

## Beyond stigmatization of children with difficulties in learning

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**Abstract:** In the Albanian schools settings does not exist religious discrimination, neither gender discrimination, but there exists a discrimination, as unfair against children called “difficulty”. The children who drop out of school are by far less numerous compared with those who start school, but who are not properly treated, so that they can progress the same as other children. The object of this article is the children with learning difficulties, the causes of these difficulties. One of the reasons, among many others, why this secret dropping out of school happens is also difficulty in learning that quite a few number of pupils have, which are not known to everyone, and consequently are not treated by all the teachers, or by the other people who surround the child, condemning him to a school failure and slim chances to succeed later in life. It has often been pointed out that to define the causes of these learning difficulties it is not an easy task. A large number of factors intermingle bringing about the hell of learning for some children. If it is impossible to intervene in different organic damages (even they in many cases can be prevented though), at least those depending on people can be avoided by offering a favorable environment, showing fondness towards them and making efforts to help these children. Above all, the authors have to be willing, to know and be able to do this as parents and precisely as teachers.

**Key words:** comprehensiveness; comprehensive culture; practice and policies; learning difficulties

### 1. Introduction

There is neither religious nor gender discrimination in Albanian schools settings. But there is one big discrimination and injustice towards children. It is called “difficulty”. The children who drop out of school are by far less numerous compared with those who start school but are not properly treated, so that they can progress the same as other children.

Actually, they have been abandoned and have dropped out of school, even though not physically.

Proceeding from this phenomenon, the authors can talk about unequal opportunities within a class of pupils (Llmbiri, 2005).

One of the reasons, among many others, why this secret dropping out of school happens is having difficulties in learning. Many children have such difficulties, which are not known by everyone. As a consequence these are not treated by teachers, or by other people who surround them, condemning them to school failure having slim chances to succeed later in life.

This is the problem the authors will talk about in this paper.

For this reason, a lot of surveys have been used in many schools, questionnaires have been addressed to

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teachers, principals and regional educational directorate inspectors. They have also been interviewed along with the parents of pupils with little progress at school and the pupils themselves. The results of many projects carried out in Albania on limited abilities and comprehensiveness in education, have been consulted, too.

## **2. Children with learning disabilities in all inclusive education**

He/she is lazy—This is the most common expression frequently uttered either by the parents or the teachers when the child does not achieve the desired results at school. In this way, parents and teachers are convinced that it is enough for the child to try harder and this can bring good results. They never think further to find out what exactly prevents their children or the students to achieve high results in school subjects, such as reading, writing, mathematics, etc.. They fail to understand that everything has its own limitations and the lack of results might speak for a variety of reasons, such as the lack of the student's involvement in the learning process, his inability, his necessary maturity to succeed as well as a talentless teacher or the inappropriate family or school environment.

There has been written and said a lot concerning the treatment of the children with difficulties in learning, but what they share according to their expressed thoughts and ideas is: There must exist the will to help these children, as well as the conviction that, these children, besides their limited abilities to learn (part of their own problem), have the same rights to be educated like other children.

The difficulties in learning are consequences of a series of shocks which appear as difficulties in language acquisition and use, in reading, writing, perceiving, memory, mathematics abilities, etc., as results of the malfunctioning of the central nervous system that can appear during the whole man's life.

In many studies, it is acknowledged that 5%-10% of the children have difficulties with learning. In Albania, it cannot speak of an exact figure of diagnosed cases, because most of the time, children with learning disabilities have been included in the group of the children with limited abilities or mental deficiency. Actually, the difficulties with learning have nothing to do with the mental deficiency. On the contrary, there are studies speak for normal intellectual ability over children with difficulties in learning. Though their results are lower than those expected, they reveal inability in one field and ability in another.

This overview of the problem and a complete ignorance on the part of the teacher are the reason that many children though physically present among other children, are left behind at the bottom of the classroom.

The learning disability is not a static phenomenon that the students have or not, it is a developing dynamic state which asks for a multidimensional definition.

Through a different approach to the problem of the learning disabilities beyond the static understanding as a learning issue, the authors pass to a didactic form of assessment, from a didactic assertion of deficiencies to a didactic assertion of abilities.

