



Save the Children

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ALBANIA

Analytical Study



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Synopsis

Project	“Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities”
Implementing organization	Save the Children
Title of the document	INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ALBANIA – Analytical Study
Type of document	Study of the presence, inclusion and learning process of children with disabilities in Albania.
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Abbreviations

CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CWD	Children with disabilities
DCM	Decision of the Council of Ministers
EFA	Education for All
EO	Education Office
IED	Institute of Educational Development
IEP	Individual Education Plan
INSTAT	Institute of Statistics
LG	Local Government
MEDPAK	The Association for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with disabilities (in alb. <i>Shoqata për Mbrojtjen e të Drejtave të Personave me Aftësi të Kufizuara</i>)
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sport
NIPE	National Inspectorate of the Pre-university Education
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NSDPE	National Strategy for the Development of Pre-University Education
REA	Regional Education Authority
SL	Secondary legislation (Normative Acts)
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WCAC	Work Capability Assessment Commission

DEFINITIONS

Assistive equipment: Support instruments, applications, technologies and other support systems used to facilitate the learning of children with special education needs in general and those with disabilities in particular.

Autism: A developmental disorder characterized by serious difficulties in communicating and establishing relationships with other people, using language and understanding abstract concepts.

Biopsychosocial model: This model of disability, defined by the ICF (The International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health, WHO, 2001), recognizes the fact that a person's health is not strictly related to their anatomical and physiological features (body parts and structure), but is also influenced by (a) other factors related to the person (i.e. to the individual as a whole, his/her personality, his/her social and cultural makeup) and (b) environmental factors (which include the physical and social context).

Compulsory education: The unified and general Basic Education. It consists of two levels: primary education and lower secondary education. Compulsory education can be full-time or part-time.

Curriculum framework: The basic document of the curriculum, describing its main aims, fundamental competences, expected results for students concerning their knowledge, skills and attitudes upon the completion of the basic and upper secondary education, aims of the learning fields and general principles of the teaching and learning processes and of the students' evaluation.

Curriculum: The entire documentation such as the curriculum framework, the school plan, the syllabus, the teaching text and further materials of a subject or learning field and the entire activity organized in the learning environment in order to ensure a specific preparation to those who are learning.

Developmental disability: An umbrella term that implies each lifelong disability manifested prior to age 22.

Inclusive education: This implies a learning environment that enables access, accommodation and support for all students. Inclusive education means that schools must be adapted for all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions.

Integrative Education: It refers to the measures taken to provide education for children with special needs within the mainstream school system, with some extra support (e.g. resource rooms, support teachers, etc.).

Intellectual disability: A term used to refer to people with disabilities characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in

adaptive behaviour.

Learning disorder: Difficulties in acquiring specific abilities related to reading, language, mathematics or other areas. They affect people's ability to both interpret what they see and hear and relate it to previous learning.

Special education: Every child is special and every child needs support during the process of development and adaptation to life. Some children need more support than others during the school years. This special help is also known as special education.

Special education teacher: A teacher trained to help students with special education needs.

Special school: A school that enables education and other similar services only for children with disabilities and whose staff is composed of teachers specifically trained to work with these children.

Students with disabilities: Students having a long-term physical, mental, sensorial or behavioural deficiency, or a combination thereof, which, in concert, may prevent them from fully and equally participating in their education and social life.

Student with special needs: A student who needs special services in order to access education and maximize his/her learning potential.

First stage of the study:

Legislative framework, institutional policies and international acts supporting inclusive education for children with disabilities

Summary

During the many years of work in Albania, Save the Children has paid special attention to the promotion of inclusive education for marginalized children, in particular to the promotion and facilitation of quality education for children with disabilities. Thanks to the multi-year experience in the implementation of the various models of Inclusive Education, a significant number of children with disabilities have been supported in the process of enrolment and full participation, in the improvement of their learning outcomes and in the socialization with their classmates in public school environments.

The promotion of inclusive education has been mainly carried out through: (1) The provision of direct support to children with disabilities in their inclusion and education in public schools; the identification, enrolment and daily support through the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP); the supervision and monitoring of the learning and social achievements of children with disabilities in accordance with the specific IEPs adapted to their needs. (2) The capacity building of teachers, parents, education specialists of the Regional Education Authorities (REAs) and school psychologist on issues concerning Inclusive Education. (3) Awareness activities, provided to the selected kindergartens and schools and to the surrounding community, on the right of children with disabilities to inclusive and quality education. (4) The preparation and distribution of materials published for the purposes of the awareness campaigns.

This long cooperation between Save the Children and MoES in promoting and supporting inclusive education has proved to be efficient and helpful in the improvement of the policy-making process and of the legislative framework related to the education of children with disabilities. An important achievement in the field of policy development is the law on Pre-university Education (approved in July 2012). Save the Children was involved in formulating key parts of this legislation which positively foresees the Inclusive Education of children with disabilities at a national level.

The Albanian Government, in collaboration with non-governmental organizations and with civil society, has committed to guarantee the right to participation and quality education

to every child, considering this commitment key in the framework of the development of education. Some positive indicators of the development of inclusive education in Albania are the approval of the Law on Pre-university Education, the National Strategy for Pre-university Education (of the MoES), the Action Plan for Children (of the MoLSAEO) as well as the obligation to comply with the international acts signed by the State and the efforts to reach the “Education for All” objective (included in the Millennium Development Goals).

However, despite the positive steps made for the improvement of the legislation on inclusive education, a lot of work still needs to be done for its implementation. The problems of the identification of children with disabilities and their inclusion in public kindergartens and schools is related to the infrastructural barriers and difficulties in accessing schools, the existing educational methods and plans, the lack of professional help and support for children with disabilities in public education institutions, the rigid social and emotional environment and the need for improvements in the legislative framework in force.

The need to develop models and principles of Inclusive Education for children with disabilities and the presence of educational, social, infrastructural and institutional barriers within the current educational system, prompt the engagement of non-governmental actors in developing supporting policies and making concrete interventions in this area, in close collaboration with governmental institutions and other interest groups .

The study of the legislation, strategies and institutional action plans related to the right of children with disabilities to inclusive education aims at providing an overview of inclusive policies in education.

The methodology used in this study, which has been an important pillar of our work, is the scrutiny of the legislative framework, the inter-sectoral strategies and action plans and the international acts on the development of inclusive education and the rights of people with disabilities. The statistical and qualitative findings that came out from the questionnaires and focus-groups are presented in the second part of the Analytical Study.

Problems encountered:

The main problems and difficulties in the implementation of inclusive education, encountered during the examination of the legislative framework and inclusive policies in Albania are:

- The vagueness in the definition of the term Inclusive Education as part of Quality Education, the adopting of the Medical Model rather than of the Social and Biopsychosocial ones, the lack of clarity in the use of the terms Integration and Inclusion as well as of Special Needs and Disability.
- The lack of direct investments from the government for the implementation of strategies on inclusive education for children with disabilities: All the documents taken into consideration stress the importance of quality in education but,

actually, the key priority of the action plans seems to be the encouragement of school enrolment. Some sporadic interventions in the field of inclusive education (related to Roma children or street children dropout) are seen but there are no clear actions and strategies related to quality education for all the marginalized groups.

- *The ambiguous data provided by the responsible institutions in relation to the total number of children with disabilities: The State Social Service only provides the total number of people with disabilities: 17,786 or about 3.6 per cent of the population. This statistic only refers to people receiving monthly disability payments and, in addition, accurate data on the various categories of disability are missing. The Institute of Statistics does not provide any data on the number of children with disabilities enrolled in the public education system either. The collection of data on disability problems seems to be difficult. This is due to the lack of institutional capacities in statistical data collection and updating. What is mainly missing is the coordination of the techniques and methodologies used for the data collection process by responsible institutions as well as the collaboration with civil society organizations and with interest groups for the improvement of the process of data collection related to the hidden dropout among children with disabilities. The creation and strengthening of inter-sectoral mechanisms for the identification of students with disabilities and the collection of data on their education is extremely necessary.*
- *The lack of capacity building and training for teachers on inclusive education, needed to make inclusive education become the norm of education: The recent reform made in teachers' education to improve their capacities (by including in their program the learning of managerial skills, and innovative teaching methodologies which make use of information and communication technology) is important but it seems that teachers' training on supporting children with disabilities during the learning process does not occupy an important place within this reform.*
- *The lack of flexible curricula adapted to the needs of children with disabilities: The existing curricula do not contain the necessary information on the skill building of children with disabilities and the teaching for these children is based on the core curriculum which has no provision for their special needs. The curricular reform is a priority of quality education but this reform has not been counting on the engagement and contribution of the interest groups (except for the activities of the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities for the inclusion of partners in the 2012 strategies and action plans).*

- *The lack of direct investments and financial plans for the implementation of inclusive education: The scrutiny of documents revealed a lack of clearness in the allocation of financial resources for inclusive education. The action plans show that government investments (co-investments and investments made through projects of NGOs working in the field) have been so far oriented towards the partial and short-term fulfilment of needs (such as rehabilitation of school buildings or teacher trainings), while the challenge in the achievement of inclusive education lies in guaranteeing a wide financial support covering all the needs and standard-meeting requirements.*

Introduction

The need for this study

The enrolment and inclusion of children with disabilities in the pre-school and compulsory education system still remains a big concern in Albania. Problems such as the difficulties in identifying children with disabilities, the inaccessibility and poor infrastructure in public kindergarten and school buildings, the unsuitability of programs and curricula for children with disabilities, the lack of teachers' preparation in working with children with disabilities, the lack of support teachers in the classrooms, the rigid viewpoint of the society, and the poor information provided on the rights of children with disabilities prompt the call and the need for changes and improvements in the education system and to the social environment.

*Based on the data received by the State Social Service, the general number of children with disabilities reaches **17,786** and about 60 percent of them live in rural areas. Of these children, 4,776 are 0-6 years old, 8,845 are 6-15 years old and 4,165 are 15-18 years old. The number of children with disabilities who should attend preschool education is estimated to be 2,289, **children who should attend the 9-year education system are** estimated at **5,477**, and those who should attend the upper secondary education estimated at 1,356.*

*According to the analytical tables of the 38 Regional Education Authorities and Education Offices on the inclusion of Roma and Egyptian children and children with disabilities for the year 2011 at a national level (tables provided by the Ministry of Education and Science) **the total number of children with disabilities enrolled in schools is 1,058**. Children attending mainstream school are 965. Of these, 237 children are children with mental disabilities, 145 children with physical disabilities, 187 children with mental and physical disabilities, 172 children with visual disabilities, 57 children with hearing disabilities, 91 children with speech impairments and 41 are autistic. The total number of children with disabilities who have dropped out of school is 75 and there are 26 children who are provided education at home.*

The collection of data related to children with disabilities appears to be a difficult process due to the lack of accuracy of the official figures provided by administrative documents and the vagueness of the statistics provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education. We draw attention on the fact that the Institute of Statistics in Albania does not disaggregate the data on children with disabilities in its analyses and its statistics of the number of children enrolled in kindergartens and 9-year schools.

Based on these data, the number of children with disabilities who attend mainstream kindergartens and schools represents a small part of the total number of children with disabilities.

The reports that cover the progress made by Albania during the 2008-2011 period on the development of education and protection of people with disabilities highlight that progress in the treatment of socially vulnerable people and/or people with disabilities is insufficient.

The 2008 Report of the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation on the Monitoring of the Implementation of the National Strategy on People with Disabilities viewed the rigid attitudes and mentalities of the society towards children with disabilities – including those of education specialists and children's family members – as a barrier to their inclusion in education and into the society.

The Progress Report of the European Commission for 2009¹ showed a quite alarming situation in Albania for what concerned children with disabilities' mainstream school enrolment and attendance. Education for them was mainly provided in special schools. Although the Ministry of Education had invested in raising the awareness of teachers and education specialists with regards to the inclusion of children with disabilities in public education, the problem of the lack of infrastructure and the lack of trainings for teachers and specialists of the field still remained.

The Progress Report of the European Commission for 2010² states that, thanks to the nongovernmental organizations' promotion campaign and efforts in strengthening children with disabilities' rights, the Albanian government has improved the standards and the support services for the groups in need. As for the education area, school curricula have been reviewed and have now some flexibility to meet the needs of minority and vulnerable groups but the legislation related to the provision of inclusive education for children with special needs and vulnerable groups still needs to be implemented. Some measures to ensure quality have been taken or strengthened, such as the drafting of new textbooks and guidelines for school inspections³. The quality of education is affected by the need for rehabilitation of schools' physical infrastructure, equipment improving, teachers' training and inclusive school activities based on data sources such as the database of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-UNESCO which provides strategies and tools to provide practical and inclusive learning-friendly environments.

The Progress Report of the European Commission for year 2011⁴ underlines that the legal framework has not been completed and the implementation of the national strategy for persons with disabilities has continued to be slow.

As to social services, the number of persons receiving the services is lower than the number of those who actually need them and this is due to the lack of institutional

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1. Progress Report - Albania, European Commission, 2009.http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press_corner/key-documents/reports_nov_2009_en.htm
 2. Progress Report - Albania, European Commission, 2010.http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press_corner/key-documents/reports_nov_2010_en.htm
 3. Inspection and internal evaluation of kindergartens and schools, Guidelines of the National Inspectorate for Pre-university Education.
 4. http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/al_rapport_2011_en.pdf

inclusive mechanisms and the hesitation of people with disabilities to declare their disability because of the rigid mentality and stigma of the society. The rehabilitation centres for children with disabilities are very few⁵, the psychosocial support for their families is missing and there are not enough programs of awareness on the integration of these children into the school life and beyond.

The 2007-2013 Social Inclusion Strategy of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities considers children with disabilities and Roma and Egyptian children as the most unprotected groups in Albania. Due to the unsuitable teaching plans, lack of necessary equipment in schools, discrimination and untrained teachers, children with disabilities have the lowest level of school access and participation.

Although the development of the legislation in Albania has moved at a fair pace in terms of inclusive policies, still a lot of work remains to be done for the implementation of these policies. Inclusive education is not part of the university curricula for future teachers yet (with the exception of “Aleksandër Moisiu” University of Durrës, where disability has been introduced in the master program of the Faculty of Education Sciences as a separate subject.) The child-centred teaching approach requires professionalism, adapted curricula (referring to both the university curricula for teachers and the basic education curriculum, including for preschools and multidisciplinary support at school.

As a signatory of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations), signed by Albania on December 22nd 2009⁶, the Albanian Government has committed in undertaking a number of reforms in the disability area, which include human rights, inclusion in education and in the society, and a better living for people with disabilities. The signing of the convention obliges states parties to improve their existing legislation in accordance with the Convention and to embrace policies and initiatives for the creation of an inclusive society.

Given that, during these last years, Albania has made great efforts on the legislative framework to fulfil the international milestones for an inclusive society, it might be worthy here to mention the principles and values of such society.

The vision of an inclusive society is that of an equal society, where the causes of exclusion are identified and adequately addressed. From this point of view, disability is not a (functional and interpersonal/social) problem but an effort the society must make in order to create an interaction between the individual and the society/surrounding environment.⁷

5. According to the State Social Service, in Tirana there is a total of 13 rehabilitation centres that provide the service for people with disabilities; 4 of them are specialized for children with disabilities too (people with disabilities of 6-40 years old, children with mental disabilities of 0-12 years old).

6. www.un.org/disabilities/documents/.../crpd_albanian.pdf.

7. Based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health - World Health Organization.

The World Declaration on “Education for All (EFA) by 2020”, aiming at providing education to all the children, clearly evidences inclusive education as a core strategy for development. The Salamanca Statement (1994) states that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs and that children with disabilities must have the right to learn in regular schools, which must welcome them based on the principle of child-centred education and be able to meet their needs. The Statement also says that an education system that takes into account the diversity of children’s needs and characteristics is the most effective way to combat discriminatory attitudes, create welcoming environments, build an inclusive society, achieve education for all and, above all, improve the education system in general.

Based to this Statement, education is based on the basic principle that all children must learn together, despite the difficulties they might have or the differences between them. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the various needs of their students, adapt all learning levels and ensure quality education for all through adapted curricula, organizational structures and teaching strategies, cooperation with the various school communities and a number of services in accordance with the needs identified at school.⁸

Considering inclusive education as an important legislative reform for quality education, it is worth to go over the main actions, the legislative framework, and the basic reform towards the observance of the right of children with disabilities to participation in education and to an adequate academic development.

The aim of the study

The main aim of this study of the legislative framework, institutional policies and international acts is to contribute towards the improvement of inclusive education for children with disabilities to fulfil their rights to quality education.

Structure of the Study

***The first part** of the study explains the terminology and concepts used in almost all the documents that were examined: inclusive education, integrated education, special education, medical model, social model and biopsychosocial model.*

***The second part** presents the legislative framework in force, the strategies and the existing action plans undertaken by the government for the implementation of inclusive education.*

8. Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and its Framework for Action http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF

The third part presents the most important conventions and other international acts related to the right to inclusive education.

The fourth part includes recommendations and conclusions on the strengthening of inclusive education in Albania.

A list of the documents that were examined can be found in the Annex attached to this study.

First Part

Conceptual structure

The concepts and definitions encountered in almost all the documents examined are those of inclusive education, integrated education, special education, quality education, medical model, social model and biopsychosocial model.

The meaning of these concepts varies and there is no common agreement at an international level on such meaning. The definitions used for the purposes of this study are based on the standards of the World Health Organization and on the “Disability Equality in the Classroom: A human Right Issue”, a book of Richard Rieser and Micheline Mason.

Inclusive Education for children with disabilities

Children with disabilities are different but united by the common experience of barriers to inclusion encountered at school and within the society. So far, no universal definition of the term disability has been agreed upon but, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which is based on the Standards of International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, provides the main elements for an analysis of this term: “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

Inclusive Education for children with disabilities is the process of increasing their presence (access to education), participation and academic achievements (quality of education). Inclusive Education for children with disabilities does not see the child's personal characteristics or abilities as reasons to “exclude” him/her from regular education.

Difficulties in achieving inclusive education in Albania are due to the teachers' attitudes and their rigid teaching methods, the curricula being unsuitable for children with disabilities, the lack of adapted didactic equipment and tools, the environment being physically inaccessible, the parents not being involved and the fact that teachers and schools are not supported in the implementation of inclusive education.

The reform for the achievement of inclusive education also includes changes and improvements in the mentality and attitude of the society towards diversity as well as improvements in the policies and practices of the schools and of the entire education system, in order for the latter to be ready to welcome and educate

every child.

Inclusive Education creates the conditions for an equal and quality education, provides adapted teaching methods that aim at the fulfilment of special needs and additional trainings for teachers and is oriented towards the inclusion of parents as necessary partners in the child's education.

Inclusive education for children with disabilities is considered, first of all, a process in continuous improvement, which requires the time and engagement of all the institutional actors and all the partners for the construction of a successful system.

Integrated Education for children with disabilities

Integrated education for children with disabilities aims at integrating these children into mainstream education. Differently from Inclusive Education, it sees the physical/intellectual condition of the child with disabilities as a reason for exclusion. The teaching process in this typology of education mainly reflects the medical model of disability. Therefore, integrated education focuses on solutions such as the "adaptation" of the child to the existing education system. The problems identified by integrated education are related to the fact that the child with disabilities has special needs, is different from other children, needs a special environment, needs special equipment, needs special teachers, does not respond to the learning process, has difficulties in reaching the school and so on.

With this approach, the child can only benefit for a limited period of time. Integrated education does not lead to a stable and quality education system for children with disabilities.

Often, integrated education is apt to promote the presence of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms but does not guarantee their full and equal participation in all the types of school activities or their good academic achievements.

It is important to mention that, frequently, there is not a clear perception of the distinction between integrated education and inclusive education for children with disabilities.

Special needs – Special Education

For some societies, the term "special needs" has the same meaning of "disability". In other cases, it refers to children who are "different" due to their disability, their behaviour, or their social vulnerability (e.g. being unprotected and weak within the society).

However, either calling them "children with disabilities" or "children with special educational needs", it is an inappropriate way to differentiate them as a specific group as in reality all children have special or individual needs (for instance because they have

difficulties in a particular subject, are particularly gifted, find it hard to socialize, etc). A child does not have to have a specific impairment or other diagnosed physical or intellectual disability to have a special educational need.

Quality Education

During the examination of the laws in force and of institutional practices in Albania, no clear relation between the right of children with disabilities to education on the one hand and the concept of quality education on the other was observed. However, it is important to point out that quality education is inevitably related to the right to a full and effective participation in public education.

In this study, the concept of quality education refers to the interpretations given to this term in the Dakar Framework for Action⁹ where it is stated that “Quality is at the heart of education and [...] A quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs, and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living.”

The main factors defining quality education are:

- Healthy, well-nourished and motivated students
- Well-trained teachers and teaching promotion techniques
- Suitable didactic equipment and tools.
- Curricula adapted to children’s learning needs and ability, and based on the teachers’ and students’ experience.
- An environment that is not only learning-friendly but also welcoming, healthy and safe.
- Clear and detailed definition of the evaluation method and academic expectations.
- Maintaining of the cooperation with different communities and cultures.

Medical Model, Social Model and Biopsychosocial Model

The medical model emphasizes the principle that people are “individual objects” to be “treated”, “changed” or “improved” and made more “normal”. The medical approach of disability holds the belief that disability is “an individual pathologic problem” and that people with disabilities are the ones needing to fit in the society.

The social model of disability, on the other hand, is based on the belief that, regardless of their medical conditions, which may or may not require treatment,

9. Dakar Framework for Action, United Nations, 2000: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf>

disabled persons can have a quality life if the society creates for them the necessary conditions to achieve it. This means that what needs to change and to adapt is the social unwillingness not disability as such.¹⁰

The table below describes the impact of the medical and social models in the cases in which they have been implemented in mainstream schools.¹¹

No.	Medical Model	Social Model
1.	♦ “The child is guilty”	♦ “The child is of value”
2.	♦ Focusing on the diagnose	♦ Capacities and needs are defined by children themselves and by the others within and out of the school environment.
3.	♦ Labelling	♦ Recognition of barriers and finding of solutions
4.	♦ Placing of the impairment in the centre	♦ Development of programs based on expectations
5.	♦ Focusing only on the evaluation and monitoring of the child’s progress within the medical context	♦ Resources provision
6.	♦ Marginalization and special services	♦ Trainings for parents and professionals
7.	♦ Focusing on the satisfaction of physiological needs	♦ Building of friendship relations
8.	♦ Reintegration of the child into the society if he/she is considered “normal” or temporary exclusion of the child.	♦ Welcoming of the diversity and of the child’s special needs and trends.
9.	♦ The society remains unchanged	♦ The society includes

10. Rieser and Mason, 1992, pg. 15,

11. Rieser, The Social Model of Disability. 2001, pg. 139

The Biopsychosocial Model

As we said above, the most well-known models of disability are the medical model, which views disability as a feature of the person, directly caused by the disease, trauma or other health conditions, which requires specific medical treatment to “correct the individual pathologic problem”, and the social model, which, on the other hand, sees disability as a socially-created problem and punctuates that the lack of disabled persons’ inclusion is caused by the rigid social attitudes and environment.

