes for working with children with disabilities are intended for educators at all levels of education. Namely, of the total of 70 accredited programmes, most of them are intended for educators working in primary schools (68), followed by educators in pre-school facilities (50), secondary schools (39) and adult education schools (15). All the programmes cater for different profiles of educators (70).

The largest number of programmes for working with children with disabilities last for two days (33), while fewer programmes last one day (26). There were fewest programmes which take three days to be carried out (11).

Over a two-year period, between the school years 2012/13 and 2013/14, 380 seminars addressing children with disabilities were conducted in Serbia. These were attended by 9,458 educators. By way of comparison, there were 3,600 attendees over the period spanning 2006, 2007 and 2008 (Ministarstvo prosvete, 2008). This means that there has been an almost threefold increase in the number of the educators who have attended these seminars in the past two years.

Of the 70 programmes for working with children with disabilities, which were on offer in the Catalogue of Professional Development Programmes for the school years 2012/13 and 2013/14, 54 were carried out at least once, while 16 programmes were not realised at all. It should be noted that the number of programmes carried

out was higher in the given two-year period than the number of programmes which were on offer in each of the past ten years (the exception being the Catalogue published for the 2011/12 school year). The frequency of carrying out individual programmes varies considerably. The greatest number of programmes were realised up to five times (34): once or twice – 10 and between three and five times – 24. Twenty programmes were carried out more than five times, while 12 programmes were carried out more than ten times. The most frequent programme was the one which was realised 29 times.

Considering the fact that most accredited programmes were carried out, it is not reasonable to expect that the characteristics of the realised programmes considerably deviate from the already mentioned characteristics of programmes. The findings of the analysis go to prove this to a great degree. Even if the analysis of the characteristics of realised programmes were limited to 12 most frequently realised programmes, in other words, those which have been carried out between 11 and 29 times in the last two years, no significant diversions from the already outlined characteristics are recordable.

Concluding observations

In the period between the school years 2010/11 and 2014/15 the number of in-service training programmes related to working with children with disabilities has been stable, varying between 6% and 7% of the overall number of in-service training programmes on offer for all fields. The programmes aimed at children with various kinds of disabilities prevail over the ones targeting children with a single disability. The majority of accredited programmes are intended for various profiles of educators at different levels of education. Three quarters of all of these programmes were carried out over a two-year period. The topics of the majority of professional development programmes in this field, both accredited and realised, are focused on learning and teaching strategies. Considering the fact that the results of empirical research indicate that potential seminar attendees (pre-school teachers, primary and secondary school teachers) hold these topics to be a priority (Kundačina & Stamatović, 2012), it can be assumed that in-service training programmes aimed at working with children with disabilities are, to a certain degree, consistent with the needs of those for whom the programmes have been designed.

However, a question can be raised as to why educators still think they have not been adequately trained to work in this area. There are number of possible answers. First of all, it is highly unlikely that the problems brought about by the quality of initial education can be entirely resolved through in-service training. Besides, regardless of the rich offer of programmes on various topics and with prevailing didactic content, it seems that the needs of educators in this field have to be further explored, as well as their satisfaction with the existing programmes on offer. Bearing this in mind, the existing programmes should be revised. Likewise, it is necessary to establish the directions along which new programmes will be developing. Furthermore, based on the analysis one gets the impression that there is more focus on getting acquainted with various challenges in working with children with disabilities than on developing the necessary skills for working in this field. And much as professional development provides one with the opportunity to choose programmes according to individual needs and interests, it is questionable whether

this really happens in practice given the problems of financing such types of professional development. Finally, the total number of the delivered seminars and involved participants does not provide an insight into involvement of individual participants by the number and sort of seminars. Further efforts in terms of raising the level of preparedness for inclusive education should be aimed at changing initial teacher education in line with the requirements of the inclusive policy and practice, as well as at ensuring an environment in which various forms of continuing professional development are available and supported.

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