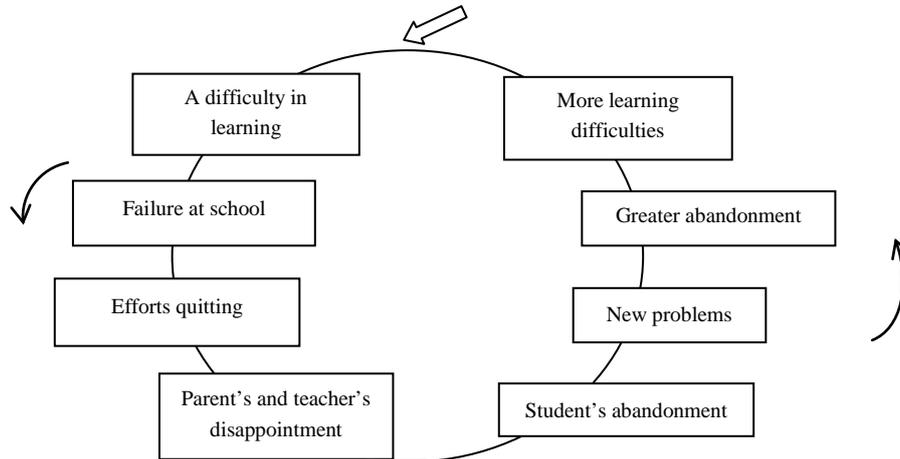
If the difficulties in learning are not known (unfortunately, it happens not rarely), and the children with learning disabilities will not be accepted and helped (see Figure 1) this will lead to the phenomenon that a certain difficulty in learning will be the cause of serious difficulties bringing about new bigger problems continuously.

To avoid this, it is required that all those around the children, in particular, the teachers have to try hard to help the integration and comprehensiveness of the children with learning disabilities.

Comprehensiveness is considered to be the most favorable means:

- (1) to create equal chances for the education of the children;
- (2) to avoid the discriminating attitude to children with limited abilities;

- (3) to bring into evidence personal values of everyone, an emancipated society needs so much;
- (4) to facilitate their social integration as adults in the future.



**Figure 1 Vicious circle of learning difficulties**

Comprehensiveness is an example of the resources of the democratic societies including Albania as well, and it is given to help fight better against inequality and better take into consideration these differences starting with the legal framework.

Though rather late, the Normative Provision of the year 2002 marked an achievement and freed the passage to the comprehensive education in Albania. In this provision, for the first time and clearly, the contemporary tendency is revealed for the integration of the children with learning disabilities in common schools and the comprehensive education is proclaimed a necessity.

According to the Normative Provision:

- (1) The comprehensive activity of the school in all aims at the possibility of equal chances given to every student. None of the children must be expelled from the compulsory education despite their abilities.
- (2) The students with limited abilities have the right to be educated in public schools for 1 to 2 persons per class.
- (3) The educational work at school should take into consideration the difficulties and the learning pace of each child.
- (4) The teacher has to know and value well the psychology of every student and cooperate with a psychologist and social worker, too.
- (5) The teachers, who work in classes part of which are students with learning disabilities, benefit a reduction of 3 students in their class, a reduction of 2 teaching classes in their week teaching load and an extra payment for every 4 classes.

In a declarative level, the legal framework the Normative Provision in power represents is valued as advanced and democratic and compared with the standards of the developed countries. A question rises: At what rate does this legal framework put into practice in the Albanian educational terrain. Despite the efforts made so far, yet there is a lot to be done, it is still far from a complete real quality of the learning chances and far from the creation of a school for all.

### 3. A school for all, a school that teaches

A school for all is a school which receives all the students without being selective.

A school for all is the place of global education aiming at the development of the students' capacities at their maximum.

A school for all helps realize a real integration of different children by managing differences, putting forward objectives not identical for all, getting rid of the normative system and implementing a flexible system in conformity with the individual pace.

A lot of work has been done so far to help the transformation of the Albanian school into a school for all. The idea of all inclusion is embraced, objectives referring to different levels are being used with the aim to include and help everyone achieve success. However, here and there still exists the influence of the normative system and people have to accept the fact that not all the teachers know and are able to realize the all inclusion. To achieve this, to acknowledge the differences and help the students overcome them, first of all, the teacher should know and diagnose the differences, in collaboration with different specialists. According to Ainscow and Twedle model, the helping model has to be as follow (see Figure 2):