Disability is a multidimensional phenomenon determined by the relation between the individual features and qualities of a disabled person and the features and specificities of the social environment.

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), WHO, 2001, has defined a new theory of disability treatment which consists of a merger of these two models. The Biopsychosocial Model¹² is based on the harmonization of the biological, individual and social dimensions. This theory combines the clear and applicable elements of the medical model (focused on the impairments and limitations in a person’s capacity to perform actions) with those of the social one (focused on the restrictions in a person’s participation in educational, economic, social, cultural and political activities), rejecting what is unnecessary and ineffective in both of them.

12. <http://www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/>

Second Part

The legislative framework and institutional policies regulating inclusive education in Albania

The legislation in force in Albania has undergone some improvement and enhancement for what concerns the rights of persons with disabilities, in particular the right to inclusive education. This is reflected on the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2009); the Law 69/2012, On Pre-university Education; the Pre-university Education Strategy 2008-2013 (MoES, 2008); the MoES Integrated Plan 2010; the Action Plan for Children 2012-2015 (MoLSAEO) et cetera.

Despite the positive steps taken by the Albanian Government in improving the legislation, and its commitment in developing strategies and action plans addressing disability and inclusion issues, the examination of the existing legal system revealed a number of gaps and a necessity for improvement with regard to the adaptation to the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 1993), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Education for All Goal (Millennium Development Goals) and other international acts Albania is party to.

Constitution of Albania

Article 18, paragraph 2, of the Constitution of Albania states that: “No one may be unjustly discriminated against for reasons such as gender, race, religion, ethnicity, language, political, religious or philosophical beliefs, economic condition, education, social status, or ancestry.”

As the Albanian Government is engaged in the European Union integration process and has legal obligations deriving from a number of international acts signed, the need arises for the inclusion in this article of the term “disability”. The article specifies many categories that should not be discriminated against but does not mention “people with disabilities” among them. Thus, people with disabilities do not find themselves directly protected by the constitution. The legitimation of the rights of people with disabilities by constitution would provide a strong basis for the achievement of their inclusion into the social and educational life.

Article 27,2 states: “Freedom of a person may not be limited, except in the following cases: [...] (e) when a person is the carrier of a contagious disease, mentally incompetent and dangerous to society”. The term “mentally incompetent” used in this article does

not comply with the universal standards of the WHO's ICF, which are based on the biopsychosocial model of disability. Therefore, the adaptation of the language to this model is recommended as a positive step towards the observance of the rights of people with disabilities within the Albanian legislation.

Law 10 221, 2010, On Protection from Discrimination

Article 1: “This law regulates the implementation of and respect for the principle of equality in connection with gender, race, colour, ethnicity, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, political, religious or philosophical beliefs, economic, education or social situation, pregnancy, parentage, parental responsibility, age, family or marital condition, civil status, residence, health status, genetic predispositions, restricted ability, affiliation with a particular group or for any other reason.”

The mentality and society barriers must be listed among the “other reasons” as the biggest barriers to the respect for people with disabilities. Including this, would ensure that this article was in full compliance with the fundamental human rights and freedoms recognized in all the most important international acts on the protection and observance of the rights of persons with disabilities which Albania is party to, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the one on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Civil Code

Article 9 states that “the infant of fourteen to eighteen years who is unable to carry out his own affairs because of psychic diseases or mental illness is deprived of the capacity to perform legal transactions by a court decision. These transactions can be performed through his legal representative.”

The use of the terms “mental health” and “mental illness” is a norm of the old medical model, which has been removed from all the European Conventions as well as from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and replaced by new biopsychosocial models. The biopsychosocial theory aims at presenting a number of factors affecting the fulfilment of disabled people's capacities, such as the biological factors, the psychological factors (emotional state, self-esteem) and the social factors, concentrating on concerns related to diversity, stigma, prejudice, and the changing of the society's attitudes.

The terminology can also be adjusted in reference to other rights related to the responsibility of “physically and mentally handicapped” children for their actions, listed on **Article 613**. Firstly, what needs to be changed is the language used, which is based on the medical model, and secondly, the article in general must

be improved for what concerns the liability for actions so as to be in line with the international legislation, also applicable in Albania.

It must be said that, in almost all the articles of the Civil Code regulating the rights of persons with disabilities, the terminology used mainly refers to the medical model of disability and must be improved and adjusted to comply with that of the best practices of inclusion of the social model, and that of the definitions used by the World Health Organization.

Law 9062, dated 8.5.2003, The Family Code

Article 267 regulates the right to custody when parents are missing. This article states that, before appointing a guardian, the judge should take into consideration the opinion of the social worker.

The inclusion of social services and the engagement of multisectoral services in decision making is an important action, in line with the provisions of the international acts on the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities. Moreover, applying the social model on the evaluation on the child's needs is a successful step towards the achievement of respect for children with disabilities.

Law on Mental Health, 2012

The general principles of the new law approved on 2012 are compliant with the international acts Albania is party to, related to an equal treatment, free of discrimination, in respect of human dignity. The law clearly states the rights of children and young people to professional rehabilitation, whenever their health conditions allow schooling.

The definitions used in this law are in compliance with the terminology of the ICF of the World Health Organization.

Law 69/2012, On Pre-university Education

The new law, approved on July 2012, marks an important step as for the right of children with disabilities to access, full participation and quality in compulsory and preschool education.

Article 2 of the law defines students with disabilities as “the person having long-term physical, mental, sensual, attitude-related deficiency, or a combination there of, which, in concert, may prevent him/her from fully and equally participating in his/her education and social life.”

The definition used in this article refers to the standards of the International

Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health of the World Health Organization.

Article 5, “Right to Education”, states that: “The right to education in the Republic of Albania shall be guaranteed to the Albanian citizens, foreign citizens and those without citizenship, without discrimination in terms of gender, race, colour, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, political or religious convictions, economic or social status, age, residing location, disability or other grounds being referred to in the Albanian legislation.”

Article 6, “General principles”, stresses that education institutions shall abide the principle of inclusion for all; every student shall be ensured the right to quality education; and students of vulnerable families, students with disabilities and those with learning difficulties shall be ensured specific care.

Paragraph 8 of this article guarantees the right of students, educational employees, parents and children’s legal representatives to express their views concerning the quality of the educational service and to be heard concerning these views.

These articles clearly sanction the right of children with disabilities to access in education and quality education as well as the right of parents to be involved in the issues concerning their children’s education and the services provided.

Article 19, on the provision of care to separate categories of students, guarantees the provision of special care by the state. The forms and criteria of care shall be determined upon the decision of the Council of Ministers.

In this case, the provision of inter-sectoral services has to be regulated by secondary legislation (normative acts/dispositions) which should specify the services necessary to children’s education in all mainstream settings.

Article 20, on the psychosocial service at educational institutions, emphasises the provision of support through psychologists and social workers in treating the problems of specific cases, assessing the cases of children with special psychosocial needs, and designing prevention programs, according to the needs of the school community.

The development and institutionalization by secondary legislation (normative acts) or guidelines of the standards and rules of functioning for these services is needed.

Article 44, “The curriculum. General principles”, provides that the curriculum shall be in compliance with the physical, mental, social and ethical development of students and their individual learning features and shall be drafted and implemented based on the fundamental competences of students.

The same article establishes that the curriculum, in accordance with the educational levels and forms, shall be drafted and developed based on the curricular frame of pre-university education; “shall enshrine the principle of integration among the learning fields and subjects”; and shall enable students “individual choices

according to their needs and interests.”

This article is in full respect of the principles and best practices of inclusive education related to the implementation of the regular curriculum and the adaptation, when necessary, of the syllabuses of the various fields of learning to children’s development and special needs as well as their implementation based on students’ fundamental abilities.

Chapter XI, Education of children with disabilities, Article 63, on the principles in educating children with disabilities. This article foresees the full development of children with disabilities’ intellectual and physical potential and the improvement of the quality of their life, aiming at preparing them for the full integration into the society and the labour market. The same article states that, the involvement of children with disabilities in specialized educational institutions is generally temporary. ***The involvement and integration of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergarten and schools of basic education shall be a priority.*** Deaf students and those who cannot speak shall be guaranteed their right to communicate in the sign language and blind students the right to use the Braille writing system.

This article guarantees the full an effective development of their physical and intellectual potential but a confusion between the terms integration and inclusion in mainstream education is observed.

Article 64, “On the attendance at education institutions by children with disabilities”, establishes the criteria and structures responsible for the provision of education to children with disabilities in special and/or mainstream education.

Criteria and standards must be regulated through the development of secondary legislation (normative acts) and of their related guidelines.

Article 65, “On the organization of education for children with disabilities” says that students with disabilities shall learn in accordance with ordinary teaching plans and syllabuses adjusted for them or in accordance with specialised teaching plans and syllabuses. The personalized syllabus for students with disabilities shall be drafted by a commission composed of teachers of various fields of learning of the institution and psychologists. The drafting of this syllabus shall be done in collaboration with the parents of the child. Children with disabilities shall be provided support teachers and rehabilitating service as well as appropriate teaching and learning environment, in accordance with the criteria and standards set out by the Minister’s guidelines.

The significant improvements related to the inclusion of Individual Education Plans in the teaching programs, the definition of their drafting criteria, the involvement of parents and students in the adaptation of the programs to students’ special needs and the provision of support teachers and rehabilitation services are some of the reforming measures aimed at the achievement of inclusive education in Albania. However, besides the legislative reform, a lot of work still needs to be

done by the Ministry of Education and Science for the development of the related secondary legislation (normative acts) and guidelines, which would support the correct application of the law.

Law No 9355 dated 10.03.2005 (updated on 2011) **”On Social Assistance and Services”**

*In the meaning of this law, **Article 4**, “A Person with disabilities is an individual who has become disabled due to physical, sensory, intellectual, physical and mental or other impairments, either congenital or developed in the course of life, as a result of accidents and temporary or permanent diseases which are not related to employment.”*

The definition of disability in this law needs to be broader and must include other causes created by the society. The definition of the term “disability” based on the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1992, and on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities points out the social barriers in interaction and the environmental ones (physical accessibility). Approaching disability not as a barrier but as an indispensable condition for changing the mentality among the society, prompts the need to update the language used in this law.

Article 15 says that “Residential care services are delivered to individuals for whom it is impossible to provide home care. Placing them at social care centres shall be done with their consent, [...] following the assessment of their social, economic and medical conditions.”

This article states that the service is provided to individuals based on the assessment of “their social, economic and medical conditions” and does not mention disability. Furthermore, a medical approach of assessing the person’s need for services is observed.

The biopsychosocial model, defined by the World Health Organization must be used by the multidisciplinary bodies created within local government units¹³ within their methodology of special needs assessment.

13. Law 8652, dated 30.7.2000, “On the organization and functioning of local government”, amended.

Secondary Legislation on Pre-university Education, 2002

The approval of the new law on pre-university education brings the need to draft new secondary legislation and dispositions in accordance with this law.

Chapter XIII, Education of Students with Special Needs

Article 57, paragraph 1 (c) provides a definition of the term “student with disabilities”: “all those children or youngsters with specific anatomic and functional features, whom the public school shall find it difficult to educate.”

The placement of the child’s anatomic and functional features at the centre of the education concerns reflects the medical model of disability; furthermore, the difficulty of these children in receiving equal and quality education, differently from their peers, is viewed precisely in their anatomic and functional features.

Paragraph 2 says that the education of students with disabilities shall be carried out in two ways: through integration in public education schools (mainstream schools), in the framework of inclusion, and through their treatment at special public schools or classes, part of the public pre-university school institutions network in the Republic of Albania, in accordance with the categories and specifications they present.

In this paragraph we notice a confusion between the terms integration and inclusion. The article does not provide a clear orientation to the ways of education for children with disabilities.

Paragraph 17 says that, children’s needs and specificities shall be taken into consideration during the implementation of the texts and teaching programs. Their implementation shall be carried out in a creative way, depending on the difficulties faced by the students. While, in the case of special students whose state shall be below the minimal level of the teaching programme or in the event he/she shows completely unique specific features, individual education plans shall be used.

Although the individual education plan has been included in the teaching plan for children with disabilities in mainstream schools, the modalities of its development have not been provided. In addition, the inclusion of psychologists and/or social workers is also necessary along with that of experienced teachers.

Paragraph 18: “The integration of students with disabilities with the students of ordinary schools shall be an indispensable contemporary process, implemented at special schools and shall be considered as an important process for the development of the children. This process is reciprocal and *in special cases*, a full integration may be achieved.”

In this paragraph of the article, as in the previous one, an ambiguity in the use of the terms Integration and Inclusive Education is observed. “Integration” in this case

refers to the separation of children with disabilities in special classrooms within the mainstream schools, while “full integration” refers to the inclusion in mainstream classrooms, sharing the same didactic activities as their peers, in and outside the classroom. Also, it is not specified which are the specific cases in which the child with disabilities can pass from the level of integration to that of inclusion.

Guideline No. 31 for the 2011-2012 academic year in the pre-university education system

Chapter IV: “In the framework of the implementation of the MoES objective to ensure at least one preparatory year for children of 5 years old, including Roma and Egyptian children and children from marginalized groups, 200 new preparatory classrooms shall be opened in the new academic year.”

This chapter does not mention children with disabilities; this category is only implicit under the term “marginalized groups”. Considering children with disabilities as a priority for preschool education and developing awareness programs on this topic is very important for the promotion and protection of the right of these children to education.

Order No. 362, 2007, On Approval of the Regulation on Medical Criteria for Evaluating Disabilities

The Work Capability Assessment Commission, which assesses disabilities, is currently composed of doctors of different specialties but does not include professionals of other disciplines such as: psychologists, social workers, therapists and the like. The criteria and rules for the assessment of disability are based on the old medical model, which sees the persons’ impairment and injury as the reasons for their disability, not taking into account the biopsychosocial one, adopted recently by the World Health Organization, which focuses on the reduction and elimination of the social and mentality barriers.

Third part

Strategies and Action Plans

The National Strategy on People with Disabilities, 2005-2015

The Strategy on People with Disabilities, an initiative of the Albanian Government and the civil society, identifies a number of priority fields and sets seven strategic objectives related to them:

- 1.** Encourage and educate for a non-disabling society.
- 2.** Ensure rights for people with disabilities.
- 3.** Provide the best education for people with disabilities
- 4.** Provide employment and economic development opportunities for people with disabilities
- 5.** Ensure aware and responsive public service for people with disabilities
- 6.** Support quality living in the community for people with disabilities
- 7.** *Collect and use relevant information about people with disabilities and disability issues*

The Action Plan accompanying the Strategy covers a 10-year period and foresees 95 measures to increase the quality of disabled people's lives concerning their education, employment, support and services as well as the creation of equal opportunities of access, focusing on their potential rather than their impairments. The Action Plan has been developed with clear distribution of the responsibilities and obligations among the institutions in charge.

The institutions in charge of the implementation of the measures foreseen by the Action Plan are the line ministries and their subordinate institutions, the local government and non-governmental organizations. The possible financial resources for the implementation of the National Strategy on people with disabilities have been designated but a detailed budget is missing.

The 2009, 2010 and 2011 Progress Reports of the European Commission declared that the implementation of the National Strategy on People with Disabilities had been slow and the action plan had not been fulfilled. Capacity building for the improvement of the legislative framework and mechanisms in order to comply with the Strategy was indicated as a priority task for the Albanian Government.

National Strategy for Development and Integration (2007)

The strategy includes eleven inter-sectoral strategies and aims at the promotion and sustainability of economic, social and human development. This strategy clearly defines Albania's objective of integration into the European Union and propounds a number of tasks to be accomplished for this purpose. Integration into the EU requires, among other things, the improvement of the legislation and policies related to disability, in accordance with the international conventions and European standards on the provision of equal opportunities and quality life to people with disabilities. Therefore, the accomplishment of these tasks is a government priority for integration and development.

Inter-sectoral Strategy for Social Inclusion 2007-2013

This strategy includes inter-sectoral policies and measures at an institutional level and focuses on economic development and on the reduction of social exclusion. The strategy foresees a set of measures that aim at the provision of assistance to groups in need, the provision of community services to support the families and the strengthening and development of people belonging to socially excluded groups, in order for them to fully exploit their capacities and to enjoy the same rights as others. Other priorities are the institutional capacity building on the development of disability policies, the improvement of the legislation, and the raising of awareness on the rights of people with disabilities. The strategy draws attention to the groups in need, with a special focus on disability, planning measures aimed at increasing individual income generation opportunities (“The disability benefit will be indexed annually parallel to the increase of the minimum salary at a national level¹⁴”) and facilitating the access to receive services and infrastructure benefits through the establishment of nine daily community services for people with disabilities in different local government units.

With regards to the facilitation of the access to basic services, the 2010 Report of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs on the monitoring of the implementation of the Inter-sectoral Strategy for Social Inclusion 2007-2013 says: “The number of individuals, including children, older people and people with disabilities, benefiting from social services in public residential or daily centres has increased by 26% as compared to 2007, while in non-public centres this number has tripled” and also “forms of alternative services have been promoted such as foster families, social counselling service, etc.¹⁵”

However, despite the increase in number of social centres, the number of children receiving education in mainstream schools is still very low and the infrastructure in public

14. Inter-sectoral Strategy for Social Inclusion 2007-2013

15. Report on the Monitoring of the Inter-sectoral Strategy for Social Inclusion, MoLSAEO, 2010.

spaces and schools remains inaccessible for children with disabilities.

National Strategy of Pre-university Education 2009-2013

MoES strategic objectives aim at simultaneously ensuring equal opportunities and effectiveness for all students, particularly to the marginalized groups such as Roma, gypsies, children of families in need and children from minority groups.¹⁶

In the same objective (Creation of equal opportunities) it is subsequently stated that: "School documentation and teaching process must carefully treat developments on the ratification of important international documents such as the law on gender equality, amendments to the Family Code, surely linked with their accompanying problems."

Children with disabilities are not mentioned in any of the paragraphs of these objectives as a group in need, with the exception of the statement of commitment of the Ministry of Education on meeting the obligations arising from the "Education for All" project, approved at an international level.

Within the context of the adaptation of the education system to diversity, the need to improve school environments, create optimal learning conditions and provide schools with labs, didactic material and necessary school equipment, as well as the need to continuously improve the conditions for the education of marginalized groups have been emphasized.

But, the means and resources suitable to the special needs of children with disabilities have not been defined in this part either.

The Integrated Plan of the Ministry of Education, 2010

The fundamental goal of the Integrated Plan is to create equal opportunities for all students. Every child, with no exception, has the right to receive education. The focus of the plan is quality education, which will be achieved through the following measures: (1) the curricular reformat all levels of education, in order to adapt the curricula to the country's economic and social reality and to the European standards, (2) the continuous qualification of teachers and professors - this is one of the determinants of quality which will be achieved through the implementation of support programs for the development of human resources in education.

This plan foresees some concrete measures for the fulfilment of the right to quality and inclusive education for every student:

- Equal education opportunities for all the citizens of the Republic of Albania;*
- Basic education for all;*

16. National Strategy of Pre-university Education 2009-2013, page 28.

- *Increasing quality of public and private education at all levels;*
- *Quality education in accordance with the individual, community and society needs and interests, and with the European standards.*

Concerning the expectations related to basic and preschool education for 2010, no measurable indicators have been established to evaluate the services provided to children with disabilities in education institutions.

Action Plan for Children 2012-2015, MoSWY

The Action Plan for Children 2012-2015 aims at (a) strengthening the institutional structures created to monitor and to report the implementation of children's rights at a national and regional level and (b) promoting the drafting of comprehensive, coordinated and harmonized policies for the protection and social inclusion of children.

The objectives and measures of the Action Plan for Children 2012-2015 relating to children with disabilities' rights to protection and social inclusion have been clearly defined. The document explicitly states the need for specific legal acts and bylaws to set policies on children's involvement in the drafting of the annual teaching programs, with the purpose of creating the conditions for children to become an active part of the working group during the curriculum and teaching plan development. **Concrete policies and measures for a review of curricula and textbooks are foreseen, making them more approachable to children through the implementation in schools of integrative and social programs, aimed at the total elimination of school dropout.** This aim will be achieved through the inclusion in education of all groups of children, regardless of the socio-economic conditions of their families, their disabilities and the ethnic or minority group they belong to, by designing concrete measures which will be under the responsibility of the central and local government.

Institutional policies must also encompass the changes needed to be made on the school infrastructure and on the capacity building of the pedagogical staff with regards to the adaptation of the curriculum and the implementation of new suitable teaching methods.

The Action Plan foresees concrete measures for the improvement of school infrastructure in the rural areas in order to ensure a quality teaching process in rural schools.

Concerning the teaching as another priority of quality education, some reform measures have been foreseen with regards to the teachers' career and qualification, which view teachers not only as professionals in the field of education, but also as important actors in the field of child protection and child rights implementation.

These reforms play a significant role in improving the quality of teaching and inclusion. Informing and raising the awareness of children and of the teaching staff about disabled people's rights is considered an important step within the education reform.

The objectives and related sub-objectives for the achievement of inclusive education are the following:

1. Creating an environment which promotes children's early development.
2. Creating an inclusive and quality education system for children.
3. Increasing child participation in the decision-making process within and out of the school.

The Strategic Objective of "Creating an environment which promotes children's early development" will be achieved through lobbying local governments to promote children's development at an early age. The measures for the promotion of children's early development will be focused on the examination of the current developmental situation of children 0-3 years old and the implementation of counselling programs about services provided in crèches for the children of this age.

The Strategic Objective of "Creating an inclusive and quality education system for children" will be achieved through: (1) Continuous improvement and consolidation of a free and quality public education system in the preschool and compulsory education levels; (2) Children's inclusion in the learning process, regardless of their ethnicity, disability and geographic location or the socio-economic conditions of their family; (3) Reduction of school dropout rate.

The Strategic Objective of "Increasing child participation in the decision-making process within and out of the school" depends on the following sub-objectives: (1) Continuous and effective participation of children in the decision-making regarding the teaching methods to be used, and in the activities within and out of the school; (2) Promotion of children's rights.

