



Research Article

© 2024 Evjonda Pylli & Alma Karasaliu

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

The role of group work techniques for children with special needs in primary education

Evjonda Pylli

“Fan S. Noli” University, Korce, Albania

Alma Karasaliu

“Fan S. Noli” University, Korce, Albania

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/bjir-2024-0023>

Abstract

The aim of this research is to highlight the role of collaboration through the implementation of group work techniques for children with special needs, compared to other techniques that focus on individual work. The objectives of this paper include: exploring various strategies that prioritize group work, highlighting children’s areas of achievement during the implementation of group work techniques, and evaluating their influence on meeting the standards for children with special needs, among other aspects.

Furthermore, this paper includes a comparative analysis of the use of group work techniques versus individual work techniques, emphasizing their respective advantages and disadvantages. The methodology applied in this paper is a combination of qualitative methods, consisting of a literature review on the aforementioned issues, as well as quantitative methods, which focus on the analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the study. The instrument for gathering these data is a questionnaire for teachers, composed of 17 testable items, divided in two main sections: General information about the teachers and data on the techniques and strategies used in the classroom.

Keywords: Teaching strategies, special needs, special needs education, achievement standards, expert group, group work.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the number of children with special developmental needs is increasing. Therefore, by the end of 2019, the number of children and adolescents with disabilities worldwide was about 317 million (UNICEF, 2023). Therefore, various states as well as international organizations of children’s rights, and not only, have focused their attention on the design and implementation of various action plans as well as the

determination of concrete ways of guaranteeing their rights in society, including here and the education system.

In fact, human society's efforts to include all children in regular schools are early. Therefore, we recall the Declaration of Salamanca and its framework of action, where, among other things, the necessity of recognizing and responding to the needs of all children, including those with disabilities, was emphasized (UNESCO, 1994). The requirements for inclusiveness and full participation of children with disabilities in ordinary schools, continued even further by the Council of Europe, through the Council of Action Plan, where it defined a series of concrete objectives and actions of the member countries in order to promote and guarantee of the rights of children with disabilities in society (Council of Europe, Political Declaration 2003) and (Action Plan 2006).

Furthermore, Article 24 of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (December, 2006), recognizes the obligation of all governments to ensure inclusive education for all students.¹

Albania also, based on the relevant legislation,² provides that children with disabilities have the right to be included in regular schools since the influence of the school on their preparation and integration in society is great. Another equally important goal is the creation of favorable conditions on the part of the school institution, in order to fully develop the potential of children with disabilities.

School as an institution and as one of the biggest factors/actors of the socialization process (Nikaj, 2023), takes on special importance mainly in preparing children with disabilities for a full integration in society.

In addition, the management skills of teachers, heads of schools or kindergartens, as well as administrators and any other actor involved in the education system, directly influence the successful implementation of the process of the most complete integration of children with disabilities in society. Therefore, the teacher, already faced with new and previously unknown challenges, must choose among the large number of teaching techniques or strategies, the most effective, those that have measurable and clearly visible results.

In a general sense, the selection and adaptation of teaching strategies, in accordance with the age and individual characteristics of students, is a long-standing ability of the teacher, which has a determining influence on the academic achievements of the latter. However, when it comes to selecting these strategies for children with special needs, of course the challenges that teachers will face will be completely different and, of course, greater.

2. Methodology

The methodology used in this study is a combination of qualitative and quantitative

¹ International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 24, on the rights of all persons with disabilities to education, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities, states must ensure an inclusive education system in all levels and in lifelong learning.

² The Albanian law on pre-university education, regarding inclusiveness, law no. 69/2012. chapter XI - Education of children with disabilities, Articles 63, 64, 65.

methods. In addition to the review of the literature in Albanian and foreign languages as well as the review of the legal basis on the rights of children to have a quality education in the country, a questionnaire was built for teachers in order to collect the necessary data for the study. The questionnaire contains 12 test items and consists of 2 sessions. The first session refers to the general data of the teachers. The second session refers to the concrete use of the methods they use mainly with students with special needs. In order to determine the validity of the questionnaire, this questionnaire was previously used with 25 primary education teachers in the Korça District, as well as with the students of the Professional master's program: Teacher for primary education, who, as part of the professional practice that the study program contains, developed professional practice with active status, near the primary schools of the 4 Districts above.