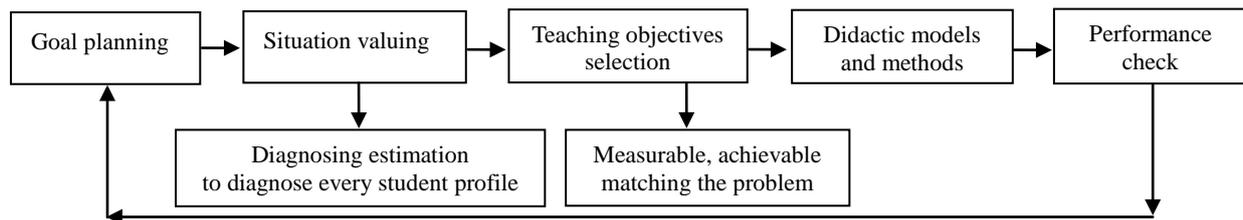


Figure 2 Ainscow & Twedle model

Based on the achieved results, other alternative trainings are offered. World literature offers various tests to estimate students' abilities in reading, content understanding, word relation, mathematics abilities, etc.. It is worth revealing that whether the teachers in general to define students abilities in different fields base it only on experience.

Recently, the authors have obtained good results in diagnosing children with learning disabilities with the help of the non-governmental organizations "Save the Children" and "Help the Life", supported by the Ministry of Education. The implementation of these projects almost all over the country resulted in:

- (1) Identifying 247 children with learning disabilities in 6 regions during 2008-2009;
- (2) 82 children have been identified within schools and they have been helped through individual educational programs;
- (3) During 2008-2009, 242 children with learning disabilities are attending, making progress, being promoted to higher classes in schools where the methods of all inclusion have been used;
- (4) During 2008-2009, 113 children with learning disabilities attend the kindergartens assisted by individual educational programs.

The achievements of these projects are evident but they do not give solution to the problem of diagnosing and in particular the comprehensiveness of all the children since they have been implemented in about 50 schools and only 500 teachers have been part of them.

### 3.1 Teacher formation, the main goal of a school for all

One of the most important goals for an effective school to be open to differences is the teacher formation. The teachers act as interlocutors between the learning environment and the families, they support and help children to achieve success in compliance with their peculiarities, aiming at obtaining the basic habits and skills and above all helping them to be self-valued and accepted by others.

In her effort to analyze the personality distinctions of a successful teacher concerning the children with learning disabilities inclusion, Olson and her collaborators have stressed: Children’s acceptance for what they are, their ability to observe, their awareness of their role, the cooperation with other supportive factors, the devotion to help all in inclusion, the creation of the possibilities for suitability, the ability to use strategies, methods and techniques matching everyone’s peculiarities (Olson, Chalmers & Hoover, 1997).

According to the studies committed so far related with teachers’ attitude to the issue of all inclusion, it has been noticed that the teachers of the comprehensive education are of the opinion that the inclusion of the children with special needs in their classes is of great responsibility, because the knowledge of difficulties in learning is limited and the cooperation with the teachers of special education is not realized properly as well as the lack of other support factors (Cornoldi, Terreni, Srugs & Mastropieri, 1998).

Through talks organized with teachers of different levels concerning the issues of all inclusion, it has been noticed that: The teachers of primary schools are more willing to help; the opinions in favor and against are not defined by the gender; the most successful teachers are more inclined to accept all inclusion; but there still exist problems concerning the large number of students in classes, for example, the lack of the supportive personnel and all inclusion training, as well as the non-accepting attitude of parents.

The authors think that the theoretical and practical training of the teachers in dealing with the problems of inability and learning disabilities is crucial. It is now 10 years since the subject of special education has become part of the curricula of the Albanian universities, which train pre-school and elementary school teachers. The University of Vlora has recently established a special branch of the differentiated pedagogy. But this is not enough to meet the needs in knowing, diagnosing and training all the children with learning disabilities, besides a small number of these graduated teachers are employed in the education system. Their involvement in projects will be of great value. It is for this reason that the young teachers and other trained in-service have answered positively the questions “Do you know the legal provisions for children with learning disabilities?” and “Are you in favor of children with learning disabilities comprehensiveness?”.

Many in-service teachers have answered positively to the question “Do you have the necessary knowledge to work with children with learning disabilities?”, 69 out of 80 thus 86.2%, only 11 that is 13.8% gave a negative answer to the above question (see Figure 3).