The inter-sectoral action plan for children is an important reform for the children with disabilities' inclusion process and for the protection of their rights; however, adequate funds and clear monitoring and evaluation plans are needed from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities and the Line Ministries (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Innovation and Information and Communication Technology, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior Affairs), and from the Local Government Units, as well as cooperation with NGOs, to ensure its concrete implementation.¹⁷

17. The Plan on the Measures for Strategic Objectives Implementation, part of the "Integrated Plan for Children 2012-2015", lists the responsibilities of the collaborating institutions and the financial resources for its implementation, but often the latter is not specified in figures.

Fourth Part

International conventions on Disability

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, United Nations, 2006

The purpose of the Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

As a state party to the Convention since 2009, Albania observes the principles declared in it and has the primary obligation to undertake institutional policies and make improvements to the legislative framework in full compliance with the Convention.

*Since the right of children with disabilities to access **equal and quality education** is highlighted in this Convention, the Albanian government must ensure that education in the country is allied to these principles.*

General principles:

The principles consist of: the respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices; non-discrimination; full and effective participation and inclusion in society; respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity; equality of opportunity; accessibility; equality between men and women; respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities. They also comprise the principle of inclusion which implies the creation of a society that provides equal opportunities for all.

The inclusion process is based on legal instruments and institutional policies that guarantee inclusion as an alternative to exclusion for all persons with disabilities, and facilitate their access to education and to society on a basis of equality and quality.

Article 24, which refers to education, states: "States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

(a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity; (b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential; (c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society”.

An awareness campaign on the implementation of the rights recognized by the Convention is a necessary measure to be taken by responsible institutions in Albania in order for inclusive education to be comprehensible and sensitive to the society.

Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 1950:

The convention protects the rights of everybody, including children with disabilities.

European Social Charter, revised in 1996¹⁸:

Specifically its articles 15, 16 and 17 guarantee the right to independence, social integration and participation in community life; the right of the family to social, legal and economic protection; and the right of children and young people to be raised in an environment that encourages the full development of their personality and of their physical and mental capacities.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ratified by Albania on 1990.

This document specifies that every child has the right to free, equal and quality education.

Salamanca Declaration, UNESCO, 1994

The Declaration specifies that every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning; every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs; education

18. The Republic of Albania has ratified this International Act with Law no. 8960, dated 24.10.2002, published in the Official Journal no. 75, dated November 22nd 2002, page 2087.

systems should be designed and teaching programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs. Schools shall have the necessary mechanisms to combat discrimination and achieve inclusion.

Albania has agreed to achieve all the UN Millennium Development Goals and the UNESCO Education for All by the year 2015. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education¹⁹ is another important document in this context. This statement reaffirms the commitment to Education for All, especially recognizing the urgency and necessity of providing education for all children, young people, and adults and the principle that ordinary schools should accommodate all children.

19. UNESCO. (1994). The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education adopted by the world conference on special needs education: Access and quality. Paris: UNESCO.

Fifth Part

General recommendations

- ***The legislation, institutional policies and protocol of the Albanian Government must be coordinated*** and must conform to the international legislation and recommendations regarding the children with disabilities' right to social and educational inclusion.
- ***A national awareness campaign must be promoted***, aimed at informing the parents, the families, the society and the responsible institutions (education institutions, health institutions, social services, child protection units and the like) on the right of children with disabilities to receive a quality and inclusive education on an equal basis as their peers, and on the rights of disabled children and disabled people in general.
- ***The infrastructure of education institutions' buildings*** must be improved, according to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in order to meet the standards of Universal Design²⁰ on the physical access for children with disabilities.
- ***The Work Capability Assessment Commission (WCAC) must revise its form and methodology of working*** by incorporating a multidisciplinary team of professionals. The assessment of disability should not only be based on the medical diagnoses but also on the need for education, rehabilitation, socio-cultural inclusion, and other aspects of life. Consequently, the implementation of the biopsychosocial model²¹ of disability diagnostics and treatment is needed. The Commission must also design formation policies for informing families, kindergartens, schools, social services units and the entire public opinion on issues related to disability.

20. "Universal design" means the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. "Universal design" shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed. – This standard has been adopted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

21. A model defined by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. It has also been adopted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

- **Concrete measures must be taken to increase the number of teachers qualified on inclusive education.** The provision of teachers with capacities to include every student on an equal and quality basis, regardless of their needs, can be achieved through training modules on disability; cooperation with specialists of the field, psychologists and/or social workers; awareness campaigns; designing and formalizing of procedures and guidelines on children with disabilities' education in mainstream schools and kindergartens; and establishing positive cooperation with teachers of special schools in order to exchange experiences and information on the practices of working with children with disabilities. An important precondition for the preparation of teachers and education specialists able to work in inclusive schools is the introduction of disability issues in the university curricula (3-year programs and master programs) of the faculties of education.
- *The Ministry of Education must **take measures for the appointment of support teachers**²² in mainstream schools, who would provide specialized support and services to facilitate the full and effective participation of children with disabilities in the didactic process and in extracurricular activities.*
- **The decentralisation of schools** in terms of decision-making and management is needed, as a process that facilitates the increase of children with disabilities' participation and the improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. Decentralisation enables schools to draw plans for the improvement of the didactic process, in collaboration with Education Authorities and Offices, parents and groups of interest.
In order to improve the quality of services and education policies, schools must ensure the necessary resources for the achievement of inclusive education. To increase education quality, the education institutions must integrate into their programs the use of support materials such as the "Index for Inclusion" and the UNESCO "Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-friendly Environments", which are also recommended by the Progress-Report Albania 2010.
The approach to the best practices of inclusive schools such as the application of the Index for Inclusion²³ is a key element in ensuring quality and equality in education. The Index for Inclusion is a set of materials to guide schools through the development of inclusive education by building supportive and promoting structures within mainstream schools. The introduction of the Index for Inclusion as an integral part of new or existing policies enables schools to analyse cultures, policies and practices for the identification of barriers to inclusion, and to independently set the

22. Law on Pre-university Education, approved on July 2012, Article 65, paragraph 3.

23. Index for Inclusion – Enabling Education Network www.eenet.org.uk/index_inclusion/index_inclusion

priorities for change and the progress evaluation methods.

The decentralisation reform guarantees that the reporting of education institutions²⁴ on the implementation of rights and the achievement of quality education for children with disabilities will be more transparent and tangible to the beneficiaries of the education service.

- ***The curricular reform*** must aim at encouraging the personal and intellectual abilities/trends as well as the satisfaction of children with disabilities' special needs. The MoES must increase its capacities in order to be able to provide the institutional mechanisms needed for the introduction of inclusive education into the adapted school curricula. *When necessary, the basic curriculum in mainstream schools must be adapted to the needs of children with disabilities disabilities. This must be made in conformity with their physical, mental, social and ethic development and their individual learning characteristic²⁵. The development of Individual Education Plans (IEP) creates facilitating conditions for the inclusion of children with disabilities. The improvement of the cooperation between education specialists, psychologists, social workers, experienced teachers, researchers of the field, and the Institute of Educational Development and the REAs and EOs would enable a flexible curricula, accessible to all students, which could satisfy children with disabilities' needs.*
- ***The building and strengthening of institutional capacities for the collection of data and statistics*** on children with disabilities is a key condition for the identification of exclusion barriers and the evaluation of children with disabilities' inclusion indicators. *The monitoring of the means used and of the actions taken to improve inclusive education requires the creation of a data system, coordinated by all the institutions in charge. The creation of the data system on inclusive education must be based, among other things, on the collaboration with the nongovernmental organizations and the civil society actors engaged in the field.*

24. Law on University Education, approved on 2012

25. Law on University Education, approved on 2012, Chapter VII, Article 44

Annex I:

List of instruments examined for the purposes of the study

- *Albania 2009 Progress Report, European Commission.*
http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press_corner/key-documents/reports_nov_2009_en.htm
- *Report on the Monitoring of the Implementation of the National Strategy for People with Disabilities – Albania Disability Rights Foundation, 2008.*
- *Albania 2010 Progress Report, European Commission*
http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press_corner/key-documents/reports_nov_2010_en.htm
- *Tables of the children with disabilities' school enrolment in Albania (Source: Ministry of Education and Science, 2012).*
- *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health – World Health Organization.*
- *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities - United Nations, 1993*
www.un.org/disabilities/documents/.../crpd_albanian.pdf
- *Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education*
www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E
- *Enabling Education Network (EENET)*
- *Disability Equality in the Classroom: A human Right Issue - A book of Richard Rieser and Micheline Mason*
- *Dakar Framework for Action, United Nations, 2000.*
www.unesco.org/education/wef/en-conf/dakfram.
- *The Social Model of Disability – Rieser, 2001.*
www.inclusive-solutions.com/childrensattitudetoinclusion.asp
- *Constitution of the Republic of Albania, 2007.*
- *Law 10 221, dated 04.02.2010, On Protection from Discrimination*
- *Civil Code, updated on 2009.*
- *Law 9062, dated 8.5.2003, The Family Code*

- *Law on Mental Health, 2012.*
- *Law 69/2012, On Pre-university Education.*
- *Law 9355, dated 10.3.2005, amended by Law 10 399, dated 17.3.2011, On Social Assistance and Services.*
- *Secondary legislation (Normative Acts) on Pre-university Education, 2002.*
- *Guideline No. 31 for the academic year 2011-2012 in the pre-university education system.*
- *National Strategy for People with Disabilities, 2005.*
- *National Strategy for Development and Integration, 2007.*
- *Inter-sectoral Strategy for Social Inclusion 2007-2013.*
- *The report of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs on the monitoring of the implementation of the Inter-sectoral Strategy for Social Inclusion 2007-2013*
- *National Strategy on Pre-university Education 2009-2013.*
- *Integrated Plan of the Ministry of Education, 2010.*
- *Action Plan for Children 2012 2015 - MoLSAEO.*
- *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – United Nations, 2006.*
- *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.*
- *European Social Charter, revised in 1996.*
- *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.*
- *Salamanca Declaration - UNESCO, 1994.*
- *Index for Inclusion, ENNET.*
www.eenet.org.uk/index_inclusion/index_inclusion
- *Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-friendly Environments, UNESCO*
[www.unescobkk.org/education/inclusive.ilfe-toolkit/](http://www.unescobkk.org/education/inclusive/ilfe-toolkit/)

Second stage of the study

Physically present in school but not participating in it: situation of children with disabilities in the kindergartens and 9-year schools of Albania

INTRODUCTION

Although increasing attention is being paid to the factors affecting the improvement of the quality of education for children with disabilities, now seen as the most challenging category within the general group of children with special needs, as of today, there have been only a few studies conducted in this field. This study aims to examine the legislative framework and collect objective evidence in order to present the current situation of children with disabilities in kindergartens and schools all over Albania. It also seeks to analyze the findings – an input to help the related institutions to take concrete steps forward to improve the situation, through designating effective policies, strategies and instruments as essential measures in the implementation of the new law on pre-university education approved in mid 2012.

The study is also particularly pertinent, at this time, when many priorities are competing for the limited financial resources available within the MoES. It is extremely important for the policy-makers of the Ministry and for the nongovernmental community to have empiric data to guide them towards a more objective distribution of these resources. The working group that conducted this study hopes and believes that its recommendations will contribute to a clearer guidance in this direction.

At the same time, the study will be useful to organizations operating in the field by helping them understand what works and what fails to work, so that they may focus their energies and resources on the right issues.

The study mainly focuses on mainstream schools since, based on Save the Children's experience, they are the most suitable places to meet the needs of all children with disabilities for an equal education. As it will be explained throughout the study, rather than simply increasing the number of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, which does not definitively solve the problem, this material helps us understand that if these children feel unwanted and unloved at school or

are unable to keep up the school program, sooner or later they will “give up” by dropping out. For this reason, we need to thoroughly understand the barriers to full participation and success in school as well as the ways these barriers can be overcome.

Save the Children, in collaboration with a number of other international and national organizations operating in the field of education and focussing on the rights of children with disabilities, has been working for some years now on changing the educational situation of children with disabilities and providing equal education opportunities to them.

This study is one of the key activities of the initial phase of the “Inclusive Education for children with disabilities in Albania” Project, financed by the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region and Save the Children Italy, and implemented in Albania through a cooperation between Save the Children, Medpak and MoES. The project seeks to address two major needs – the need to ensure the right of children with disabilities to inclusive education is realised and the need to build and strengthen the capacities of the responsible institutions in responding to the first need, and therefore this study helps to introduce the current situation of the education of children with disabilities.

The findings of this study will help the planning and designing of further studies; therefore, it can be seen as the first step of a long journey. Evidently, we choose to present here only a brief summary of all the data and information collected, more as an overview of the general situation of children with disabilities in the country, mainly focusing on urban areas but also providing an outline of all the dynamics and realities of schools and children with disabilities in rural areas.

However, the main goal of the study was not the presentation of the situation but its analysis, including both the legislative framework and the field data. Therefore, all the data underwent an objective analysis. This was done in order to identify the primary interventions needed as well as the links between the various factors that can play a role in increasing the quality of education for children with disabilities. For this reason, in presenting the situation, the study does not only identify the obstacles and difficulties, but also the achievements and the positive practices and aspects related to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, as well as some of the issues and factors leading to these children dropping out of school or missing educational opportunities.

The input of the study is not conclusive; it is rather a good start that encourages and generates various paths for the development of more quality researches in the future.

By analyzing this data, we will be able to understand what happens to students with disabilities, and more concretely, what does the school community think of them, including not only staff and students but also the parents, both of children with and without disabilities; what the child’s progress is; what happens to him/

her at school; how does he/she learn; if he/she is provided with help; if the staff understands his/her needs; if he/she is given concrete opportunities to participate; how do the other children see him/her and so on. In summary, we think that for those who design and implement policies and strategies, this work will be eye-opening in terms of the reality and the factors contributing to the success in the education of children with disabilities. At the same time, it will serve to understand the more “obscure areas”, which will help us make a better planning for these students.

The study is also important for the area of inclusive education, the natural trend of education not only in our country, but also in the other countries of the region and of the world. Certainly, the review of this study and the conduction of similar studies are crucial, especially in developing countries such as Albania, which are yet to appropriately meet the needs of these students.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study aims to describe and analyse, with quantitative and qualitative elements, the situation of children with disabilities’ education in Albania. In analyzing the documentation and investigating the experiences and the education environments in all regions of the country, the study provides answers to some questions.

The main questions that are being answered in this study are:

- What is the number of children with disabilities in mainstream and special kindergartens and schools in Albania?
- What is the quality level of the children with disabilities’ education?
- What are the main barriers to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and schools?
- What are the level, organization and main needs of the structures and persons responsible for the education of children with disabilities in the country?
- What is the participation level of children with disabilities and their families in schools?
- What are the causes of these children’s dropout?
- What are the best practices, strengths, challenges and opportunities related to inclusive education?

The methodology of the study combines quantitative and qualitative methods, as the aim of the study and its objectives are quite broad and cover a large number of issues.

The findings of the study are wide ranging. Among the most important are:

- The number of children with disabilities attending compulsory education is very low compared to the general number of children with disabilities in the country. There is a general ambiguity and lack of data concerning the educational status of children with disabilities. The number of children with disabilities who attend special schools is almost the same as the number of children with disabilities attending mainstream schools. The two school systems work separately from one another, each one independently trying to affirm its identity and improve its quality.
- There is, in general, a visible gap between the requirements of the law on children with disabilities' education and the implementation of this law in practice.
- There are a large number of barriers, at all levels, to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and schools.
- The quality of the education for children with disabilities, both in mainstream and special schools, is very low.
- The structures monitoring the education of children with disabilities have shortcoming in their system, funds, organization, and level of knowledge on disabilities.
- Although, physically, a significant number of children with disabilities are attending schools, the real level of participation of these children in schools is very low and this participation is very difficult.
- There are a number of good practices in some pilot schools, conceived and implemented by NGOs in collaboration with the MoES.

The study **and its findings** are submitted to a more thorough analysis at all levels of education, from the monitoring level, right up to the implementation level, and from the level of the decision-making institutions and their dependent structures, to the schools. The analysis tries to establish the connections between the main facts and factors affecting the improvement in quality of children with disabilities' education.

The main recommendations of the study include:

- The improvement of the cooperation and coordination of the work among the line ministries (MoES; MoLSAEO, MoH) and the local institutions in order to coordinate all the services provided to these children and their families.
- The designing of new instruments or the further development of the existing ones including: drafting new secondary legislation (normative acts), developing strategies and action plans for inclusion, improving the curriculum.
- The training and qualification of the staff working with children with

disabilities in kindergartens and schools and the designing of focused training modules.

- The assigning of support teachers to every school attended by children with disabilities, determining their working hours based on the level of the child's disability and difficulties.
- The adaptation of programs by the related departments in universities in order to provide future teachers with the necessary knowledge and practices for working with children with disabilities in mainstream schools.
- The creation of joint commissions at a district level with specialists from the health units as well as from the special and mainstream schools.
- Early identification of the nature of the child's disability and early intervention.
- The need to include, monitor and encourage private kindergartens and schools in the implementation of the law on the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and schools.
- Awareness-raising campaigns on the inclusion of children with disabilities.
- The conduction of further surveys and studies to create an exhaustive database on the education level and status of children with disabilities in relation to their type of disability, their age, their gender, their location, etc.

CHAPTER I

EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ALBANIA

The basic principles of the Albanian education system are embodied in the Constitution of Albania which, together with the main laws, the legal acts and other important instruments, considers the sector of education a national priority. Each Albanian citizen has the right to all levels of education, regardless of their status, nationality, language, gender, religion, political beliefs, health condition, and economic situation.

The legal basis regulating compulsory and upper secondary education is summarized in the law on pre-university education, no. 62/2012, approved by the Parliament of the Republic of Albania on June 21st 2012.

The MoES is the highest public administrative institution in the education sector. This institution is responsible for the administration of the education system at a national level. The MoES approves the basic dispositions for education institutions, the school programs and the curriculum, and provides guidelines for each new academic year.

The pre-university education system in Albania has the following structure:

1. *Preschool education* includes children of 3-6 years old. At the age of five, children are given the possibility to attend preparatory classes. These classes, which can also be attended at basic education schools, aim at integrating the child into the compulsory education system.
2. *Basic education* includes primary education and lower secondary education. It lasts 9 years and is mandatory by law. Primary education consists of 6 grades, going from the first to the sixth grade. Lower secondary education consists of three grades, going from the seventh to the ninth grade. Children who reach the age of 6 on or before the first day of school can enrol in the first grade.
3. *Upper secondary education* starts with the tenth grade of full-time education. Only students under 18 are accepted. Students may attend the three-year upper secondary education until they reach the age of twenty-one, and the four-year upper secondary education until the age of twenty-two. Students who reach the age of twenty-one and twenty-two in the case of the three and four-year upper secondary education respectively, who have not completed

the upper secondary education, are allowed to continue attending the grade they are in until the end of that academic year. The types of upper secondary education are gymnasium, secondary vocational education, and oriented secondary education (art schools, sports schools, foreign language schools and other schools oriented to specific learning areas).

This education system applies to the entire country and is integral, meaning that each education level is a logical and natural continuation of the previous one.

Compulsory basic education also includes the specialized schools for children with physical and mental disabilities.

In many villages with small numbers of inhabitants there are so-called subordinate schools, which are managed by the nearest 9-year school. In the elementary cycle, the same teacher teaches all subjects. In those schools where the courses take place on a multi-grade basis due to an insufficient number of students, the courses for two grades are taught by the same teacher in parallel (grades I and III or grades II and IV).

The upper cycle covers grades 7 to 9. After its completion, students have to pass the exams of the basic subjects and they are given a Clearance Certificate.

General secondary education is considered to be very important within the education system. The right to attend this education level is a constitutional right. It generally lasts 3 years, except for the professional schools which last 4 years. During the last years, the professional education has been increasingly gaining importance and space within this cycle. After the completion of the cycle, students are given a Maturity Certificate.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ALBANIA – A CONCISE OVERVIEW

The first efforts on inclusive education in Albania date from the beginning of 1990s. In the 1994-2000 period, thanks to the support of many international organizations, the first inclusive projects were run in kindergartens and schools around the country. Although the first results were promising, due to the lack of financial support by the government, these projects gradually reduced their impact until coming to a halt. During the same period, despite the efforts of different organisations, the main efforts of the leading education institutions were focused on building and improving conditions in special institutions and schools such as the institute of deaf students, the institute of blind students and the special schools in different districts, all established since the 1960s.

In the Secondary Legislation (Normative Acts) on Public Education of 1996, for the first time the idea that the integration of children with special needs into

mainstream schools was an irreversible and modern process, and the best thing for the children and the schools was expressed. Everything depended however, on the type of curriculum, the school organization, the teachers' availability, and their ability to respond to the students' diversity.

On 1997, the Child Development Centre in Tirana undertook a project which aimed at integrating CWDs into mainstream schools. In parallel with the first integrative practices, an interest arose in identifying CWDs at a national level and in really getting to know their problems related to education.

In the 2000-2001 period, the "Integrated Special Education" Project of MEDPAK launched its first phase. The project was able to successfully combine the modern model of inclusive education with our general education experience, thus generating an Albanian version of inclusion. Thanks to this project, the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream schools located near their residences was finally made possible.²⁶

The success of the abovementioned project encouraged MoES to approve, in December 2002, the Secondary Legislation on Pre-school Education which for the first time introduced the concept of inclusive education as well as a number of rules enabling its implementation in practice. However, this secondary legislation did not include some of the main requirements nor the basic services for these students such as the presence of a support teacher, of the IEP development team, etc.

On July 2003, Save the Children and "Help the Life" association started a project aiming to build an experience on inclusive education interventions at an earlier stage of education before compulsory education started.

In 2004, the National Strategy for People with Disabilities was approved. The policies for children with disabilities' education occupy an important place within this strategy.

The completion of the legislative framework prompted a number of initiatives and efforts on inclusive education.

Save the Children, in collaboration with "Help the Life" and MEDPAK associations, the Regional Education Authority of Berat and the Ministry of Education and Science, has since 2004 been supporting the process of children with disabilities' education in compulsory education schools. Thanks to this support, a significant number of children with disabilities or learning difficulties in the cities of Tirana, Berat and Librazhd have been receiving a higher quality education adapted to their individual characteristics. Since 2008, by request and with the support of MoES, this project has been expanded into three other districts, namely Vlora, Gjirokastra and Korça.

Another big step in the long journey towards inclusive education was also the new law, approved in June 21st 2012, which promises to take the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and schools to another level.

26. Ndrio, M. "Vlerësimi i faktorëve që kontribuojnë në zbatimin praktik të arsimit gjithëpërfshirës" World Vision, Tirana 2012.