The sample used in this study includes 50 primary education teachers in the Korça District, Devoll District, Kolonje District and Pogradec District).

The data collected through the questionnaires were analyzed and interpreted through the statistical package SPSS, (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The conclusions and recommendations of this study are limited as they pertain only to the District of Korça, however, they can serve as an initiative for other, if not more comprehensive, studies.

2.1 Research questions

What specific group work strategies are most effective to use in mainstream classrooms that include children with special needs?

What is the level of integration of children with special needs in the classroom and wider, during their involvement in group work?

Why are some concrete strategies of group work more efficient compared to other strategies of individual work of students with special needs?

2.2 Introduction to literature

The studies developed in the context of the effort to include more and more students with special needs in regular classes are as numerous as they are early. However, we again see a trend of increasing interest of researchers in their recognition and assistance in this regard. Among other things, one reason for the increase in studies is because, regardless of the legal framework for this category of children, the influence of external factors such as economic, social and cultural of each country are inevitable. In addition, the dynamic changes of today's human society as a whole, simultaneously bring new challenges of skills and human relationships, including teacher-student-parent relationships, etc. The latter become determining elements of the successful or unsuccessful progress of the implementation of any initiative or reform undertaken, with the aim of the most complete integration of students with special needs in society as well as the development of their full potential in the

classroom environment, school and outside.

The fact that children with special needs are already part of regular classes, in a general sense, also means the belonging of each student with special needs to a secondary group, such as the class, where he belongs. And yet, studies have shown that the implementation of concrete strategies, within this secondary group (Gjini, 2001), to help these students to develop more their emotional, cognitive and social areas.

Mainly during the last decade, researchers have focused precisely on the concrete ways that teachers, educators and specialists in the field of education can implement concrete strategies during a lesson, in order to facilitate the acquisition of information by students with learning special needs, in accordance with the objectives previously determined by them (Hooper, 2016) (Bateman & Cline, 2016) (Bryant, Bryant, & Smith, 2020).

As mentioned, Bateman and Cline (2016) emphasize that all children for whom the relevant specialists have determined their status as students with special needs, have the right to receive services in the classroom through an individual plan (PEI). For them, this plan is a kind of contract between the school institution and parents. The value of this plan, among others, according to the researchers above, is related to the goals on the direction, monitoring, control, accountability and evaluation by the teachers. They note the fact of the primary role that the teacher has in their classrooms. They think that teachers, through their teaching skills, can prepare students with special needs to be more cooperative in classroom environments through actions such as being on time, asking for help, etc. (Bateman & Cline, 2016, page 98).

Moreover, they highlight the fact that the ability of teachers to influence the success of children with special needs in the classroom is so great that they can make changes, in order to achieve the learning objectives. Therefore, according to them, if a teacher wants to make changes related to the physical environment, he can do it very well by placing the student next to the teacher, by placing him next to another student whom he thinks of as a role model with a positive influence, etc. Whereas, when teachers seek to make changes regarding the learning process, they must place children with special needs in groups (Striniqi and Dibra, 2024). This is because working in groups creates favorable conditions to control each other's work and this has a positive effect on them.

Other authors also support the opinion that the changes in the classroom environment, or the group itself, bring changes and transformations in the positioning of the learner due to the continuous renewal of information and, therefore, the renewal of the student's skills (Isa N. Engleberg and Dianna R. Wynn, 2016). In this sense even teachers cannot escape this transformation, as it is their responsibility to take care of the overall balance of:

- situations created in the classroom;
- developed activities;
- relations arising from them (Gjini, 2001, pp. 88-89).

Likewise, a conclusion already confirmed by studies in the field of social psychology,

and which many teachers recognize and apply, is that the process of socialization and that of learning in class environments depends mainly on social interactions in the classroom. In this way, the process of communication, exchange of information, friendship, promotion of positive attitudes towards others and towards oneself, etc., are realized thanks to the development of group work (Theresa A. Quigney and Jeannine R. Studer, 2016).