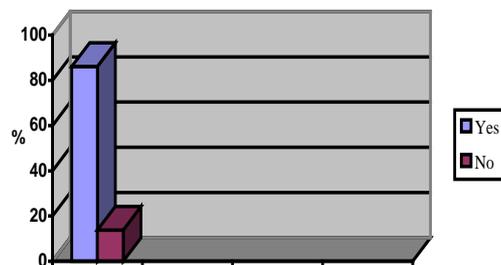


Figure 3 Answers to the question “Do you have the necessary knowledge to work with children with learning disabilities?”

While to the question “What has helped you to deal with children with learning disabilities?” ((1) professional experience; (2) collaboration with families; (3) collaboration with different specialists), the answers were as follows: 70% professional experience, 62% collaboration with families and 25% collaboration with different specialists (see Figure 4).

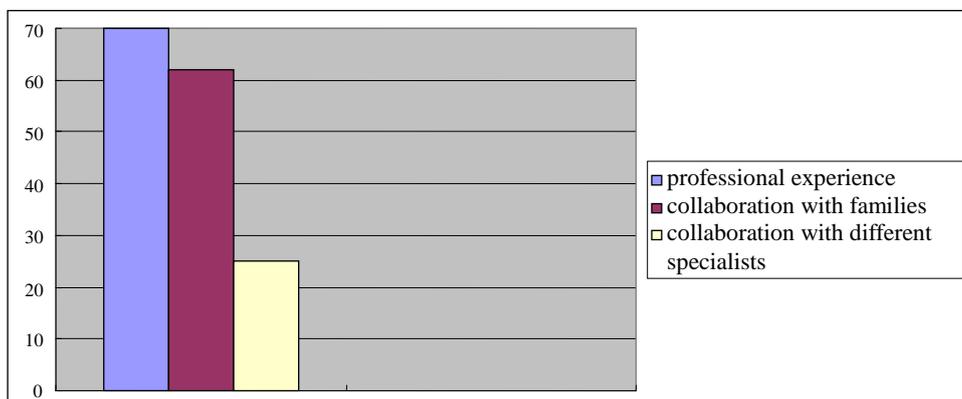


Figure 4 Answers to “What has helped you to deal with children with learning disabilities?”

As it can be seen that, it is obvious that they do not ask sufficiently for the help of the specialists, and consequently, their effective presence at school is almost inexistent (As for the role of the psychologist at school, many of the teachers confess that they have met several times to talk about his role, others confess to have invited them to talk about drug use, while some of them had no idea of him) (Save the Children, 2005).

The answers to the question: “What are the possible causes that not all the children achieve good results at school?”, ((1) the child himself; (2) his family; (3) curricula and text compiling; (4) insufficient time to help the children with learning; (5) the large number of students per class; (6) lack of knowledge concerning students’ individual peculiarities to match; (7) the teaching load), are respectively (see Figure 5): (1) 85%; (2) 87.5%; (3) 23.7%; (4) -; (5) 16.2%; (6) 7.5%; (7) 8.2%.

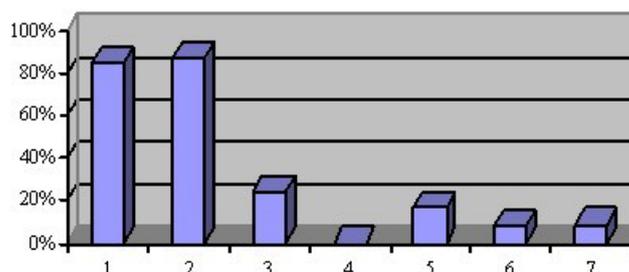


Figure 5 Answers to “What are the possible causes that not all the children achieve good results at school?”

Judging from the above figures, the teachers consider the children’s families as the cause for their low results, their socio-cultural level and their indifference. A high percentage lays blame on the children themselves (lack of concern, responsibility, low intellectual capacity, etc.).

A few of them see that the problem was linked with curricula and text compiling as well as their insufficient work. Only 6 of them were of the opinion that the lack of knowledge and incompatibility with children’s peculiarities influenced them. Even only these answers show that many of the teachers blame “the child pathology”. Meanwhile, many studies conducted in this scope show that appropriate planning of teaching, programs, methods and school settings enhance obviously the possibilities for the children with learning disabilities to achieve satisfactory results bringing into focus on the “Pathology of teaching”. It is necessary to give priority and consider as main goals of an effective school, the teachers’ formation, their new mentality to accept differences and help every child to exist with their cognitive, emotional, physical characteristics, etc..