CHAPTER 2

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The methodology of the study combines quantitative and qualitative methods, as the aim of the study and its objectives are quite broad and cover a large number of issues.

The methodology chosen is composed of two parts or stages, which can also be seen as two separate studies:

During the first stage the whole legislative framework and strategic programs supporting inclusive education for children with disabilities in Albania were examined and analysed. The data synthesis in this stage was made by analysing the following material:

- a. Official data sources on children with disabilities in Albania.
- b. Legislation and secondary legislation related to inclusion.
- c. Studies on the inclusion of children with disabilities in Albania, in particular those conducted during the last years.
- d. Data/reports coming from various bodies on the level of children with disabilities' inclusion and the barriers encountered in its implementation.
- e. Other international sources (regional studies or reports Albania has been part of)

The second stage of the study was based on instruments that aimed at the collection of field data. The instruments built for such purpose were the following:

- a. One structured questionnaire for the education authorities and the education offices of the main districts in Albania, which aimed at collecting information on the situation of children with disabilities in each district (infrastructure, resources and the like). The data collected by this questionnaire were mainly quantitative.
- b. Two half-structured questionnaires for the conduction of focus-groups with a large number of people.
- c. One structured questionnaire aimed at collecting quantitative and qualitative information from the special schools.

The structured questionnaires were firstly piloted in Tirana. They were designed to collect quantitative data from all the compulsory education schools in the country, including special schools, within a short time. A lot of data on the number of children with disabilities in kindergartens and schools, the types of disabilities,

the infrastructural barriers and the various needs were collected through these questionnaires.

The collection (from some categories/groups involved in inclusion) of qualitative data on the reality of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and schools aimed to better understand their reality by exploring questions such as: What happens in the environment around students with disabilities? What are the main barriers children with disabilities encounter in mainstream kindergartens and schools? What are the main educational needs of children with disabilities? What is the attitude of the various factors in the school towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in it? What are the staff's perceptions, role, behaviour and knowledge on the education of children with disabilities in their school? What are the positive aspects of the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools? How does the presence of children with disabilities in mainstream schools affect the others?

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of the study is to explore and analyse the situation of children with disabilities' education in Albania, mainly focusing on the barriers and difficulties. In order to achieve this aim, the following objectives were set:

- a. Identify the number of children with disabilities in mainstream and special kindergartens and schools in Albania.
- b. Explore the quality level of children with disabilities' education.
- c. Explore the main barriers to the education of CWDs in mainstream kindergartens and schools.
- d. Identify the level, organization and main needs of the structures and persons responsible for the education of children with disabilities in the country.
- e. Assess the level of children with disabilities' and their families' participation in schools.
- f. Identify the reasons for children with disabilities' dropout.
- g. Identify the best practices, strengths, challenges and possibilities posed by inclusive education.

The sample of the study

Many people participated in the study. The first structured questionnaire was distributed in all the REAs and EOs. The second one was distributed in all the special schools in the country.

In the focus group selection process, the Broad Involvement Design²⁷ was used in order to achieve a representative sample.

Based on this sampling technique, the selection of the sample for the focus groups was made by taking into account the number of kindergartens and 9-year schools in each district, and the 8 categories selected for the focus groups (which are listed below).

The total number of focus groups organized in all the country was 29. This number is not only based on the number of kindergartens and schools but also on the general number of teachers and students in each district.

The participants in the focus groups were school directors, teachers, students and parents. Based on the data on 9-year public schools and their locations, a maximum number of 10 participants for each focus group was selected. The selection of participants was made in collaboration with the REAs, giving priority to the schools and participants with a significant experience in working with children with disabilities.

The categories selected for the focus groups were:

Category 1 – Teachers of mainstream kindergartens and schools

Category 2 – Students of mainstream schools

Category 3 – Parents of children without disabilities

Category 4 – Mainstream school directors

Category 5 – Representatives of the related REAs and EOs

Category 6 – Parents of children with disabilities

Category 7 – MoES, NIPE and IED representatives

Category 8 – Specialists working with CWDs

For the collection of qualitative data, the authors also interviewed a number of key persons in the field of children with disabilities' education (education specialists, and directors and specialists of the MoES and its subordinate institutions), and visited 12 mainstream and special schools, some of them randomly selected and others already part of pilot projects on the inclusion of CWDs in mainstream schools.

27. The Broad Involvement Design technique is one of the four types of focus-group designing. This type of designing is mainly used for studies with a broad public interest. It enables the participation of all the groups related to the phenomenon under analysis, giving priority to the group that represents the main data source. The other groups are included in the focus groups on a smaller scale.

Data analysis

The study provides a significant number of quantitative and qualitative data. The data collected during the study were analyzed in the following ways:

- Quantitative data, collected from the structured questionnaires with the help of the SPSS program, were analyzed using elements of descriptive statistics.
- Qualitative data, mainly collected from the focus groups and interviews, were analysed using the content analysis method.

CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY – AN OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION FROM THE FIELD

Introduction

This chapter reflects the most important findings the group of researchers came across by using various methods of information collection during the research process:

The education systems currently implemented in Albania for children with disabilities are those of inclusive, integrative and special education, although in some cases, the differentiation between inclusive and integrative education is not made by the REAs and EOs directors and specialists included. For many years, the MoES has built a system of special schools, while some NGOs are implementing projects for the promotion of the inclusive system. Currently in Albania, there are 7 special schools and 2 institutes, respectively for blind and deaf students. The inclusive school system has been introduced in the country only in these last years and is being piloted by NGOs. According to the data provided by the MoES, a small number of inclusive schools are being piloted by Save the Children and Medpak. During the last years, there have also been other efforts by other organizations, mainly at a local level, targeting one specific category of disability or several ones, but data on these projects often are missing or are not always completely reliable.

The research team learned a lot about the barriers to inclusion, the monitoring system, the main characteristics and dynamics of inclusion in different areas and places in the country, and the best practices piloted in Albania in the field of children with disabilities' education.

The quantitative data is mainly based on the data received by the Regional Education Authorities, which are responsible for implementing development policies for pre-university education at a regional level, managing human resources, guaranteeing the quality in public and non-public schools, and organizing the teachers' certification in the region through the cooperation with specialized institutions. There are 14 in total and they are located in 12 districts. In order to have nationwide representative data, and with the aim of understanding the characteristics of urban and rural areas, the questionnaires were also distributed in Education Offices, located in 24 municipalities, which are responsible of the progress of the didactic-educational process, the human resources management, the collection of statistical

information, the supervision of curricular and extracurricular classes and activities, and the management of financial resources.

3.1. Statistical data on children with disabilities in kindergartens and 9-year schools in Albania.

According to data provided by INSTAT, the number of children with disabilities enrolled in compulsory education is 2,400 (including the children with disabilities enrolled in special schools). This number represents only 0.5% of the total number of children enrolled in compulsory education²⁸.

The Ministry of Education and Science distinguishes the following categories of disability: mental disabilities, physical (motor) disabilities, mental and physical disabilities, visual disabilities, hearing disabilities, speech disabilities, and autism.

Based on this categorization, and on the data received through the questionnaires distributed in all the REAs and EOs about children enrolled in preschool and 9-year education for the 2011-2012 academic year, we were able to provide the following statistics regarding children with disabilities:

3.1.1 Total number of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and 9-year schools according to the data provided by REAs and EOs

Table 1: Number and percentage of children with disabilities as compared to the total number of students enrolled in mainstream education.

Number and percentage of children with disabilities compared to the total number of students enrolled in mainstream education	
Number of CWDs in kindergartens	511/103,492 0.49%
Number of CWDs in 9-year schools	3167/472891 0.64%
Total	3678/576383 0.63%

28. <http://www.instat.gov.al>

Table 2. Table of the distribution of children with disabilities enrolled in mainstream education (kindergartens and schools) – Presented in percentages

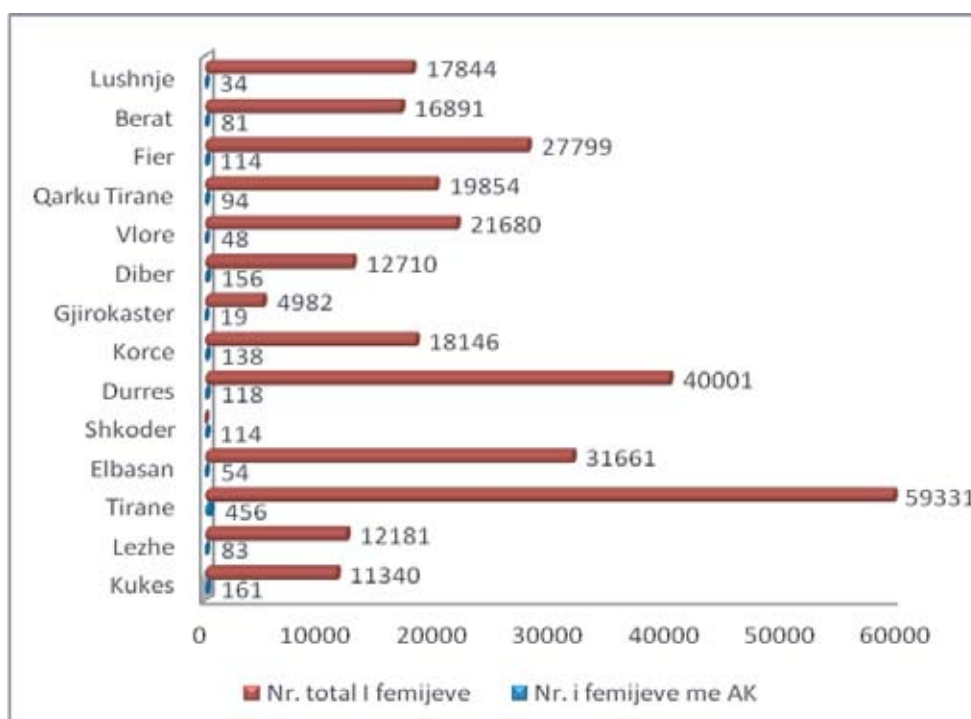
Distribution of children with disabilities who attend mainstream education	
CWDs in kindergartens	13,89%
CWDs in 9-year schools	86,11%
Total	100%

As shown by the tables above, the total number of children with disabilities enrolled in the mainstream kindergartens and schools of the country is 3678, of which 511 are enrolled in kindergartens, and 3167 in 9-year schools.

Children with disabilities enrolled in kindergartens make up 0.49% of the total number of children enrolled in kindergartens for the 2011-2012 academic year. Children with disabilities attending 9-year schools for the 2011-2012 academic year constitute 0.64% of the total number of enrolled students.

In the following charts we have represented the ratio between the number of children with disabilities, and the total number of the children in kindergartens and schools, according to REAs and EOs.

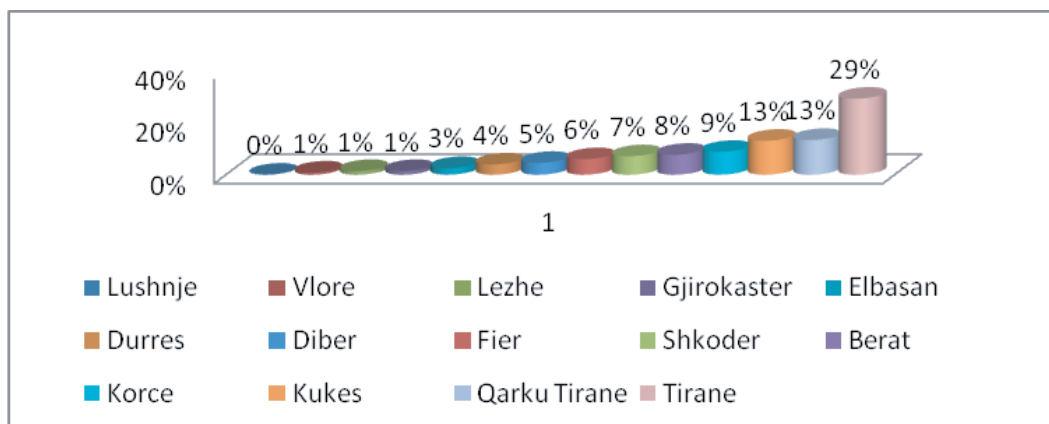
Chart 1: Number of children with disabilities compared to the total of number of children enrolled in kindergarten and schools divided by REAs.



3.1.2 Children with disabilities in kindergartens

The number of children with disabilities in kindergartens, according to the data reported by REAs and EOs, is **511**. By looking at these data, it becomes immediately evident that the children with disabilities enrolled in the kindergartens of Tirana represent the 29% of the total number of CWDs enrolled all over the country.

Chart 2: Distribution of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens

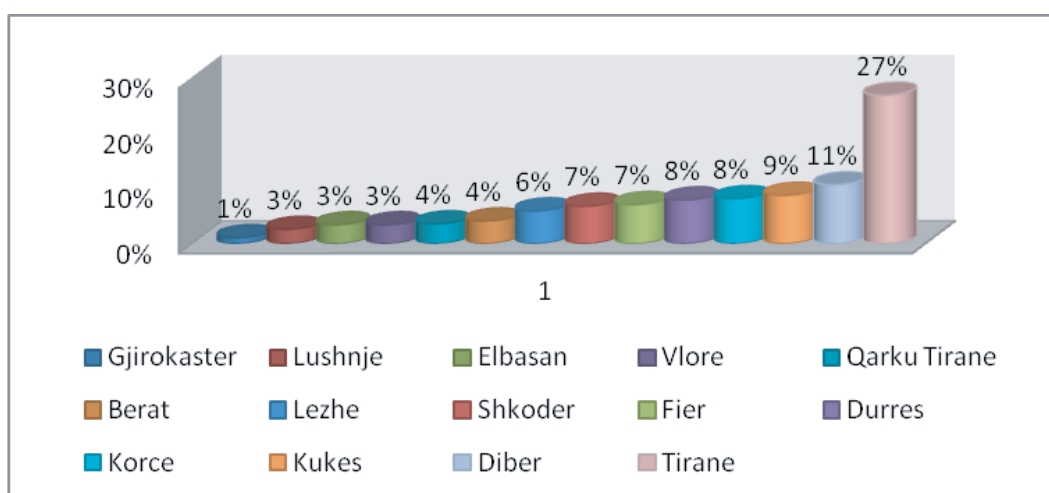


3.1.3 Children with disabilities in mainstream 9-year schools

The number of children with disabilities in mainstream 9-year schools as reported by REAs and EOs is 3167.

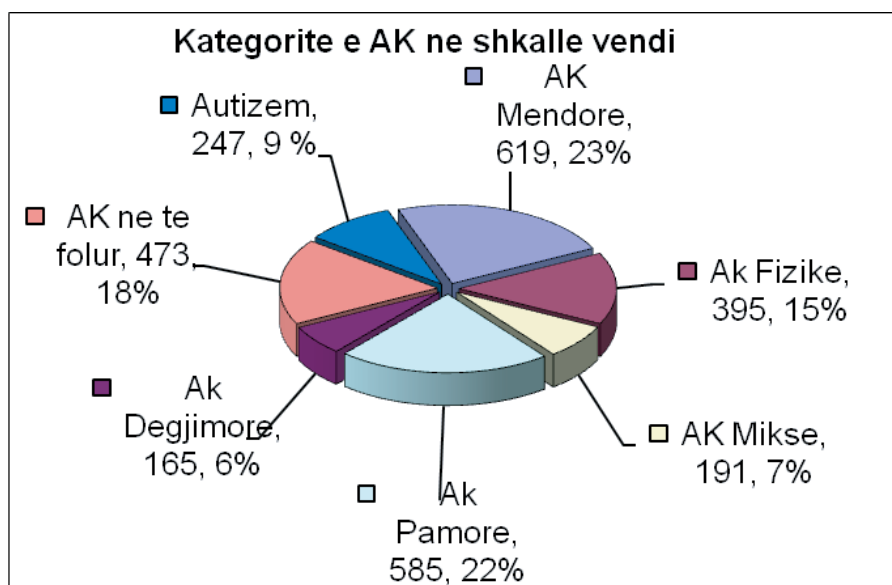
The percentage of children with disabilities in 9-year schools in all the country, according to the REAs and EOs, is:

Chart 3: Distribution of children with disabilities in 9-year schools



3.1.4 Statistical data on children with disabilities by category of disability

Chart 4: Number and percentage of children with disabilities in kindergartens and 9-year schools by category of disability



This categorization, reported by the responsible experts at REAs, takes into consideration the number of children with disabilities who have been officially diagnosed by medical commissions, and not the assumed number of children who have disabilities, therefore it excludes those who have not been diagnosed. According to the data collected from the interviews and focus groups, the number of children who show disability indicators but who have not been diagnosed is higher than the number of children reported as children with disabilities in the charts above.

Meanwhile, completely missing from the above data on children with disabilities are those who do not attend any form of preschool and compulsory education, neither in mainstream nor in special schools.

Reliability of statistical data

Most of the specialists who completed the questionnaires were asked, during the interviews and focus groups, about their answering method and data reliability. In general, the specialists interviewed stated that they had a lot of difficulties and were at times doubtful when completing the questionnaires. We learned about how they have collected these data from the reports of the directors of each kindergarten and school of the districts involved in the study. In many districts, the categorization of disability provided by the MoES is not clear and there is overlapping data, especially when it comes to categories such as mental and physical

disability, speech disability and autism. Some of the school directors, for instance, have recorded the same child in the autism category, as well as in the speech and mental disability ones. Often, school directors, but also REA and EO specialists, do not know the specificities and criteria of each of these categories. Another important factor which reduces the reliability of the data is the fact that the terms used in diagnosis by the medical commissions that assess the category of disability are different from those of disability categories applied by the MoES.

However, the statistical data provided above offers information on the field of children with disabilities' education and emphasises the basic indicators, trends, and incidence of disability in mainstream kindergartens and schools in Albania.

3.2. Main barriers to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and schools

The education of these children in the mainstream kindergartens and schools of the country is hindered by a large number of barriers to learning and participation. These barriers are structural, pedagogical, conceptual, professional, financial, and behavioural. They relate to the students, are found within the schools, within the education system, within the families and within the larger economical, political and social context.

Barriers manifest themselves in different ways and become clearer only when the teaching process fails, when students drop out of schools, or when they do not even enrol in it.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments used in this study enabled a significant number of findings related to the barriers for children with disabilities to compulsory education.

Access in the school context has to do with physical access (ramps, accessible toilets, and other accessibility needs), access to communication (sign language, didactic material in Braille), and access to the curriculum. The findings of this study try to reflect these three types of access.

3.2.1 Infrastructure and physical environment

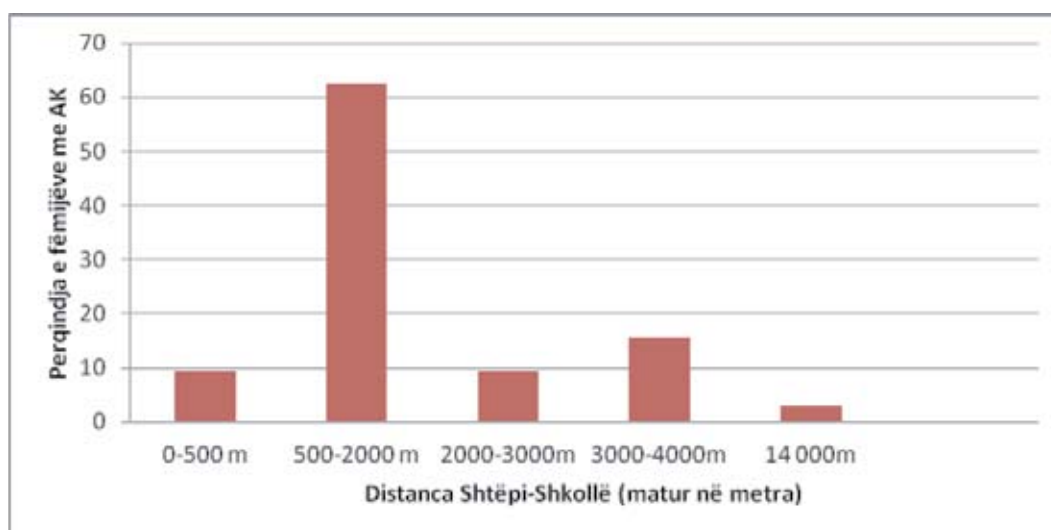
Although adaptations have been made to the infrastructure of kindergartens and schools (especially in the cities), aiming at facilitating the access to the classroom and school environments, the existing infrastructure in general is not disabled-friendly. In most of the schools, this adaptation of the infrastructure has been limited to the placement of ramps at the school entrances and in the ground floor, but not in other floors. Very few kindergartens and schools provide an fully accessible infrastructure for children with disabilities.

The data below, received from REA and EO specialists, provide statistics related to the transportation of children with disabilities to schools:

Transportation

Distance from home to school

**Chart 5: Distance from home to school for children with disabilities
(measured in meters)**



The x axis represents the distance children with disabilities have to cross to reach their school

The y axis represents the percentage of CWDs travelling from home to school

The distance that children with disabilities have to travel between the schools and their homes is 500-2000m in 62.5% of the cases and 3000-4000m in 15.6% of the cases, while 9.4% of the interviewees refer to the distance as 'normal' without specifying it in meters (implying a distance of 0-500m).

There are also cases such as the one of a child with disabilities in Mallakashtra, who has to travel 14 km to reach the school.

Although 37.5% of children with disabilities travel the distance from school to home on foot, in more than 85% of the cases they are accompanied by someone else, who can be a family member or a schoolmate.

However, data collected from the focus groups show that in urban areas the lack of transportation is not seen as an important barrier to children with disabilities' inclusion in mainstream kindergartens and schools. This barrier seems to more significantly affect the families of children with disabilities in rural areas, especially those in the most remote areas, which is where the highest number of children with disabilities who do not attend any form of education resides. Special

schools make particular efforts to reach these children, as in the case of the special school in Durrës, which provides transportation every day for a large number of students (about 25) who come from rural areas. However, in general, due to a lack of funds, special schools often fail to provide this service to children with disabilities living in rural areas and in particular those living in remote areas with a poor road infrastructure.

3.1.2 Physical state of the kindergartens' and 9-year schools' buildings

REA representatives report that 35% of all kindergartens' and 9-year schools' buildings meet the conditions for the inclusion of children with disabilities. The school and kindergarten directors relate this fact to the buildings' renovation and restructuring; however, ramps are the only element in the buildings that enables access for children with disabilities. In very few cases, adaptations of the toilets are also reported.

Observations and interviews conducted in a large number of public mainstream kindergartens and schools show that buildings are not accessible and disabled-friendly. In the schools we visited, all facilitating elements are missing, except for the ramps at the school entrances. For this reason, children with physical disabilities are placed in the classrooms of the ground floor of the school; the other floors are not accessible.