On the other hand, when talking about strategies or concrete techniques of implementation in classroom environments and especially for students with special needs, we must show increased caution regarding the validity they have when applied to these students. Thus, there are many student-centered techniques such as: Group of experts, Panel, Symposium, Debate, etc. They present a certain level of difficulty in implementing them due to the very high organizational competencies that the teacher must have. A teacher's style is a factor that can promote or inhibit the activation and inclusion of all children in a lesson. During group work, children generally:

- strengthen their social communication skills;
- share information and learn from it;
- increase self-esteem;
- reduce the level of shyness and expression of opinion in front of friends;
- significantly reduce the level of anxiety;
- increase skills for understanding diversity and inclusion;
- develop lasting friendships. etc, (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020).

3. Results of the study - Elements of descriptive statistics

The first part of the questionnaire contains questions related to general data of the teachers. The collected data is presented as follows:

From the teachers involved in the study, it turns out that most of them belong to the age group of 31-40 years. In the same way, the schools in which they teach have an extent almost equal to 30% of the Devoll, Kolonje and Pogradec Districts, and only 10% in the Korça District.

Table 1: The age of the teachers

	The frequency	Percentage
25-30 years	3	6
31-40 years	23	46
41-50 years	15	30
51-60 years	8	16
over 60 years	1	2
Total	50	100

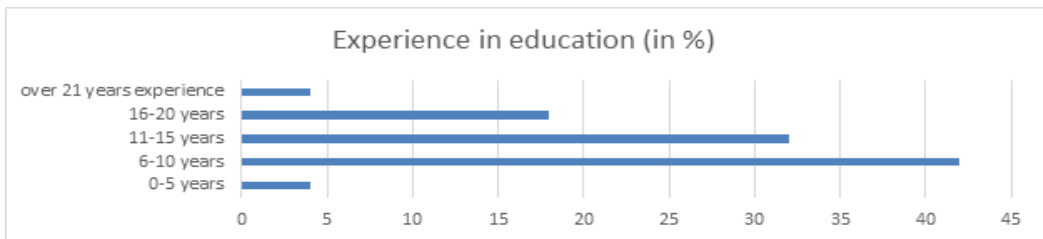
Table 2: The school where you teach is located in which District

	Density	Percentage
Devoll	15	30.0
Kolonje	15	30.0
Korce	5	10.0
Pogradec	15	30.0
Total	50	100.0

The educational experience of the teachers is an important indicator in the study. The main aim is to understand the frequency of the use of techniques centered on group work with children with special needs as well as their academic and social development. In this case, most of the unemployed teachers have considerable experience as teachers.

Likewise, this study aims to show significant correlations between the education of teachers who work with children with special needs and the classroom implementation of techniques centered on group work.

Table 3: Experience in education



As can be seen from the below table, most of the teachers who currently work with children with special needs do not have the relevant education. Therefore, 72% of the respondents admit that they work with children with special needs but their education does not include any program related to special pedagogy at the Bachelor or Master levels. Meanwhile, the fact that 28% of teachers have a suitable education to work as teachers of children with special needs is encouraging.

Table 4: I have the relevant education to work with children with special needs, because I have a diploma in the field of special pedagogy

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	14	28.0
Not	36	72.0
Total	50	100.0

Table 5: I do not have a diploma in the field of special pedagogy, but I have regularly trained in the field of special pedagogy

	Density	Percentage
Yes	40	80.0
Not	10	20.0
Total	50	100.0

It is worth appreciating the fact that despite the lack of education in the field of special pedagogy or other directions related to it, 80% of teachers refer to having been regularly trained in this field to provide necessary information and knowledge. Even, as can be seen from the table below no. 6, the teachers have also received individual training in order to improve the work of their supervisors.

Table 6: I received individual training on how to work with children with special needs, in addition to the relevant education I have

	Density	Percentage
Yes	17	34.0
Not	33	66.0
Total	50	100.0

Table 7: The teaching strategies I use are the same as those I use for other students

	Density	Percentage
Yes	11	22.0
No	39	78.0
Total	50	100.0

Based on the trainings developed by teachers, but also the different level of learning results of children with special needs, teachers already choose different techniques and strategies with them. As a result, from the surveyed teachers, 78% of teachers use other strategies or techniques, which differ from the techniques used for other students.