### 3.2 Role of the support teacher

The following responsibilities are suggested as appropriate to the support teacher:

(1) To work in collaboration with the class/subject teacher to make the curriculum accessible/understandable for all pupils in the class and help with planning of the supported lesson;

(2) To assist in identifying individual pupils' needs in order to help them over their learning obstacles and set appropriate objectives;

(3) To help provide effective learning strategies which can be incorporated into the work of particular pupils;

(4) To assist in developing resource materials to meet individual needs;

(5) To develop a variety of methods which individual pupils may be offered to enhance their learning (finding pathways to learning);

(6) To assist in providing methods for making, assessment and recording which can be practiced by both teachers;

(7) To assist in the continual evaluation of the approaches, methods and materials being offered to all the class and especially for the pupils with special learning needs;

(8) To help find ways to provide individual tuition when needed.

In the Albanian reality, people are far behind concerning the possibility to provide classes with support teachers (even those included in comprehensive educational projects), not all of them have been treated with the defined alternatives, such as pay-rise, extra payment up to 170 classes per year and the reduction of the students' number in classes as well. In addition, even in the cases when teachers specialized for the differentiated pedagogy have been made part of the classes, financially supported by non-governmental organization, they have not been welcomed properly by the class teachers. It is indispensable to help the formation of specialist teachers for the special education. This can be realized in 1-2 year specializations of experienced teachers (or according to Bologna system) in different fields, such as difficulties in learning intellectual delay, problems of behavior, etc.. This would lead to a proper specialized treating of the children.

To achieve good results, great help related to all inclusion would be the training of coordinators for special needs. According to English model in the code of practice (1994), coordinator should be appointed a teacher who is responsible for:

(1) A daily implementation of the school policy for the children with learning disabilities;

(2) The communication and counseling at teacher level;

(3) The creation of the school catalogue for the students' special needs and the implementation of principals concerning children with difficulties in learning;

(4) The relation between the parents and other supportive factors;

(5) The qualification of the teaching staff.

In the education system, precisely, time and money have been spent recently to re-assess the schooling services, but the support to the main "actor", the class-teacher, has not been given yet.

It is crucial that the teachers should create together with the parents, community, supportive personnel, etc., a learning community which will serve the abilities of all the students, dealing directly with the changeability.

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

To achieve an organized and simultaneous effect which leads to a satisfactory result related to children with learning disabilities, the principal thing is the sensitiveness on the part of the teacher considering either a child or a group of these children as "his/her owns". The conclusions and recommendations are as follows:

- (1) Not all the teachers know the peculiarities of learning difficulties, consequently not all of them are able to help the children;
- (2) School in fracture must change in favor of students with learning disabilities;
- (3) There must be a reduction in the number of students of the classes, students with learning disabilities are part of;
- (4) The increase of the professional freedom of the teachers to help a curricula and text matching;
- (5) The involvement of supportive teachers along with the main teachers of the class;
- (6) The preparation of coordinative teachers to help the comprehensiveness;
- (7) The specialization and qualification of teachers concerning the difficulties in learning;
- (8) The compilation of curricula to meet the requirements of the comprehensive education, develop more flexible programmes, efficient strategies and methods as well as alternative texts and standards of subject achievements for students with learning disabilities;
- (9) The organization of a reinforcing teaching by the teacher of the class or by a specialized teacher paid for that, will be of a great help;
- (10) The improvement of the subject curricula at the universities of education which prepare and train teachers in adding subjects concerning the comprehensive education and the rights of the children with learning difficulties;
- (11) The qualification of the in-service teachers should also include knowledge on children with learning difficulties;
- (12) There should be supporting services for the teachers such as the reduction of the teaching load, assistant teachers even some are already on pension, a better payment and other rewards;
- (13) The Ministry of Education has to cooperate with the NCTQ (National Center of Training and Qualification) to help know the credits of the specific training for the comprehensive teaching and motivate the teachers included in the process;
- (14) Headmasters should be part of training activities with regard to children with learning disabilities. Parents too should be involved in these activities as well;
- (15) Children with learning disabilities are part of all mainstream classes. Simply labeling them as children with learning disabilities does not say much. All those near these children should see beyond this labeling. The parents should remember that there are no experts who know more than them about their children; the teachers should not forget that they are the key to success; the experts of different fields with their knowledge should help too, and altogether they should make children feel well, urge them to act and encourage them to believe that they can cope and get over any difficulties.

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