Most of the kindergarten and school directors are not able to identify what needs to be adapted in the building in order to enable the inclusion of the various disability categories.

The infrastructure of kindergarten and school buildings is under the responsibility of municipalities and communes, which, in the questionnaires, mention the lack of financial resources as the main reason for the not improving the school infrastructure.

Classrooms and number of students per classroom

In general, classrooms are not set up to become more accessible for children with disabilities (do not have appropriate desk arrangement, non-skid flooring, etc.). In mainstream schools, except for a few schools in some cities, which are part of a project on inclusive education, resource rooms, support spaces or other special classrooms are missing.

Local representatives report having asked for support for children with disabilities, including the creation of resource rooms, but have not received this support yet.

Classrooms are not big, which makes the access and mobility of children with physical disabilities more difficult; they are overcrowded, especially in urban areas where, in some cases, the average number of children per classroom exceeds 32.

There are frequent cases in which the number of students per classroom is as much as 40²⁹. In many of the schools, classes are organized in shifts. This overcrowding makes the mobility and personal space in the classroom very difficult, especially for children with physical and visual disabilities.

Assistive equipment, tools and technology

The REA directors state that, in more than 60% of kindergartens and schools, the didactic material is not suitable to the disabled students' needs, and, in more than 25% of the cases, the didactic material and equipment is only partially suitable.

Adaptations, such as the provision of instructions in sign language and instructions and didactic material in Braille for children with hearing and visual disabilities, are not made.

The data collected from focus groups and interviews also highlight other details worth mentioning. In many cases, teachers try to adapt the environment and use the support equipment that is available such as school laptops, calculators, and specific programs.

3.2.3 Documentation

Teachers only pay attention to the documentation related to children with disabilities which they are required to keep by school directors, specialists and inspectors. However, in most of the cases they do not record in these documents the real work made with these children; very few of them record objectively in their journal or notebook the work they actually do with these children to identify their steps and achievements during the school years. Even fewer teachers document in a special file all the work done with children with disabilities. Consequently, in most cases, the whole experience and the achievements of the child cannot be passed on when the teacher changes. In the final report card, which is the official final evaluation document, nothing from the 3-level objectives³⁰ work is reflected. As a result, the teacher cannot reflect the work done with the child with disabilities and his/her evaluation.

29. According to Guideline No. 21, dated 23.07.2010 of the MoES, "for the first grade, classrooms are made of not less than 30 students, while for other grades they are made of not less than 32 students": <http://vet.al/files/ligje%20etj/Udhezimi%20Nr%2021%20Per%20normat%20e%20punes%20mesimore%20etj.pdf>. These figures are quite high compared to European standards in general: <http://www.teachingexpertise.com/articles/learning-about-education-from-our-european-neighbours-3203>

30. The Institute of Educational Development suggests to the teachers the development of three-level learning objectives. Teachers are required to set for students with intellectual disabilities and students with special needs minimum objectives which cover the 30% of the objectives of the program.

3.2.4 Quality of education in compulsory education structures

The curriculum

One of the most concerning barriers for children with disabilities is the curriculum. This is mainly related to its inflexibility, which stops it meeting the different needs of children with disabilities. The curriculum is too “overcrowded” for the children with various categories of disability, especially for children with intellectual disabilities.

One of the other key challenges for children with disabilities to access the curriculum is the lack of provision of adequate material and tools. The barriers become even bigger for children with severe disabilities who have no assistive technology, which would enable them to participate in the learning process. As a consequence, the teachers of students with mental disabilities often “design” the curricula and the teaching plans for these children with a main focus on teaching life skills and basic writing and reading.

Another important finding is the almost total lack, both in mainstream and special schools, of adapted textbooks for children with disabilities, such as large-print textbooks, simplified or supplemented textbooks, Braille textbooks, etc. The only exception is the institute of blind students which actually uses the Braille textbooks.

Teachers do not have any guideline on how to adapt the curriculum for students with disabilities. They often carry the dilemma of whether to adapt the curriculum for children with disabilities, or create an entirely new one. The teachers interviewed describe the great difficulties they encounter in this process, especially in the upper secondary education cycle and, in particular, with children with multiple mental disabilities or autism. Most of the teachers stress that the curriculum is more content-based rather than skills-based and is oriented towards the examinations, and that it has to be developed within a specific timeframe. For some students with disabilities, the curriculum provided in mainstream schools is not suitable, as they will never be able to pass the state exam. Thus, the curriculum becomes a recipe for failure in terms of quality education. Teachers suggest that these students need to have another curriculum which helps them in acquiring life skills.

For the development of individual education plans, teachers get some help from the publication “Objektivat minimale të domosdoshme të të nxënit” (Minimum necessary learning objectives)³¹. However, teachers have difficulties in adapting these minimum learning objectives for CWDs, especially those with severe disabilities.

Currently, the Ministry of Education and Science is concluding the long process of the development of a new curriculum. But, although one of the basic principles

31. Llambiri S. *Objektivat minimale të domosdoshme të të nxënit: braktisja e fshehtë*, Tirana; Tetova: Albas, 2004

of this curriculum was the principle of inclusion, which states that the curriculum must recognize, accept, respect and meet the needs, experiences, learning interests and values of all the groups of students, regardless of their origin”, - a principle that aims to build a curriculum that provides equal opportunities of individual success for every student – it seems that it has not taken into consideration as much as it should the learning needs of students with disabilities within the mainstream schools. From an initial evaluation of the documents of the new curriculum, it is observed that the teachers still do not have a guideline on how to meet the objectives and requirements of the curriculum for children with disabilities, and also that learning programs remain overcrowded, which is mainly due to the fact that they are more knowledge-based rather than learning skills-based, and that often they are not age-appropriate, exceeding students’ information processing capacities.

The failure of the learning process is also reflected in the mechanisms used to evaluate academic achievements. The evaluation and examination system is not suitable to children with disabilities. Exams and evaluations are made only as a formality and official exams for children with intellectual disabilities are in some cases completed by teachers themselves or by the other students as the exam is the same for all the students and not adapted to the capabilities and the development level of CWDs. Teachers are confused about the standards and criteria they have to apply in order to make an objective evaluation of these children. In confidence, teachers told us about cases in which children with disabilities had passed the final state exam and concluded “successfully” the 9-year school although they did not even know how to write and to read.

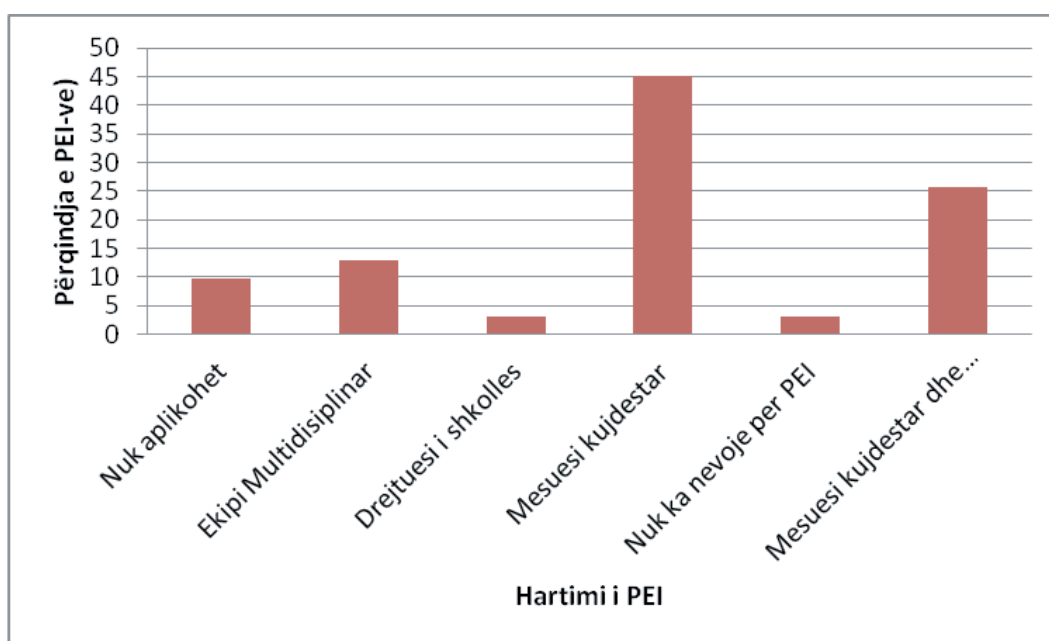
Knowing and developing the individual education plans

Data received from all the REAs show that 71.9% of the teachers know how to and do develop IEPs and only 12.5% do not know how to develop them.

It is worth pointing out that data coming from the EOs are qualitatively different from those coming from REAs (in particular those of the EOs of Lezhë, Krujë, Has, Kolonjë, and Kurbin); according to these data, not only do teachers not know about IEPs, but they are not even considered an important element.

In more than 50% of the cases in which they are developed, IEPs are designed by the responsible teachers alone, while in 25.8% of the cases they are designed by the teacher and the school psychologist.

Chart 6: Percentage of IEPs by persons who develop them



However, there are several problems related to the IEP development. Different districts apply different formats, depending on the organization they have been trained by. In some cases, the formats are different even between the schools of the same district.

The quality of the format in many cases is poor; it has nothing to do with the requirements and the format of the learning program, and includes very few learning objectives. Some of the teachers (about 35%) have not received any training how to prepare them, and the others, although they have been trained, encounter lots of difficulties in this process.

The interviewees also pointed out the fact that there is a big difference between the objectives set in the individual plans and the concrete work for their achievement. In general, these plans are designed more for the sake of being compliant with the documentation rather than to provide quality teaching to children with disabilities.

Organizing of the classes and teaching methods

The study's qualitative data provided valuable information on the way the classes are organized and on the teaching methods. In general, teachers still use passive teaching methods³²; student's tasks are individual, and there is very little, if any, group work or pair work. Teaching is still teacher-centred, especially in rural areas, where teachers continue to use the authoritarian teaching and communication style. Learning by rote instead of learning in a critical way is still a normal practice,

32. Passive teaching methods are considered the teacher-centred approaches.

paralleled by the lack of practical work and exchange of ideas.

Classes last 45 minutes, within which the teacher gives oral tests to the students, explains the new lesson, and assigns tasks. Teachers say that it is impossible for them to make separate work with students with disabilities in such a short time. The adaptation of the classes, tasks and other requirements for all children with disabilities seems to be objectively impossible. Students stay in their desks during the entire class, ideally without making any noise, and without having many opportunities to communicate with each other and to move. A large number of teachers in kindergartens and in the lower cycle of compulsory education, assign the child with disabilities tasks such as drawings, writing, and other similar “tasks”, for almost the whole duration of the class, in order to keep him or her “quiet”. There is a significant lack of communication between children with disabilities and teachers. This is not due to a lack of will to communicate as much as it is due to the inability and lack of information both teachers and other students have regarding effective and quality communication with children with disabilities. Not only the teachers, but also the other students are “responsible” for the behaviour of the child with disabilities, especially the desk-mate, who frequently intervenes to correct the behaviour of the child with disabilities. In many cases, desk-mates not only take care of the child with disabilities’ behaviour, but also help him/her, encouraged by the teacher, in the didactic-related tasks such as in taking out their books and notebooks, focusing on the assigned task, and so on.

The management of some students’ behaviour during the classes is a big concern for the school staff, but also for the parents and the community. Most of the teachers that were interviewed do not have the necessary expertise to manage these behaviours, and, in many areas, there is a lack of experts or of specialized departments in REAs and EOs for the management of these challenging behaviours. As a consequence, practices such as suspensions or expulsions are being increasingly applied in schools, especially to students who have not been assessed and are not legally recognized as disabled persons.

In general, CWDs are forced to stay in the classroom during the entire class and, in emergency cases (inappropriate behaviour, going to the toilet, etc), the teacher or one of the students accompany him/her outside. Sometimes, the guard or the cleaner are called and asked to accompany them.

“I tried so much to teach Ermal literacy and numeracy. Thanks to this, he achieved some success, but, after that, I couldn’t do anything. I often left him to play with toys or draw. Due to the lack of time to work with him separately, I tried at least to keep him busy with something, so he wouldn’t bother the others and the teaching process. I couldn’t do anything else in those conditions.”

Elementary teacher, Vlora

Stigma and discrimination

Children with disabilities experience stigma and verbal abuse at school and in the surrounding community. Parents say that quite frequently children with disabilities are called by the most offensive names by other students. In many cases children with disabilities in mainstream schools become victims of mockery and name-calling. The parent of a child diagnosed with Down's syndrome told us:

“Often, before entering the school to pick up my son, I hide behind the main door and watch how the other children behave with him when neither I nor the teacher is there. You have no idea how they look at him, as if he were from another planet. ... One day I felt very bad when, during the long break, while he was staying with a classmate, an older student came and started to call him “the beast” laughing out loud. ... However, I was happy when I later learned that my son’s desk-mate had reported the incident to the teacher and measures had been taken against the older student.”

Parent from Tirana

Siblings of children with disabilities cannot escape the mockeries of their peers either. Parents also report that they often receive direct or hidden messages of pity. The parent of an autistic child told us: “Everybody either says it to me or makes a facial expression as to say ‘I’m really sorry’.”

3.2.5 Factors hindering the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools

The instruments used in the study revealed a number of other hindering factors at a school level which limit the inclusion of children with disabilities.

Factors related to teachers

Successful inclusion depends on many factors, but a key role in this process is played by the teachers, especially in Albanian schools, where they have a very influencing and leading role for the students.

The data collected mainly through the focus groups with the teachers revealed the following factors:

- 1. Lack of knowledge on integration and integrating practices** for children with disabilities. Almost all the teachers interviewed stated their lack of knowledge on the practices related to the teaching of children with disabilities.

School teachers have not received any knowledge during their studies on the methods of integration of children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. Some of the urgent training needs they mentioned had to do with:

- Knowledge how to manage the behaviour of children with disability, in particular on the work techniques related to the management of the behaviour of autistic and hyperactive children and of children with a mental disability.
- The provision of knowledge and expertise on the preparation and development of individual plans.
- Pedagogical techniques to differentiate the teaching process and adapt it to children with disabilities.
- Knowledge on assistive technology and on the specific programs for the learning of the sign language and reading of Braille.

Other more specific topics which would be of interest to teachers are:

- Designing and administration of individual tests for children with disabilities, based on their specific abilities and the level of their academic achievements.
- First aid and management of emergency situations (e.g. in the case of a child with epilepsy).
- Organizing of student-centred classes, especially for teachers of the upper cycle of compulsory education, where the curriculum is less flexible and many of the CWDs start to fail.
- Group work with school psychologists and parents.
- Helping and planning of the work for the involvement of other children in helping children with disabilities in the classroom and in the activities outside the classroom.

Data collected by the questionnaires show that teachers training on the integration of children with disabilities has been a priority for the MoES and other organizations working in this field. According to the data received by the REAs, all the kindergarten and 9-year school directors in urban areas have received at least two trainings on the inclusion of children with disabilities during the last 3 years, while it is reported that about 80% of the teachers have received at least one training.

However, trainings have mainly been knowledge and awareness-oriented and only in few cases they have been focused on working techniques and practices related to these children. Teachers have general knowledge on special needs, but it is clearly not sufficient. Most of the teachers have not received quality trainings on the management of CWDs, which has also affected the quality of education for them.

MoES and IED, which is the only national institution responsible for the teachers training, have still not developed a training kit on the integration of children with disabilities in mainstream schools and how effective classes can be run. The legislation recognises the REAs right to manage teacher training activities. However, so far, most of the trainings on inclusion have been mainly provided by non-governmental organizations, in agreement with the IED and the regional authorities. IED representatives state that the short trainings carried out by this institution during the year only reach a small number of teachers and are not able to cover all the issues and needs in the field of inclusion.

In most of the schools, the teachers identified the need for training on the methodologies of effective teaching for different ability students. The teachers interviewed state that they encounter many challenges in teaching children with intellectual disabilities.

“Every time I give him any small task, he starts to get stressed and tries to bite himself. It takes me several minutes to calm him down.”

Teacher from Korça

It is worth to point out that, in most cases, the trainings received have not been followed by a mentoring period in order to evaluate their practical feasibility.

Trainings and workshops remain the main resource for providing teachers with information and increasing the quality of education for children with disabilities. However teachers state that, the texts and information brochures of NGOs on inclusion, individual plans, school organization, and communication with parents have also been useful.

In order to evaluate the situation of university curricula, the working group interviewed representatives of faculties and departments of the main universities in the country, whose students are being prepared to work in the education system. In general, mainly during the last academic year, universities have begun to think about the need to include courses related to teaching for children with special needs in general, and in particular children with disabilities.

Some of the recently integrated courses are: “Special Pedagogy”, which is mainly provided at the master’s level of studies, and “Disability”, which is provided at the last year of the first cycle of university studies.

However, most of the professors for these courses encounter difficulties in implementing the international models and theories within the Albanian schools’ reality and conditions.

In comparison to other universities, the “Ismail Qemali” University of Vlora has been providing, for several years, one of the most quality programs, in consonance with the best international experiences and levels in the field of specialized pedagogy. Currently, the Education Department of this university also provides

first degrees and master's degrees in the field of specialized pedagogy. Also, part of the curriculum for the first degree students of the Faculty of Education (preschool and elementary school departments) is related to working with children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

It is worth pointing out that, in all the universities, the curriculum for the preparation of students in these faculties is being adapted, in order to enable them to work with children with disabilities, conforming to the most modern trends and practices in the field of special education. This tendency is observed not only in the universities we visited, but also in many other private universities that have seen the necessity to provide future teachers with the knowledge and best practices to work with children with disabilities.

In summary, the concept of inclusion of children with disability is not unknown to the majority of teachers, in part due to the training they have received, but until now due attention has not been paid to it within the university curriculum for future teachers, and has not been implemented and coordinated adequately in teachers' trainings.

2. Another limiting factor for teachers is **their lack of motivation in general**. More concretely, the low salaries, the nonobservance of the law for teachers who have children with disabilities in their classes (teachers declare they are not receiving extra payment for their work with these children, and are not having the number of children reduced in their classrooms, as provided by the law³³), and the lack of parents' and school management staff's acknowledgment are some of the main demotivating factors.
3. Another limiting factor to be emphasized is related to **burn-out**. In the many interviews with teachers, we noticed that they often said: "we are broken... exhausted... overburdened... when we go home we have no energy to do anything..." Considering the general conditions teachers have to deal with (the lack of facilities and tools, the overcrowded program, the excessive number of students, the work under stress, the second jobs they do to make a decent salary), the presence of children with disability in the classroom, is often, as one of the teachers said, "the icing on the cake".
4. Another barrier to effective inclusion is also **the traditional teaching method** applied in mainstream schools.

33. According to the secondary legislation, the teachers who have children with disabilities in their classrooms are entitled to an extra payment, and, for each student with disabilities, the number of children in the classrooms must be reduced by 3.

5. Prejudices of teachers or other children's parents' present another barrier. Some teachers do not believe in the concept of inclusive education and in the capacities and the potential of CWDs. Some teachers say: "These children [CWDs] are not for us... Better to send them in special schools...", "...It is worthless to weary yourself with them... It is lost labour..."
6. A final limiting factor is also the mistakes made along the inclusion process (that have to do with the methodology, the quality of the support provided, the attitudes of the school management staff, etc.)

Hindering factors related to school directors

The focus groups conducted with school directors identified the following barriers:

1. Lack of knowledge on the field of inclusion;
2. Prejudices and negative attitudes towards children with disabilities, especially towards children with intellectual disabilities. Scepticism towards their future in school;
3. Poor or a lack of management skills;
4. Frequent changing of the school staff by the REAs.

Hindering factors related to parents

The families of children with disabilities also identified a number of reasons that negatively affect the success of their children's inclusion at school, among which we can mention:

1. Parents' poverty, inadequate economic conditions, and unemployment (a significant correlation between economic factors and the participation of these children in schools or their school dropout has been observed in many other studies too³⁴);
2. The long distance from school, mainly in rural areas, as well as the road conditions which are totally inadequate for children with disabilities;
3. The low level of parents' information and awareness on the right of their children to education;
4. The negative attitudes and the shame of parents in relation to their child's disability;
5. Parent's overprotective attitudes and behaviours;
6. The inadequate involvement of the parents and the community in the education and inclusive process.

34. http://www.unicef.org/albania/Successful_experiences_of_hidden_drop-out_approach-Alb06-13.pdf

Hindering factors related to children with disabilities themselves

The numerous interviews, with parents of CWDs as well as with a number of CWDs, revealed different factors that hinder these children remaining at school, and frequently become the reason for their dropout. All these reasons can be summarized as follows:

- The poor motor and communication skills of children with disabilities;
- Their low self-esteem and fear to face challenges;
- The prejudices of children with disabilities towards their schoolmates (“They [children without disabilities] do not know how to communicate and to behave with us”, “The entire classroom laughs each time I speak”)

Hindering factors related to other students (without disabilities)

In the focus groups organized with them, students told us that they are aware of the presence of children with disabilities at school, and that they accept them because this is their right to access education. They stressed that, in most cases, they are happy with the presence of students with disabilities, and support them in the various activities. They mentioned cases in which they push the wheelchair for students with physical disabilities, turn the pages of their books when they are reading, accompany them around the school premises, take care of them during the long breaks, etc.

However, among the main factors identified as barriers caused by the students without disabilities we can mention:

- Prejudices towards children with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities.
- Lack of knowledge and ability to communicate and cooperate with children with disabilities.
- Bullying towards students with disability.

Hindering factors related to the parents of other students and to the community in general

Parents of students without disabilities are an important factor that can accelerate or delay integrative practices. It seems that their prejudices and the lack of training and information provided to these parents and to the community in general, are a big limiting factor on the inclusion of CWDs in mainstream kindergartens and schools.

3.2.6 System shortfalls as barriers to inclusion

Besides the limiting factors listed above, a significant number of shortages at a school level were identified, which constitute barriers for CWDs in mainstream

schools. Among these shortages we can mention the following as the most important ones:

- Lack of support teachers;
- Lack of special education teachers;
- Lack or deficiency of suitable support services. An important figure is that of the school psychologist, whose service is provided in urban areas, but not in rural ones. However, according to teachers and parents, even in the schools where the service is provided, its quality is not meeting the required standards; this is due not only to the lack of skills and evaluation instruments, but also to the large number of schools a psychologist has to cover³⁵. The school does not provide other support or therapeutic services³⁶);
- Lack of school's support strategies (lack of planning based on situation analyses);
- Lack of the needed resources, spaces and tools;
- Lack of the school staff's technical and logistic capacities;
- Lack in the coordination and cooperation of the education staff in IEP development, exchange of information, etc);
- Lack of the school funds needed to fulfil the IEP objectives.

3.3 The saga of failure – Children with disabilities' journey in mainstream kindergartens and schools

The data collected by the questionnaires and focus groups, and the numerous interviews conducted with all the factors involved in the education of children with disabilities helped us build a “map” of the CWDs' journey within compulsory education, from kindergarten to the 9th grade. The dynamics of this journey, its characteristics and the difficulties encountered, as well as the understanding of its key moments are interesting findings that can assist all the responsible levels in making it an increasingly positive experience, as every child and family deserves. In this map of the journey, mainly built through the focus groups with directors, teachers and parents, the findings are mainly focused on the progress of CWDs and the main dynamics that accompany them during the various stages of compulsory education. Making the decision to start this journey, and its actual beginning

35. For more information you can also refer to the “Raport i vlerësimit të shërbimit psikologjik shkollor” (Report on the Evaluation of the School Psychologist Service), Tamo, A., Kamani, P., Nano, V., Tahsini, I., & Agolli, I., Tirana, 2006.

36. In many countries, various rehabilitation/therapeutic services such as speech therapy and physiotherapy are provided within the school (in accordance with the child's IEP).

represent one of the most difficult moments for children with disabilities and their families, accompanied by lots of anxiety. Nevertheless, it is not facilitated by the school; on the contrary, schools put serious barriers to it. The entire journey is full of surprises because the schools do not have a plan or clear procedures, structures, and services to help these children's inclusion.

3.3.1 Preschool age

Enrolment in kindergarten – the starting of a difficult journey

Child's enrolment in a public or private kindergarten is one of the most important moments for the parents as, in most cases, it is the first time the child is confronted with the wider community. Parents are full of dilemmas in making this decision and, as they say, "it is a process full of fears and hopes...", "...a process in which we feel alone...". In the largest cities of the country, there are several centres for the support of CWDs whose specialists advise parents on the importance of kindergartens for the improvement of the child's abilities. On the other hand, in small towns and in villages, these centres and specialists are almost totally missing.

However, an increasing number of parents, mainly in urban areas, are deciding to enrol their children with disabilities in public or private mainstream kindergartens.

In enrolling children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens the parents encounter a significant number of problems and difficulties. These difficulties are related not only to the procedures and the documentation, but also to a number of factors that have to do with the parents, the staff, and previous experiences.

The ways children with disabilities' parents find to enrol their child are varied. Some of them, being informed of the small capacity of public kindergartens, try to find some help through personal acquaintances they might have within the staff or among other responsible people in MoES and REAs. Others, convinced that it is impossible to succeed and having the economic means to do so, enrol their children in private kindergartens where they do not encounter any problems with the enrolment. Some others try to enrol their children following the procedures provided by the law.

The interviews showed that a large number of parents of children with disabilities decide not to disclose any information about their child's disability and this is generally due to two main reasons: some of these parents (at this time) go through a phase of total denial about their child's disability, while others do not inform the kindergarten about the disability as they are "...afraid the child would be unaccepted and ill-treated..." (as a parent from Vlora states).

A small number of interviewees declared that they have had to pressure the staff of public kindergartens in order to enrol their children who were not accepted.

Reasons given were due to their disability, the lack of suitable conditions in the kindergartens or the high number of children enrolled.

“I even went to a friend of mine in the MoES to try to solve this issue... because, as soon as I told them about the difficulties my son had, they started to make up all kinds of excuses not to accept him, forcing me to go from one kindergarten to another.”

Parent from Tirana

In few cases, the decision for the enrolment of the child in a mainstream kindergarten has been on the advice of doctors and other development specialists, especially in the cases of children with mental and language disabilities.

It seems that this decision-making is easier for the parents who have had a similar previous experience with their child with disabilities in crèches, although the passage from the crèche to the kindergarten is very difficult for most parents and children.

Some of the parents, who have the necessary financial means, decide to enrol their children in private kindergartens. Some of the main reasons they mentioned for making this decision are: the very high number of children per room in public kindergartens, the fear of neglect towards the child and of the impossibility for staff to work with him/her separately, the child having more privacy in private kindergartens etc.

There are many cases of parents who enrol their CWDs in public kindergartens even though they can financially afford a private one. The main reasons for this decision are: the opinion that there is more control in public kindergartens, personal ties to the kindergarten teacher or director, and specialized services such as the psychologist and the paediatrician being available.

A significant number of parents, mainly from small towns and rural areas, decide not to send their children to kindergartens, but prefer to keep them at home. The researchers also found out about cases of well-educated parents and parents belonging to a high social level (i.e. people who are popular and respected within the community) and coming from the main urban areas of the country who decide to keep their children with disabilities at home.

Documentation for kindergarten enrolment

The documents needed for registration of a child in a public kindergarten are: the birth certificate, the vaccinations record and the residency certificate in the neighbourhood where the public kindergarten is located. The parents of the CWDs are not obliged to submit any document recognizing the child's disability. In Tirana, the enrolment is made in the REA offices. This is seen as a positive practice by the parents of children with disabilities since, in this way, they can enrol their children

without the various barriers that characterize the process in those cities where the enrolment is made by the kindergarten director. Some kindergarten directors, on the other hand, see this practice as inappropriate, because it does not give them the opportunity to refuse the enrolment of these children in kindergartens.

“Some years ago, children were enrolled in kindergartens by the directors and we could see them when they came to enrol. We noticed when a child was autistic and did not accept him/her. However, we provided some suggestions, explaining that there are specialized kindergartens... If the parent insisted, I asked “Does the child tell when he/she needs to go to the toilet?... does he/she speak?” in order to find an excuse not to accept him/her. The truth is that it’s not that we don’t want them here, but we don’t have any conditions to keep them.”

Kindergarten director, Tirana

However, on the other hand, this practice has created many problems related to the start of kindergarten by children with disabilities. Not being informed about the child’s disability, the kindergarten staff does not take the necessary steps to adjust the environment to the child’s needs, select the most appropriate and most adequately experienced teacher, reduce the number of children in the group the CWDs will be placed in, and provide all other required services. This practice causes a difficult start in kindergartens for everybody: the CWDs, the other children, the parents and the kindergarten staff. These conditions create an environment which is likely to lead to conflicts between the parties and for a rapid failure of the CWDs’ adaptation process in the educational setting.

First months in the kindergarten

As stated by some of the interviewees, the first month in the kindergarten is considered, from both the staff and the parents, a test to see how much the child is able to face this new reality. It is a month full of surprises. This is particularly true in the cases of children showing aggressive behaviour towards other children and the staff. This month is a critical determinant for many CWDs. The teacher, the children, and the parents “assess” the chances of success and failure.

Another important factor which affects the ability of children with disability to settle in kindergarten is that many of them do not have proper control over their urinary or bowel movements and still need to use diapers. There are frequent cases in which the child with disability is sent away from the public kindergarten because he/she is not “toilet trained” yet. In the interviews conducted, teachers state that “we are not babysitters to change the child’s diapers... because kindergarten is for children that can go to the toilet by themselves...”

Data collected from interviews show that a significant number of children with

disabilities' parents change kindergartens at least once during or after the first month. In a few cases, there are parents who admit having changed 3 kindergartens within the first 3 months. Usually, after the failure in public kindergartens, parents start to choose private ones.

The first months in the kindergarten are a period of serious conflicts between the various groups: the parents of children without disabilities, the staff and the parents of CWDs. The role of the staff in this conflict often determines the future progress of this "coexistence".

In some cases, especially if the child shows unacceptable and unmanageable behaviour, despite the efforts of the staff to solve the "issue" within the kindergarten, these conflicts are escalated to the REAs. Generally, the REA specialists responsible for the monitoring of disability in kindergartens, give priority to the continuity of attendance of the child with a disability in the kindergarten, when making any decision, as outlined by the law. However, apart from decision-making, specialists have few resources and possibilities to help the kindergarten with support teachers or other necessary tools and services.

The continuity of the CWD's attendance in the kindergarten depends on the way disagreements are solved in this first stage of their attendance. There are frequent cases in which parents, alienated by these disagreements and complains, decide to remove the child from the kindergarten. In some cases, the school director decides to move the CWD from one group to another hoping that this will reduce the conflict. Also parents of the other children, afraid of the behaviour of CWDs (mainly autistic children), remove or threaten to remove their children from the kindergarten.

In some kindergartens, staffs take concrete steps in their work with parents and in the prevention or the resolution of these conflicts. There are kindergartens in which, besides organizing of individual talks between the staff and the parents, organise meetings between the parent and the psychologist, where parents are provided with information on children's rights. There are frequent cases in which parents are afraid that "my child will imitate the behaviour of the retarded child" (as a parent from Tirana states). It seems that the teacher of the group plays a major role in informing and reducing the protests of parents during this first phase, assuring the parents about the progress and the safety of the children within the group. There are also cases in which teachers, with their attitudes and actions, use the parents' protest to move the CWDs to another class.

All the interviewees expressed the need for information and guidance during this first stage in kindergarten. Kindergartens have no material, handbooks or informative brochures on how this first stage can be better handled. Generally, they do not provide services to facilitate this important phase of transition and adaptation, which is crucial not only for the children, but also for their families. The staff members say that they do not know what they can do to facilitate the

adaptation, and emphasise the lack of a standardized first assessment that the child could undergo during his/her first month in the kindergarten.

For parents who do inform the staff about the difficulties of their child with disabilities on admission to kindergarten, the beginning of kindergarten sees much less conflict. They try to give all the necessary information on the type and level of the child's disability, and coordinate the therapeutic activities that the child might attend in specialized centres with those carried out in the kindergarten.

The law foresees that, for each child with disabilities, the number of children in a group is reduced by three, and that there cannot be more than two children with disabilities in one group. However, according to the kindergarten teachers, although this requirement is by law, in most cases is not met, especially during the last school year. The number of children assigned to one teacher can exceed 35, while the law foresees a maximum of 25. In the most popular kindergartens located in city centres the number of children in a room with two teachers can exceed 50, regardless of the number of children with disabilities in the room.

“Our problem is that, having many children in the groups, this child [with a disability] is neglected because you cannot work, it is impossible to work with him/her alone. Or it depends on how the disorder of this autistic child is manifested. He/she can destroy everything you have built for one hour or half an hour with the other children. We have had problems with parents who have asked for these children to be removed, but with some sympathy and explanations from the director they have accepted the fact that these children will continue to be with us. They are part of us and we cannot just abandon them, send them away. But, we have never had a teacher only for one individual child.”

Kindergarten teacher in Tirana

First year and beyond

The kindergarten directors and teachers state that, generally, after the second month, conflicts and complaints on the continuity of the CWDs' attendance in the kindergarten fade away. Mutual fears between the parties start to disappear after the coexistence in the first months. Often the parents and the staff realize that children are less judgemental than they are towards the child with disabilities. There are many cases in which the children of the group find original forms and ways of communicating with these children and learning the different skills. However, the climate of the groups, and the attitude and behaviour of other children towards the child with disabilities seem to reflect in general the teacher's attitude and behaviour towards this child.

After the conclusion of the first year of kindergarten, other issues come up that need solutions. Changing of the group because of progression to the next class

is another transition phase, which all the parties involved are afraid of. In many cases, if there has been an adequate progress, and enough trust in the teacher has been built, parents choose not to change the teacher, even if he/she changes the age range or the class she works with. Kindergarten directors are obliged in some cases “to keep the teacher hostage”, in order for the child with disabilities to remain with the same teacher and group of children until the completion of kindergarten. However, there are often cases in which the child with disabilities is moved to another group, with new teachers, thus starting to face the adaptation challenges all over again.

Compromise is the key word of kindergarten (and school) directors in the resolution of these conflicts and difficult situations. The directors and the staff make continuous efforts to keep the conflict between parties “inside the walls” of the institutions and solve them there as “they do not want it to be known in the upper levels”, which implies the tension related to avoiding the leak of information to higher monitoring bodies. In fact, in most of the cases, thanks also to the parents’ personal ties, they succeed in reaching (mainly tacit) compromises. The directors and staffs of these institutions state that they base all their decisions related to the children in the institution on their intuition and their experience, rather than on the trainings received or the guiding manuals on the best solution for the problem. During this phase, the “final evaluation books” are neglected, and little work is done for a special preparation of the child for the first grade.

Conclusion of the kindergarten

The conclusion of the kindergarten represents another difficult moment of transition and conflicts, but now it is mainly between the director and the kindergarten teacher on one hand, and the children with disabilities’ parents on the other. By law, children with disabilities can remain in kindergarten until they reach the age of 8, but, especially in the cases of children with intellectual disabilities, the parent tries to extend this situation as “he/she sees that the child is not ready” to deal with the program and requirements of the first grade. Directors state that, in most cases, they solve this conflict by convincing the parent or by finding a compromise which “satisfies both parties”. There are a few examples in which conflicts have been escalated to REAs, and the help of specialists qualified for these cases has been sought.

“One parent told me all kinds of stuff to make me keep the child although he had reached the school-age. When I refused, he went to the Regional Authority and I had to keep him.

[...]

There are many problems. A child of 8 and a child of 5 or 6 do not get along very well. In addition, an autistic child has an unusual physical strength. We had an autistic girl who would push us over. There were moments in which

she could kick us to the ground. You can imagine what could happen with a 5-year-old.”

Kindergarten director in Tirana

After the conclusion of kindergarten, the child is given a certificate of completion (like all the other children). However, in most cases, the educational work performed and documented by the teacher during the kindergarten, is not passed to the parents and therefore to the school. Thus, important information on this first experience is lost.

3.3.2 Enrolment and the first days in first grade

Almost all the parents of children with disabilities, who were interviewed, confessed that the most difficult moment is the decision on school enrolment. For most of them, the first preference is enrolment in mainstream schools, but often they are obliged by circumstances to choose other alternatives. They say that this is the moment in which they would benefit from a counselling service to help them make this decision. This moment is even more difficult for the parents whose children have not attended any form of preschool education, but have reached or passed the school admission age. Parents of CWDs who have attended kindergartens, as they told us, “have been trained by the challenges” encountered during the preschool years.

As it already mentioned among the findings related to the barriers to inclusion, a large number of parents of CWDs from rural areas do not enrol their children in any of the educational institutions, while others decide to send them to the special schools in the cities.

The procedures and documentation of children’s enrolment in public mainstream schools are almost identical to those of kindergarten enrolment, except for the fact that the documentation (birth certificate and vaccinations record) is submitted only to the school management. Given that, in principle, mainstream schools are open to all the children, every child can enrol in them, regardless of the disability level, if the parent insists on enrolling the child there.

The interviewees provide cases in which children with very severe impairments or showing very difficult behaviours had been enrolled in schools although they had never been assessed.

“Last year a child came to enrol. The parent had told me that the child was a little sick and nothing more. When he came, on the first day of school, we remained perplexed and didn’t know what to do. The child was not able to speak, could not sit in the desk for one second, and often screamed and put his hands on his ears, and wanted to leave. The teacher told me: ‘it is

impossible for me to work with him'. And she was right, as we have no suitable conditions for these children. It is true that, in principle, schools are open to all the children, but, in reality, our schools are not appropriate for this level of disability. I mean, it is not just a matter of placing them here in the school and then abandon them to their destiny. It is better not to admit them if we don't have the conditions, than to admit them because we are afraid of the law or of our supervisors, and then find our own ways to make them quit. It is a matter of admitting them in the school, but also creating the necessary conditions for them."

School director from Tirana

Generally, we find the same situation at the start of school for the CWDs as we did at the start of kindergarten: rejection of children with moderate and severe disabilities; conflicts between parents; exhausted teachers; children unprepared to deal with the requirements of the first grade; parents who do not accept their child's difficulties, and do not share with the teachers information on these difficulties, but react badly to the teachers' suggestion that the child should be assessed; parents threatening to withdraw their children from school; compromises between the parties, and so on.

It seems that the first days in the school are a period of confusion for everybody. For teachers who have not had any previous similar experience with these children, these days may turn into "periods of extreme anxiety and stress". The children they are most concerned are the autistic children.

"They [teachers] tell us, when they [CWDs] come after the kindergarten, 'oh my God, I won't take him/her, I won't take him/her, I have suffered for so many years with them and I am tired'. It is not easy to get teachers to accept these children in the first grade. There is an extreme reaction."

School director in Durrës

"...in order not to have conflicts between teachers, we select at random the one who is going to take the child in her class. In this way none of the teachers can complain."

School director in Tirana

"I leave this responsibility to the newest teachers of the school, because they do not object. However, in some cases, I also consider how much experience the teacher has in communicating with parents, what personality she has, and how much she is prepared to work with these children."

School director in Shkodra

School directors try to choose the teachers for CWDs based on the teacher's previous experience, his/her personality and way of communicating, and his/her motivation. The cases in which the parent knows the teacher personally and the teacher expresses to the director his/her readiness to take the child in her class are much easier. Even in this case, all decisions on the child are made based on compromising between the parties. The school does not have any available guideline, manual, information, or training on the laws, criteria, and principles that the decision-making should be based on.

The first months of first grade

The first months of first grade are described as very difficult by all the interviewees, especially by the teachers, who often say that they have to stay for the whole time in the classroom without being able to go out for any reason until the end of the school day. Teachers mainly ask for the help of the psychologist in assessing the child and developing an individual plan, but this help does not always come in due time and with expected quality. Therefore, the teachers often remain on their own during these first steps of the education of a child with disabilities. In many cases, since there is no support teacher provided, the parent remains in the classroom during all the classes, by his/her own request or by the request of the teacher. In other cases, parents hire specialists, psychologists, or other teachers to help their child's teacher. In many cases, regardless of the situation, teachers start to build a simple individual work plan, either written or not despite not having received adequate education and training, and without any help from specialists. The many attempts/mistakes have also led to success as well as to failures.

"I have seen and experienced scenes, which I don't know how to describe. I have become a doctor, a psychologist. I try to find various ways in order to do something for this child, but it is difficult."

Teacher in a 9-year school, Tirana

The first months of school are also affected by conflicts with the other parents, the unpredictability of the child's behaviour, and the lack of necessary textbooks and material for children with disabilities. Generally, during the first months of school, the same phenomenon occurring in the first months of kindergarten is observed: some parents, certain about the difficulties they will have to deal with, and after checking the school's possibilities, decide to choose "safer" alternatives such as private schools or special schools.

The lower level of basic education (primary education)

The "successful" completion of the first grade (so called by the teachers, but implying, in reality, the child's ability to adapt to the class and to survive) is, in many

cases, an indicator of the fact that the child will stay in the same classroom for another five years. One of the things parents appreciate in elementary education, is the fact that, in this cycle, the normal practice is that child has only one teacher from first until sixth grade.

Despite the difficulties, it seems that the teachers of the lower level of basic education have clear objectives for the child until the sixth grade: the behaviour objective is for the child to be able to stay in the classroom during the classes, while education objectives are related to learning basic literacy and numeracy. Despite at times not knowing the level of the child's disability and having limited understanding of the pedagogical practices for their instruction, they make continuous efforts with these clear objectives in mind. During the first year, they start to intuitively identify the suitable teaching methodology, and the pace with which the child can absorb the new information, thus becoming increasingly more realistic in setting their didactic objectives.

The middle level of basic education (lower secondary education)

The beginning of the middle level of basic education (grades VII-IX) is the beginning of a new cycle of difficulties, which are different from the previous ones. Data collected from the questionnaires and focus groups also pointed out the fact that, in the sixth grade, a number of children with disabilities (mainly children with mental disabilities) drop out of school³⁷. Interviewees list many reasons for this, among which the most important are: the inflexible curriculum, the overcrowded learning program, and the textbooks being increasingly difficult and impossible to follow in their level, thus expanding the distance between them and their peers; the fact that most teachers know very little about children with disabilities; puberty, and the fear and shame of parents/teachers about sexual behaviours that these children may show; bullying, etc. Learning programs are not adapted for these children anymore, IEPs in most cases have not been developed, and there are cases reported in which children with disabilities start to lag in education. The main criterion to achieve a pass in these classes is mainly the child's physical presence in the classroom. Grade evaluations are mainly based on pity and only try to avoid them repeating the year. There are exceptions in which it is the parent who asks the teacher not to pass the child, in order for him/her to be more prepared in the following year.

37. The data of the study (from interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires) have been collected during the March-June 2012 period, when the lower level of basic education lasted until the fifth grade. After the approval of the new law on Pre-university Education on July 2012 (Law 69/2012), the education system went through the following changes: the lower level includes six grades (I-VI grades), and the middle level (or the lower secondary education) includes three grades (VII-IX).

However, many children with disabilities, thanks to a major investment from all the actors, manage to complete the 9-year school. Of course, after a long and difficult journey for everybody. There are positive examples in which, thanks to the parents', teachers' and students' passion and hard work, the child with disabilities has been able to achieve astonishing objectives. Unfortunately, many of the investments made for the success of children with disabilities are not reflected in the documentation, remaining only recorded in the memories of teachers, parents, and students.

What happens next???

This study is only focused on compulsory education, but the participants in the interviews brought some other facts that we would like to briefly reflect below.

Although every child has the right to upper secondary education by law, only few children with disabilities reach that level of education, mainly children with physical, hearing, or visual disabilities.

Many of the parents interviewed expressed the desire to send their children to vocational schools or similar alternatives in order for them to learn a profession, but the scope of opportunities seems too narrow. Most of the interviewed parents said that, despite their wishes, they keep their children at home, because they do not have other acceptable alternatives, and high schools are too difficult to be dealt with and are not “ready” for children with disabilities yet.

3.4 Monitoring

The monitoring of students with disabilities is mainly carried out at three levels: at a central/national level, at a regional level, and at a school level.

3.4.1 Monitoring at the central level

In the current organizational chart of MoES there are no specific departments for the monitoring of disability. For many years, the MoES has tried to collect data on the education of children with disabilities in kindergartens and schools. The data from REAs are mainly reported in the framework of the “Zero Dropouts” programme that aims at the education of categories of children that are most at risk of dropping out of school, which includes children with disabilities. The data collected by the MoES every year are quantitative, which makes it difficult to monitor access and quality of education that children with disabilities manage to obtain.

The mission of the National Inspectorate of Pre-university Education (NIPE) is to improve the quality of the education service for students until university level through the external evaluation of educational institutions. For this reason, the

NIPE inspects the pre-university educational institutions every year. To support objective inspections, this institution has designed kindergarten and school evaluation manuals, part of which is also the evaluation of children with disabilities' education. Every year, this institution publishes an inspection report, which also includes indicators of the situation of children with disabilities in kindergartens and schools. However, the data on the educational situation of these children are poor. This is due, among other things, to the fact that the size of the inspectorate staff is very small in proportion with the number of institutions it covers, and there is no special unit or department for the monitoring of children with disabilities' education, nor any disability specialist within its structure yet.

3.4.2 Monitoring at the regional level

Currently, the number of Regional Education Authorities is 14³⁹ and they are spread in 12 districts of the country, while the number of Education Offices is 24. REAs operate in each district and report directly to the MoES, while EOs operate in all the sub-prefectures and report to the REAs. REAs are responsible, among other things, for guaranteeing the quality in public and private schools, while the EOs are responsible for the progress of the education process, the management of human resources, the collection of statistical information, the supervision of the classes and of the curricular and extracurricular activities, and the management of financial resources for some elements⁴⁰.

In order to understand the role and the organization of the monitoring structures at a regional level (REAs), one section of the questionnaire included questions aimed at obtaining relevant information. The data collected from this part of the questionnaire were further explored through focus groups and interviews.

In every REA and almost every EO, there are responsible persons who are responsible for monitoring the process of disabled students' inclusion and education in mainstream kindergartens and schools among other things.

According to the data received by the questionnaires, about 90% of the REAs and EOs perform regular and periodical monitoring of the following elements:

1. Monitoring/verification of the number and the needs of the students transferred in the schools of the district/area.
2. Monitoring/verification of the equipment and spaces within the kindergarten and school buildings, in cooperation with representatives of municipalities and communes.

38. During the time of the preparation of this study, the EO of Lushnja was given the status of REA, returning to the status of EO after a short period of time. However, in our study it has been counted among the REAs.

39. <http://arkiva.mash.gov.al/faqe.php?id1=5&id2=121&lang=en>

3. Monitoring/verification of children with disabilities' files in kindergartens and schools.
4. Evaluation of the kindergartens' and schools' requests for additional staff and funds.

The data of the questionnaire provide some facts to be evaluated:

Independent from the data provided above, more than 60% of the REAs do not have any written action plan on the circulation of information among the organizations working with these children, and within the community in general.

More than 40% of them do not have any action plan for the monitoring of children with disabilities' inclusion in the kindergartens and schools of the district/area.

In about 60% of the REAs and EOs, the persons responsible for the monitoring of children with disabilities' education do not have any academic background in special education; their knowledge is superficial, mainly acquired from short trainings or study visits.

To the question on whether sufficient time is available to monitor the kindergartens and schools, all the REAs and EOs answered "no", since the person responsible has to monitor many other categories of students and issues, as well as a huge number of schools at the same time. Private kindergartens and schools remain even more excluded from the monitoring, especially the kindergartens that have not been licensed by the MoES.

What surfaces from the study are the REAs' and EOs' limited competences in issuing specific guidelines for the kindergartens and schools of the area they cover. The MoES has been left with this responsibility, without taking into account the particularities that the schools of a specific district may have. Consequently, none of the REAs and EOs has issued any special guideline to support inclusion, neither for kindergartens nor for schools. Despite the implementation of the MoES' education decentralisation reform (part of the National Education Strategy 2004-2015), it seems that this process has not had any significant impact in the field yet.

In many REAs, the specialists responsible for the monitoring say that, every year, they have to deal with a large number of conflicts and complaints related to CWDs education, which they try to solve in a timely way, being the highest level of decision-making in the district.

Meanwhile, data collected from focus groups and interviews also provide details on the quality of monitoring: although, officially, the REAs must monitor all kindergartens and schools attended by children with disabilities in the field, this does not occur in practice.

"... so far, none has come from the REA to monitor or supervise us... they just receive the written reports we send them."

School director, Shkodër

“... if I report to the REA about how the situation actually is (because in reality I have, for example, much less CWDs attending the school than the enrolled ones), chances are the number of my teachers will get reduced, and there will be further cuts of the funds for the school.”

School director, Fier

3.4.3 Monitoring at the school level

As a rule, schools carry out annual internal monitoring and evaluation in order to analyse their situation and to develop the work plan for the following academic year. In this evaluation process, led by the school director, representatives of the school board can also take part in addition to the educational staff. The school evaluation includes the identification of problems, their analysis, the selection of suitable strategies, the work planning, and monitoring. The progress of children with disabilities is also part of this monitoring at the school level.

The interviews conducted in the field revealed a number of problems at this level of monitoring. So, in many cases, despite the requirements of the law, internal evaluations are made only as a formality, without carrying out any complete analysis of the situation and the problems existing. The monitoring of the quality of children with disabilities' education at school is not a priority, and, in some schools, is considered a marginal and unimportant issue. In addition, in many cases, parents' boards or children's governments⁴⁰ are not included in the process. The interviewees state that for the internal monitoring of the school, they do not use objective instruments and methods with the necessary indicators, which address, issues related to the education of children with disabilities in schools, among other things.

3.5 Profiles of Albania in the education of children with disabilities

The quality of the education service can differ greatly between the various areas of a country than between various countries of the same region. From the data collected, the team observed some major differences between schools in urban and rural areas, between the reality of education for the various categories

40. A children's government is a group of students elected by the students of their school to represent them and their views. It is one of the forms students get organized to exercise their right and fulfill their responsibilities to participate in important decision-makings within and out of the school.

of disability, and between public and private schools. In this part of the findings, the researchers' team has listed some of the most important differences identified in the field.

3.5.1 Quality of the service in urban areas versus rural areas

According to INSTAT, 53.75% of the population lives in urban areas, and the remaining 46.3% lives in rural areas, mainly remote areas with a rough mountainous terrain. The urban-rural factor is generally one of the most important and concerning factors within the Albanian education system.

In Albania, all the special schools that operate in the country are located in the big cities, while the majority of the children with disabilities are assumed to come from the rural areas. In addition, many factors contribute to making the quality of education for children with disabilities worse in rural than urban areas including: the distance from schools, the infrastructure both of the schools and of the rural roads on which children with disabilities have to walk every day, the low level of the school staffs' qualification, the multigrade teaching, the significant lack of didactic material and equipment, the lack of motivation among the education staff, the visible lack of monitoring, the lack of funds.

In remote and semi-remote rural areas, the road network is poorer the further the distance from the main roads. Many of the secondary roads receive almost no maintenance at all. In some cases, they are only passable during dry weather, and only by specific vehicles.

According to various studies⁴¹, poverty is the main problem for residents of rural areas. Also, according to the data collected from schools, the figures related to school enrolment often do not coincide with those related to the continuity of the education process. Children coming from villages where there are not any elementary schools continue their studies in the school of the nearest village. In many villages, due to the high number of children, classes are mixed and teachers have to teach children of the first and third grades, or of the second and fourth grades in parallel. There are also cases in which, in the same classroom, you can find children from the first to the fourth grade at the same time.

The level of school dropout in rural areas, due to the abovementioned factors, reaches 25%, according to studies conducted some years ago⁴². Private schools are very rare in rural areas.

In addition, 25% of the 9-year school teachers in rural areas are not qualified; the number and quality of the trainings received by school directors and teachers

41. For more information, please visit: http://www.instat.gov.al/media/169434/varferia_ne_shqiperi.pdf

42. Annual Report of Statistics for Education, Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Albania 2003; and http://www.unicef.org/albania/sq/children_2398.html

are very low⁴³.

In the case of children with disabilities, other elements are added to this sad picture, which have to do with the mentality and attitude towards disability. The prejudice and discrimination towards children with disabilities is more visible in rural areas. Also, the information parents have on the right of their child with disabilities to education is very limited.

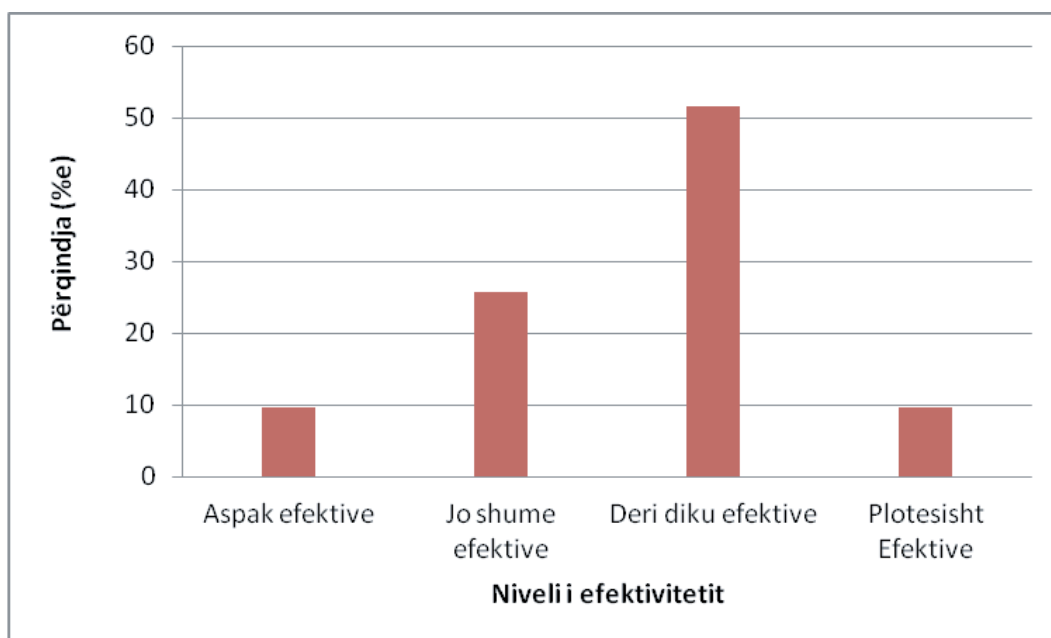
3.5.2 Differences between the various categories of disability

Another important factor identified in the study is also the difference between the various realities of education for the different categories of children with disabilities.

The data collected by questionnaires and focus groups clearly show that the category of autistic children is the one that encounters more difficulties and challenges in both mainstream and special education.

More than 80% of the interviewees report that the education of autistic children and of children with mental disabilities is partially or not at all effective. Meanwhile, only about 30% of the interviewees think that the education of students with physical or language disabilities is moderately or a little effective⁴⁴.

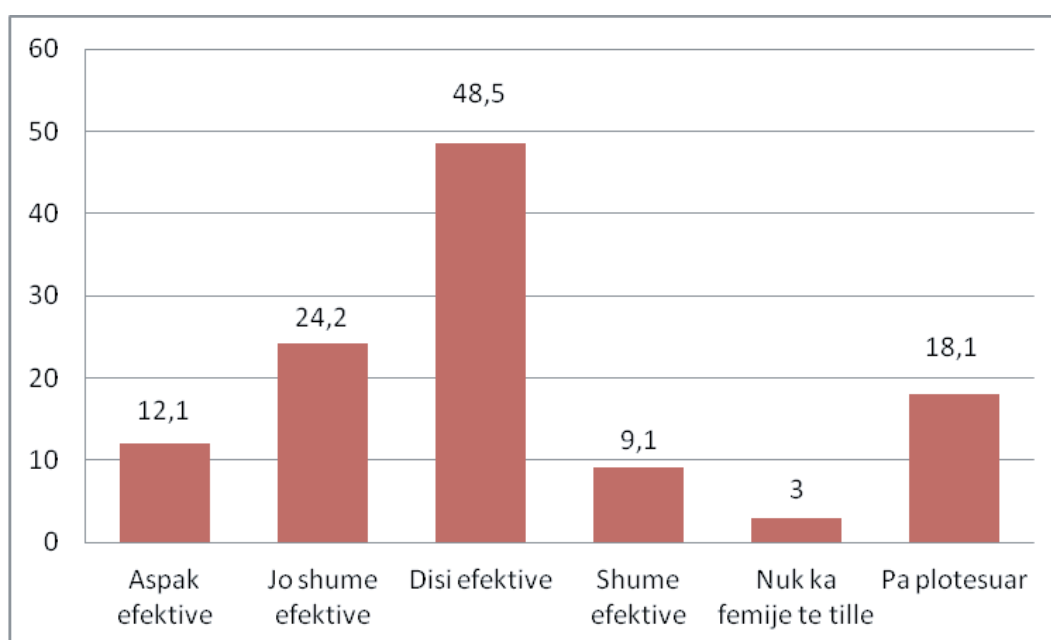
Chart 7: Effectiveness of inclusion for children with mental disabilities



43. [http://www.cfce.crca.al/sites/default/files/download/research/Situata%20e%20Arsimit%20ne%20Shqiperi%20\(2006\)_0.pdf](http://www.cfce.crca.al/sites/default/files/download/research/Situata%20e%20Arsimit%20ne%20Shqiperi%20(2006)_0.pdf); http://www.unicef.org/albania/HDO_new_eng_2006.pdf

44. Some of the children have been diagnosed by specialized centres in Tirana. For the rest of the children, the diagnose is only considered “probable” by the school doctors or the hospital doctors, but is not certified.

Chart 8: Effectiveness of inclusion for autistic children



Most of the interviewees focused on cases of autistic children with whom work seemed to be difficult, if not impossible. In some of the interviews, teachers often equated disability (and the challenges related to children with disabilities' education) with mentally children with disabilities in general, and more specifically with autistic children.

The difference between the realities of the different categories appears clearly in the words of a 9-year school teacher:

"I divide the children we are talking about in two categories: those with restricted abilities, and those with unrestricted abilities. Those with restricted abilities are children who have some physical problem or speaking impairment, but are quiet and polite, and win everyone's heart. While children with unrestricted abilities are those who are a bundle of mischief at school, who have no limits, and you don't know what to do with them. They scream, hit their peers, themselves and the teacher, interrupt classes, break everything they can, and we don't know how to restrain them..."

Teacher in Korça

3.5.3 Public education versus private education

Another important aspect of the findings is the difference between public and private education. The work group identified a number of differences between them, among which we consider the following ones as the most important.

The superior quality of private education is generally as follows:

- Generally, the infrastructure in private kindergartens and schools is of a higher quality and more accessible for children with disabilities, especially in Tirana.
- Most of the private schools provide a transportation service for all the children, including those with special needs.
- Many private kindergartens and schools provide meal services with breakfast and lunch.
- The level of students' physical security in private kindergartens and schools is generally higher than in public ones.
- The number of children in private kindergartens and schools is lower than in public ones, there is a small number of students per classroom, and the teacher-student ratio is lower.
- Most of the private kindergartens and schools enable children to stay for about 8 hours per day, which include study time after the classes.
- There is a wider range of diverse didactic material and equipment, learning programs and textbooks.
- Cooperation between the parents and the school staff is more dynamic.
- School access and enrolment procedures are easy.
- Confidentiality on the data related to children is generally more protected.
- Generally, the school staff is more qualified (staff members have higher qualifications).
- In some of these schools, the support staff (support teachers, paediatricians, etc.) is also present and provides a full-time service for a lower number of students compared to the public schools.

On the other hand, public kindergartens and schools also have their list of positive elements which are limited in private ones:

- Public education is better monitored at all levels compared to private education (a specific problem in this direction is the fact that there are many private kindergartens and schools, that are not licensed).
- Public education is free and also available to the families most in need.
- Generally, the public schools' education staff has received various trainings related to disability in which the staff of private schools has not participated.
- There are parents' representations, school senates and access to all national and international activities.
- Reports and documentation (journals, attendance books, enrolments, files, evaluation books) are much more structured than in private schools (in which sometimes this kind of information is missing).
- There are cases of qualified teachers who work with children in need in their homes, for extended hours (e.g. "Bajram Curri" School).

3.6 Special schools

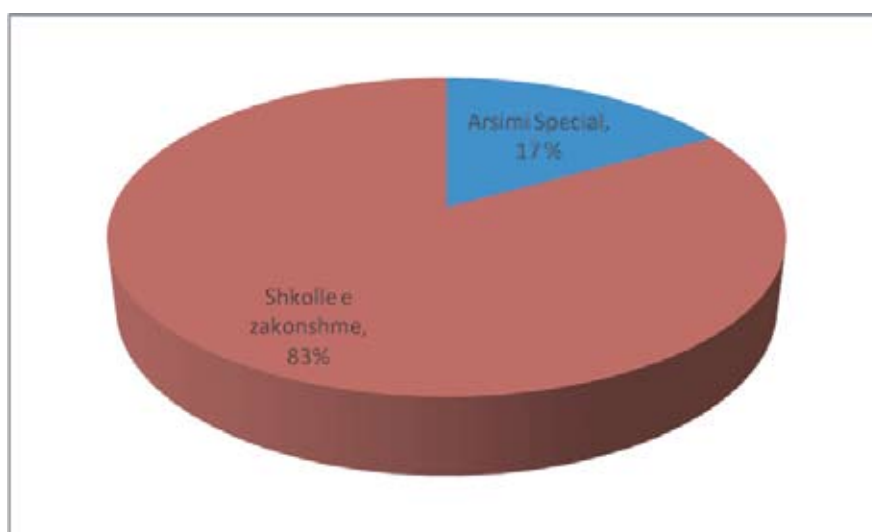
In Albania, special education has a long history. Its official and organized beginnings date from the 1960s of the 20th Century, when the first special institutions and schools started to open. A study conducted this year describes thoroughly the story and reality of special education in Albania throughout the years⁴⁵. It identifies the Albanian practices and experience, as well as the ways the education and treatment of children with disabilities is organized.

Currently, in Albania, there are 2 institutes and 7 special schools, located in the largest cities of the country (including the special school of Fieri), supporting children with disabilities' education. Children in these schools are isolated from the society. The questionnaires distributed in all the special schools in the framework of this study, and the interviews and observations conducted in most of them, aimed at understanding the current situation of children with disabilities in these schools, and the quality of the services provided in them.

3.6.1 Statistics on special schools

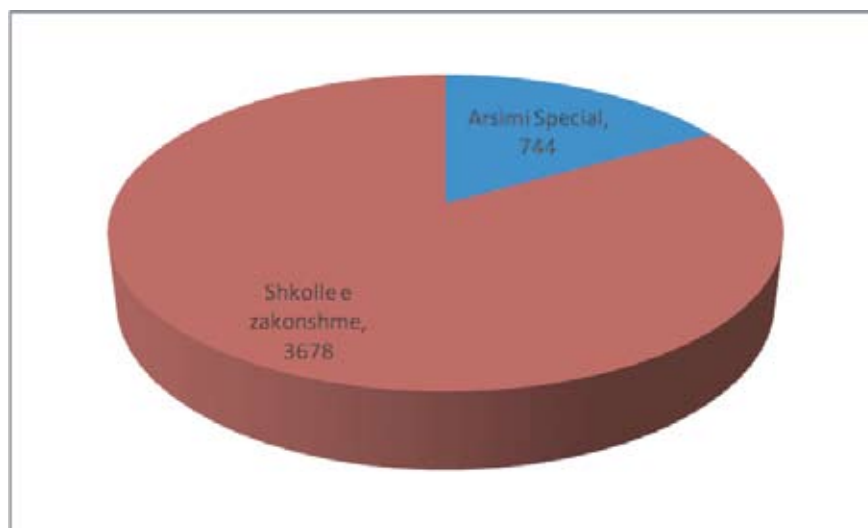
According to the data collected from the questionnaires distributed in the institutes for blind and deaf children and in the other special schools, the total number of students with disabilities enrolled in the special schools of Albania for the 2011-2012 academic year is 744.

Chart 9: The ratio between children with disabilities who attend mainstream kindergartens and 9-year schools, and CWDs who attend special schools – in percentages



45. Ndrio. M. 'E drejta e fëmijëve me aftësi të kufizuara për arsim gjithëpërfshirës', World Vision 2012

Chart 10: The ratio between children with disabilities who attend mainstream kindergartens and 9-year schools, and CWDs who attend special schools – in numbers



According to the data, most of these children (about 65%) are children with mental disabilities.

The school directors interviewed pointed out the fact that the number of children in these schools has been continuously rising, and unlike a few years ago, they are now increasingly coming from rural areas, while children from urban areas are increasingly considering mainstream schools or other private services.

3.6.2 National institutes of blind and deaf students

There are two institutes in Tirana, namely the institute of blind students and the institute of deaf students, with about 100 students each. These are national institutes with blind and deaf students from all over the country. Students coming from other districts are boarders in the institutes, while some of the students from Tirana, at the end of the school day, go back to their families. As a rule, these schools provide preschool and 9-year education. These institutions depend directly on the MoES and not on the REDs.

The program provided in them is special and is adapted to the particular type of disability. Most of the staff members are specialized and some of them are persons with disabilities. The program is developed with appropriate tools and equipment that facilitate the learning for these categories, and is composed, among other things, of many extra hours for the learning of different professions.

Something to be underlined is also the fact that the students of these institutions have in many cases protested, including in the media, against the physical and psychological violence perpetrated by the pedagogical staff on them.

3.6.3 Special schools' infrastructure

Unlike the national institutes, special schools are under the authority of the REAs and EOs of their respective districts. According to the data collected through the questionnaires, the conditions of the buildings are generally acceptable. However, the observations made on the field provided us with better knowledge on the specificities of each school.

In general, the buildings of special schools look similar to those of mainstream schools, but have additional elements that facilitate access to them. On the other hand, there are visible differences between one special school and another. For example, the “Luigj Gurakuqi” special school in Tirana, in addition to the didactic classes, also provides internal and external spaces to help the children. All the spaces in this school are accessible to children, regardless of the type of disability and the level of impairment they have. However, generally, special schools are lacking in infrastructure, spaces, and access for children with disabilities. An exception from the average is the special school of Fier, which is lacking even the minimal conditions necessary for the education of the 24 children with disabilities attending it. They have very limited spaces, only two classrooms are available; there is a total lack of hygiene; and desks and toilets are also missing.

Special schools are supposed to provide daily transportation for all the children, including those coming from rural areas. However, it seems that in some schools limited funds have led to this service being incomplete and insufficient for the children of rural areas. Consequently, children in rural areas have difficulties in reaching the special schools of the cities, and remain isolated and without any chance to attend special education.

3.6.4 Didactic tools and equipment

The possibilities to have didactic tools and equipment are generally limited, although the situation differs from one school to another. Usually, the assistive equipment and materials needed for the adaptation of the teaching program are missing.

3.6.5 The curriculum, syllabuses, and textbooks

Many of the special schools work with programs that are actually not suitable to their focus. The learning program for these children does not include useful subjects such as life-skills and rehabilitation-related subjects. The monitoring evidenced the necessity to re-evaluate these programs. The special schools and the mainstream ones have the same curriculum, but in the special schools, the annual program of the various classes is extended over 2 academic years.

The staffs in the special schools that we interviewed, stated that the curriculum represents one of the many difficulties and absurdities they encounter in providing education to CWDs in these schools. Most of the children in special schools are completely unable to meet the requirements of the current curriculum. The interviewees also state that these schools are also missing the appropriate textbooks.

The teachers of these schools have very few instruments for evaluating the children. The individualized programs the teachers adapt to these children's needs are based on self-help skills and some didactic objectives.

3.6.6 Education staff in special schools

The general teacher-student ratio is supposed to be 1 teacher for 4 students, although this ratio is not always maintained. There are often 10 to 12 children in each classroom, and at least 2 teachers.

The majority of the staff in these schools does not have a university background in special education. Most of the members of special schools' staffs simply have a bachelor degree in Elementary Education, with the exception of the special schools in Vlora and Tirana, where most of the staff is appropriately qualified. However, the staffs of these schools in general have received some specific trainings on specialized pedagogy.

In most special schools, the support service and other specialists of the field such as the psychologist, the paediatrician, the speech therapist, and the like, are missing.

3.6.7 Primary needs

Both the questionnaires and the interviews conducted with the staffs of special schools identified the following needs:

- The need for specialized staff (doctors, psychologists, speech therapists)
- The need for material basis (including specific didactic material, but also notebooks, textbooks, or even hygienic materials)
- The need to adapt the curriculum, and the need for special textbooks for children with disabilities
- The need of the staff for more specific trainings, as for example trainings on how to use specific computer programs designed to support the learning of these students

3.6.8 The staff's perceptions on the role of special schools

The researchers' team met a significant number of special school directors and teachers. During the interviews conducted with them it was observed that,

generally, teachers perceive the idea of children with disabilities' integration and inclusion in mainstream schools as a wrong practice. The trend of CWD's enrolment in mainstream schools has been perceived by the staff as a threat to their job. Cooperation between special and mainstream schools is almost completely absent, and there is a tacit competition between the two systems (special schools versus inclusive schools) as the teachers of special schools have no connection with the other teachers and do not collaborate with them in matters concerning children with disabilities who are integrated in mainstream schools.

What we observed in Vlora synthesises this kind of perception:

"We, as a staff, go to the suburbs to find children with disabilities and enrol them in our school, but this seems to be difficult because schools like ours have a bad reputation, and parents do not want to bring their children here. This is absurd, we beg them to come here and they do not come, while, in order to enrol the children in mainstream schools, they need to have personal ties since it is not that easy."

Special school teacher in Vlora

The staff interviewed thinks that these schools will continue to be very necessary to children with severe disabilities in the future, because mainstream schools are not going to be suitable for these children for a long time.

3.7 Positive practices in children with disabilities' education

A number of positive practices in the education of children with disabilities were identified, both through the examination of the questionnaires, and through the interviews and visits conducted in some schools in different regions.

3.7.1 "Inclusive education – a requirement of the new millennium" Project

In some regions of the country, namely Librazhd, Gjirokastër, Korçë and Vlorë, the "Inclusive education – a requirement of the new millennium" Project is being implemented from 2004. The project is being implemented by the "MEDPAK" association in collaboration with Save the Children and MoES, and in partnership with the Regional Authorities of Librazhd, Korçë, Vlorë and Gjirokastër. The project aims to ensure the education of children with disabilities in inclusive schools in the aforementioned regions.

Thanks to this project, the situation of children with disabilities' education in the kindergartens and schools of these regions is different from that of the rest of

the regions, where this project has not been carried out.

When referring to the results of the work carried out in the framework of the long-term projects implemented by Save the Children in the regions of Tirana, Korça, Vlora, Berat and Gjirokastra, in cooperation with the “Help the Life” and MEDPAK associations, data show that children with disabilities who have attended inclusive education have better academic achievements, higher self-esteem, and better social skills⁴⁶.

The main positive practices observed in the regions where the project is implemented were the following:

- In these regions, a special commission has been created within the REAs, with various specialists from different institutions (the municipality, NGOs supporting families), who assess the child’s disability and evaluate his/her education needs. The trained specialists of this commission draw a report on the development level and type of disability of the child with disabilities, and make recommendations for the achievement of the didactic objectives by the child.
- In these regions (especially in the schools where the project is being piloted) teachers, are not only aware of the importance of inclusion, but also trained on IEP development, curriculum adaptation.
- In some of the schools, the project finances resource rooms and support teachers in order to enable more specific work with CWDs in inclusive schools.
- The entire community and the environment in the schools where the project is applied provide support towards a quality education for CWDs (the other students support and welcome CWDs, parents of the other children are generally supportive, children’s governments have carried out activities for the promotion of the rights of children with disabilities involving CWDs in these activities).

3.7.2 Other projects and initiatives

During the interviews and observations in Tirana, we found a positive echo of the “Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Education” Project of Save the Children and the MoES implemented from 2003-2009. The project aimed at ensuring the inclusion of children with disabilities in 10 kindergartens and 10 schools of Tirana.

Although these kindergartens and schools are not supported by the project anymore, some of the representatives of these institutions we interviewed stated that:

46. Inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education, a Report drawn for Save the Children in Albania, Ma. Merita Poni, Tirana, April 2010

- The piloted kindergartens and schools are characterised by the welcoming spirit towards CWDs and their families, and the positive working practices used with them. They continue to include an increasingly high number of CWDs.
- The teachers supported by the project through trainings and other tools, continue to work effectively with children with disabilities.
- The work patterns, materials, and didactic formats have been generally maintained, although they don't have the same quality level.

In the framework of the abovementioned projects, Save the Children has supported the early identification of children with disabilities by using the "Portage"⁴⁷ method. The teachers of preschool education trained on using this method have visited the families of these children, helping directly with their development in order to prepare them for the entrance in the school and preschool environments.

These initiatives have enabled, over the years, the inclusion of about 400 children with disabilities, who have received and continue receiving education in the 34 kindergartens and 34 schools of the project. A number of 600 professionals including teachers, REA and EO specialists, and school psychologists have been trained to work with these children in the classroom⁴⁸. A set of publications has served to share the best experiences among the regions, schools, and kindergartens included in the project.

The Regional Education Authority of Berat, since 2004, has been also strongly supporting, through a project carried out in cooperation with Save the Children, the process of children with disabilities' inclusion in the kindergartens and schools of the city.

Mainly in Tirana, but also in other regions, local and international organizations have implemented and continue implementing projects related to integrative or inclusive education, in most cases only for specific categories of disability. Among them, we can mention a project on the inclusion of children with visual disabilities, carried out in Tirana by the Albanian Blind Association in collaboration with the MoES.⁴⁹

Additionally, in the framework of the "Second Chance" Project, a project implemented in the entire country, which targets the education of children who have dropped out of school, mainly Roma children, the MoES has provided for some children with severe disabilities a teacher who teaches them at their homes.

47. http://www.scalbania.org/pdf/School_for_all.pdf

48. http://www.scalbania.org/pdf/School_for_all.pdf (pg. 8)

49. For more information please see: http://wvi.org/sites/default/files/Raport_Rajonal_I_Alb_Web.pdf

However, no accurate data on the number of CWD who have benefited from this project are available.

Another project to be mentioned is one that is being carried out by volunteers of the World Vision organization, who go door to door in the rural areas of the Elbasan district to find families with children with disabilities, and encourage them to enrol these children in the schools of the city.

Thanks to many different projects and initiatives that the MoES has supported, many other positive elements in building an inclusive atmosphere have been identified:

- During the years, the capacities of a significant number of teachers, school directors, and REA and EO staffs have been increased and improved through training activities on child-centred teaching, the concept of inclusive education, and the concrete support that must be given to children with disabilities for their education.
- Throughout the years, many parents, school and kindergarten teachers, and school communities in general have been involved in awareness activities about the right of children with disabilities to inclusive and quality education.
- Generally, the REA and EO staffs have been active in improving the model of inclusive education in their respective regions, monitoring the results of their long-term work on children with disabilities, and measuring the influence that the implementation of inclusive education has had on the rest of the children.
- Thanks to the institutional collaboration with the MoES, the model of inclusive education created in the “Inclusive Education” Project financed by Save the Children and implemented by MEDPAK has been promoted at the national level through trainings, round tables, conferences, guidelines, and official documents.
- A significant number of guidelines have been published and distributed for free in order to support parents, education staffs, and other professionals in this field.

3.7.3 Indelible marks

During the data collection on the field, the researchers’ team had the opportunity to meet many people whose vision, inspiration and work related to the educational rights and inclusion of children with disabilities have left indelible marks. We met with:

- Children with disabilities who, despite the difficulties, make incredible efforts, surprising with their achievements even the most sceptical with the power of the inclusive philosophy.

- Parents and community representatives whose inspiration, dedication, and sacrifice is amazing.
- Teachers who, despite the difficult conditions and the lack of knowledge and trainings, have worked and built successful experiences with children with disabilities, thanks to commitment to their work and profession in general, and in the name of the children with disabilities' rights in particular.
- Some MoES, REAs and EOs, and school directors, as well as specialists and psychologists, who have done an incredible work in promoting and implementing the right of CWDs to be included in mainstream kindergartens and schools.
- Representatives of various organizations who had not only the right vision, but also the needed experience to make the inclusion of CWDs become a reality in the whole country.

4. Recommendations and suggestions

The following recommendations are given to all the actors involved in all the levels of the education system, from central and local level to school level. Most of the recommendations are addressed to the MoES as the key institution in the education of children with disabilities; however, they concisely include all the institutions, organizations and individuals responsible for the education of children with disabilities.

4.1 Recommendations for the Ministry of Education and Sport

To review and approve the acts and documents necessary to the inclusion of students with disabilities

In cooperation with a number of institutions and organizations working in the disability field, the MoES must develop and approve a number of secondary legislation and documents related to the implementation of the new law on Pre-university Education:

- *Develop and approve the Secondary legislation in accordance with the requirements of the new law on Pre-university Education (being careful not to leave any room for double interpretations in the issues concerning the implementation of the new law. It is necessary for these acts to clarify all the issues that have previously been sources of conflict between the parties).*
- Develop strategies and a long-term and specific action plan for the inclusion of CWDs (especially intellectually children with disabilities) in mainstream kindergartens and schools.
- Develop and approve documents that result from the implementation of the new law, such as manuals of the procedures for the inclusion of children with disabilities, standards for inclusive classrooms, and other necessary documents.
- Improve all formats and documents (e.g. the final diploma, the attendances book, the CWDs files) in order for them to reflect the work and development of the CWDs during the school years.
- Develop policies for the prevention of children with disabilities' isolation

and marginalisation and create the necessary mechanisms for the protection of these children from discrimination.

To reorganize structures and human resources (its own and those of its depending institutions)

- The MoES should plan and create a special structure/unit for the monitoring and coordination of work for the inclusion of children with disabilities in kindergartens and schools. This structure must focus not only on public kindergartens and schools, but also on private institutions.
- National institutions dependent on MoES (NIPE and IED), responsible for the monitoring and coordination of the work in all the kindergartens and 9-year schools of the country, must include in their structure specialists of the field whose responsibilities are only related to the monitoring and supporting of the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream kindergartens and schools.
- The MoES should plan the inclusion within the REA and EO structures of experienced and well-trained specialists of the inclusion who will support and monitor the inclusion of CWDs in the mainstream kindergartens and schools of their respective districts (initially in the REAs and afterwards in the main EOs, according to the action plan).
- The MoES should assign support teachers, initially in the schools where the number of students with disabilities exceeds 3, giving the priority to the largest schools piloted for the model of inclusion. If the funds available are not sufficient, the MoES may consider introducing volunteer support teachers (or other similar resources) for whom it can find various forms of motivation and evaluation.
- The MoES should positively encourage disabled persons and other qualified individuals to apply for job positions in the field of education while making the necessary accommodations for them.
- The MoES should create joint councils, commissions and structures with other ministries and organs of the local government in order to:
 - ✓ Coordinate the services for children with disabilities, placing the inclusive schools at the centre of these services.
 - ✓ Draw and implement joint plans related to the services provided to children with disabilities and their families.
 - ✓ Develop joint monitoring and information systems and built the necessary mechanisms for the information generated by monitoring

to be used for future review and planning.

- ✓ Undertake awareness campaigns on the right of children with disabilities to education, the right to non-discrimination and other rights, aiming at reaching the whole public in general and particularly the persons whose responsibilities are related to the children with disabilities' right to education.
- ✓ Adapt the national standards of access and safety in inclusive schools.
- ✓ Create connecting bridges between the early intervention services and schools and kindergartens in order to facilitate the introduction of CWDs in these institutions and their passage from one institution to another, and the early inclusion in preschool education of children with disabilities.
- ✓ Train and inform health practitioners, municipalities and communes on the observance of children with disabilities' rights and preservation of their dignity.

To coordinate its work with that of the Institute for Education Development in order to:

- Develop flexible programs and methodological procedures and model quality and efficient strategies and methods.
- Improve the transcript, production and distribution of text in Braille and large print and enable the use of information and communication technologies.
- Ensure alternative texts and set alternative standards for these students' achievements in the various subjects.
- Develop or review the programs for the early identification and intervention that are in accordance with the inclusive education approach, and make the necessary steps to guarantee access for children with disabilities in preschool programs.

To coordinate its work with that of the Training Accreditation Commission and other depending institutions in order to:

- Review the training material and modules so that they may reflect inclusive education methods as well as the needed information on children with disabilities.
- Train all the kindergarten and school teachers and directors and other

school staffs on inclusive education methods, including topics or skills such as sign language, management of bullying, mockery or other similar discriminatory and degrading attitudes towards children with disabilities, management of children with disabilities' behaviour.

The teachers' basic training must also specifically include topics such as:

- ✓ Child-centred teaching (stressing cooperative teaching, group work, active learning)
- ✓ Provision of knowledge on the overall ways of managing children with disabilities' behaviour, and in particular, working techniques for the management of the behaviour of autistic children, hyperactive children, and children with intellectual disabilities.
- ✓ Provision of knowledge and expertise on the planning and development of individual plans.
- ✓ Knowledge of the pedagogical techniques to differentiate their teaching for and adapt it to children with disabilities.
- ✓ Knowledge of the assistive technology and of specific software, as for example the knowledge on the sign language and the Braille alphabet.

Other more specific topics which would be of interest to the teachers:

- ✓ Designing and administration of individual tests for children with disabilities based on their specific abilities and on the level of their academic achievements.
- ✓ First aid and emergency situation management (e.g. the case of epileptic students).
- ✓ Organizing of child-centred classes, especially for teachers of the lower secondary education where the curriculum is more rigid and most of the CWDs start to fail.
- ✓ Group work with school psychologists and parents.
- ✓ Helping and planning of the work for the inclusion of other children in activities within and out of the classroom.
- Develop action plans, accompanied by the related funds, aimed at effectively and immediately supporting trainings for teachers, school directors, psychologist, social workers and CWDs parents.
- Enable counselling trainings for teachers, directors and psychologists, in every region, aimed at building their capacities in supporting children with disabilities and different needs and their families.

- Enable trainings for and provide support to the parents of children with disabilities.

To encourage and support universities that prepare new teachers (and other professionals that will be working with children with disabilities):

- Review and improve the curricula and subject programs utilized for the preparation of teachers and other education specialists, aiming at providing them the knowledge, skills and modern practices in the field of inclusive education.
- Review the didactic practices in order for all the future teachers to have the possibility to see and apply inclusive practices in the field.
- Train the academic staffs on knowing and applying modern inclusive curricula and practices.
- Provide future teachers with the necessary knowledge for conducting scientific studies and researches in the field of inclusion.

To support and encourage Regional Education Authorities and Education Offices in:

- Qualifying and training all of their staff, introducing them to the inclusion philosophy and practices and clarifying them the monitoring and supporting role they have in this process.
- Knowing the disability terms and categories in order to build a qualitative and reliable database on children with disabilities.
- Assigning funds for the qualification of teachers and the increase of the quality of their work with CWD, and for preparing supporting literature and practice guidelines ensuring the inclusive process.
- Sensitizing the teachers about the importance of the inclusive process.
- Guaranteeing that the teachers' performance evaluation includes indicators related to inclusive education

To improve the infrastructure of kindergartens and schools, to enable the access of children with disabilities (in cooperation with the local government and other agencies)

- Building schools and kindergartens that meet the standards of accessibility for CWDs in order for these children to have full access to the entire

school environment, regardless of their type of disability or their level of impairment.

- Since the MoES does not have a specific instrument for evaluating the application of international standards for the construction of kindergartens and schools for CWDs, as a first step it is necessary to prepare such instrument which will and then be used as a quality evaluator by monitoring institutions.
- Maintaining and enriching the existing resource rooms, using them as models for the creation of similar classrooms in other schools of the country. Creating new resource rooms, starting from the schools with the highest number of CWDs, based on models that have already been successfully applied in Albania.
- Equipping all the schools, starting from the pilot ones, with the necessary assistive equipment for the education of CWDs.
- Planning the equipment of pilot schools with the necessary technology and computer programs to facilitate the learning process for each category of disability, including Braille equipment, software, in due time.
- Ensuring the means of transport and the necessary accommodations for children with disabilities, giving priority to rural areas.
- Establishing the indicators for the evaluation of the conditions of children with disabilities' inclusion in mainstream schools, aiming at ensuring the due quality.
- Finding ways to reduce the number of children per classroom with at least 4 children for each child with disabilities.

To undertake awareness raising campaigns

- Encourage and plan awareness campaigns on the importance and understanding of inclusive education. Since the awareness of the parents and the community in the country is not at the expected levels, these information campaigns should aim at reaching the parents, the families and the community but also other institutions of the society.
- Publish periodically simple and practice materials to support the introduction of the concept of inclusion and the inclusive approach among the teachers, the parents and the community.
- Carry out an awareness campaign in schools stressing:
 - ✓ The nature of inclusive education

- ✓ The misunderstandings related to inclusive education
- ✓ The barriers encountered by children with disabilities
- ✓ The knowledge of the legislation guaranteeing the right of CWDs to inclusive education

To create and support the assessment commissions in REAs

- To create the commissions for the assessment of children with disabilities, with experts in different fields, in all the REAs where they have not been created yet, and to further consolidate the existing ones.
- To provide quality training for each member of the commission on their roles and responsibilities and on the disability assessment models.
- To provide each commission with the necessary tools and instruments for an objective assessment (specific assessment tests, the ICF evaluation system, etc.)
- To take measures for the assessments made by this commission to be focused on the support for teachers.
- To guarantee the active involvement of the parents in every step of the assessment process. The commission must ethical information not only for the families but also for kindergartens and schools.
- To monitor the assessment process carried out by assessment commissions.

To provide support for the development of quality Individual Education Plans.

1. The formats of individual plans must be unified and approved by the MoES. It is very important to describe within the IEP the adaptations made, which is necessary for the measuring of the academic achievements and functional performance.
2. Standardized IEP forms must be drawn as well as practical handbooks instructing on their use at all the school levels.
3. IEPs must be developed by the multidisciplinary team created within the school, which are composed of psychologists, teachers and parents.
4. The CWD and his/her parents must be involved in the process of IEP development.
5. The evaluation of children with disabilities must be made based on the

requirements of and objectives set by the individual education plans and the individual progress of the child with disabilities. There should not be the same criteria used for the other students. The exams planned or the state exams must also be adapted to the IEP's level and requirement, and the CWD must be evaluated based on the performance within his/her own level.

6. The IEP must be periodically monitored and reviewed.

To start the conversion of special schools into resource centres

- Inclusive education without the resource centres creates concerns for the regions that have a high number of children with disabilities. In many countries, the term “resource centres” has been substituted by “centres of competence”. Through the network or the creation of departments (medical, psychological, therapeutic and other departments), the resource centres have enlarged their basis in order to cover all the students' needs.

For this reason the MoES must:

- create other roles for special schools by converting them in resource centres with a large scope of functions supporting the education of CWDs.
- select, initially as a piloting, the schools that must serve as resource centres in all the main regions of the country, basing on models that have already been piloted in some regions of the country by organizations working in collaboration with the Ministry.

To develop a new model of funding

- To develop a model of funding which allows the development of the inclusive model in all levels of education.
- To enable special forms of financial support for the different categories of disability in kindergartens and schools.

To support and expand the best practices of inclusion

- The inclusive education model is being successfully piloted for some years now in some regions of the country. The inclusive education projects have been positively evaluated on all the objectives pursued. Children with disabilities attending inclusive kindergartens and schools have better

academic achievements, higher self-evaluation and better social skills. This experience built over the years has created what can be called the Albanian model of children with disabilities' inclusion. We suggest the MoES to support this Albanian model of inclusion and expand it in all regions of the country.

Other recommendations for the MoES

- Encourage, motivate and monitor private education in including children with disabilities. (e.g. by reducing their taxes, by giving a higher position in the school ranking to the schools that include CWDs, by monitoring private schools with the same frequency as the public ones, etc.)
- Collect data on the enrolment, dropout and promotion of children with disabilities including them in the information data system and specifying the type of disability and the gender of the child.
- Strengthen and regularize school monitoring, both at a national and local level, including special schools and resource rooms.
- Support the participation of children with disabilities and their parents in consultancies and other decision-making and monitoring processes. Develop strategies for the increase of the community and family participation in school boards and regional evaluation centres.

4.2 Recommendations for schools

The school must:

- Carry out periodical internal monitoring and evaluation in order to analyse their situation and develop the work plan for the following academic year.
- Include in its internal evaluation the problems' identification, their analysis, the selection of suitable strategies, the planning and the monitoring of the work. Part of this monitoring should also be the progress of students with disabilities.
- Be decentralised in the decision-making and management, a process which will serve to enable the increase of the quality of school services for children with disabilities.
- Guarantee that children with disabilities have access in all the environments and that its climate is welcoming for all of them. Access can be improved by making small adaptations in the physical structure of the schools. The

building, the classrooms, the library, the toilets and the hallways must be built and rehabilitated taking into consideration children with disabilities. It must be stressed that these adaptations are only the beginning.

- Guarantee that its environment is friendly towards these children and the staff is supportive and understanding.
- Take the measures for the management of CWDs transitory periods (e.g. the passage from one space to another), paying maximal attention to the beginning of the first school year and all the other difficult moments of the child within the school.
- Guarantee that CWDs are well-represented and protect their rights in organs such as the children's government.
- Inform and train all staff and students on the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools.
- Provide, every year, training for the new teachers and a reorientation for the old ones on inclusion and quality education.
- Take the measures for the creation of complaint mechanisms and of the opportunities to complain for CWDs and their parents.
- Take measures to prevent school dropout by children with disabilities.
- Guarantee that parents are welcomed and part of all monitoring and evaluation procedures as well as that of the decision-making on children with disabilities' education.
- Include parents in the:
 - ✓ Provision of information
 - ✓ Active participation
 - ✓ Participation in dialogues and exchanging of views
 - ✓ Participation in decision-making
 - ✓ Taking responsibility to act

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