Table 8: It often happens to use technique/s drawn up in the planned daily schedule

	Density	Percentage
Never	6	12.0
Sometimes	3	6.0
Often	20	40.0
Usually	15	30.0
Always/Mostly	6	12.0
Total	50	100.0

The flexibility of the teachers is also clearly visible in the table above when they are asked if they manage to implement in a comprehensive manner a technique provided

in the daily plan. A considerable number of the teachers, try to maintain and respect the daily plan provided. This has positive impact because planning is one of the main elements of management in classroom environments.

However, 30% of the teachers referred significant changes of daily schedule, when it comes to active involvement of students in class.

Table 9: When transmitting new information, I use teacher-centered techniques such as: lecture, demonstration, explanation, etc.

	Density	Percentage
Never	16	32.0
Sometimes	26	52.0
Often	6	12.0
Usually	2	4.0
Total	50	100.0

The above statement from the above information can be reinforced, where the teachers are already clear that the techniques that teachers have, such as: lecture, demonstration, explanation, etc., are not the only ways of transmitting information if we are looking for academic and social progress of all students.

Table 10: I rarely use student-centered techniques because I think students lose interest and focus in class

	Density	Percentage
Never	34	68.0
Sometimes	16	32.0
Total	50	100.0

68% of the surveyed teachers admit that other student-centered techniques are the ones that increase their concentration in the classroom and their interest in learning.

Table 11: Do you use Group work techniques such as expert group, work in pairs, symposium, debate, round table, etc.

	Density	Percentage
Never	4	8.0
Sometimes	2	4.0
Often	5	10.0
Usually	17	34.0
Always	22	44.0
Total	50	100.0

44% of the surveyed teachers admit that the inclusion of students with special needs

is always possible.

Table 12: Do you think that group work techniques such as work in pairs, symposium, debate, round table, etc., help children with special needs?

	Density	Percentage
Never	19	38.0
Sometimes	27	54.0
Often	4	8.0
Total	50	100.0

In fact, only 4 teachers out of 50 respondents in total, think that these techniques do not help the environment of children with special needs. This happens for the reason that these teachers do not use them, since in the table above there are 8% of the surveyed teachers who refer that during the implementation of the techniques that are essentially group work, students with special needs do not feel involved or active.

Table 13: Do individual work techniques enable an active involvement for students with special needs?

	Density	Percentage
Never	21	42.0
Sometimes	26	52.0
Often	3	6.0
Total	50	100.0

From the presentation of the data in the table above, it is understood that the majority of respondents think that group work techniques are not the most effective for students with special needs. Thus, 42% of them think that in no case has it happened that a certain technique that focuses on individual work, that is, working alone, has enabled the active involvement of these students in the learning process. Only 6% of them, (3 teachers out of 50), think that they can often encourage the active involvement of these students in learning.

Table 14: Do students with special needs that are involved in group work techniques such as: Work in pairs, Symposium, Debate, Round Table, etc., manage to communicate more with other students?

	Density	Percentage
Often	10	20.0
Usually	15	30.0
Always	25	50.0
Total	50	100.0

One of the immediate effects of using techniques that focus on group work is the increase in communication opportunities between children with special needs and

the rest of the class. Thus, 80% of them stated that this happens always, usually or often.

Table 15: Do group work techniques help to achieve the objectives of the Individual Plan (IEP) for students with special needs?

	Density	Percentage
Sometimes	4	8.0
Usually	19	38.0
Always	27	54.0
Total	50	100.0

Another advantage of using techniques centered on group work is that they help in achieving the objectives of the Individual Plan (PEI), for students with special needs. Thus, 54% of the surveyed teachers state that the implementation of these techniques always help to achieve the objectives of the Individual Plan, as both aim to improve learning results through collaboration and active involvement.

In the Chart no. 1, the questions that show a fair correlation between the selection of strategies by the teacher, the need for their continuous training on special skills, the mastery of knowledge of special pedagogy and efficiency in the teaching process are presented in a grouped manner. Therefore, increasing the level of training and selection of techniques or strategies centered on group work, significantly increase the level of academic and social achievements of students with special abilities.

Chart 1.

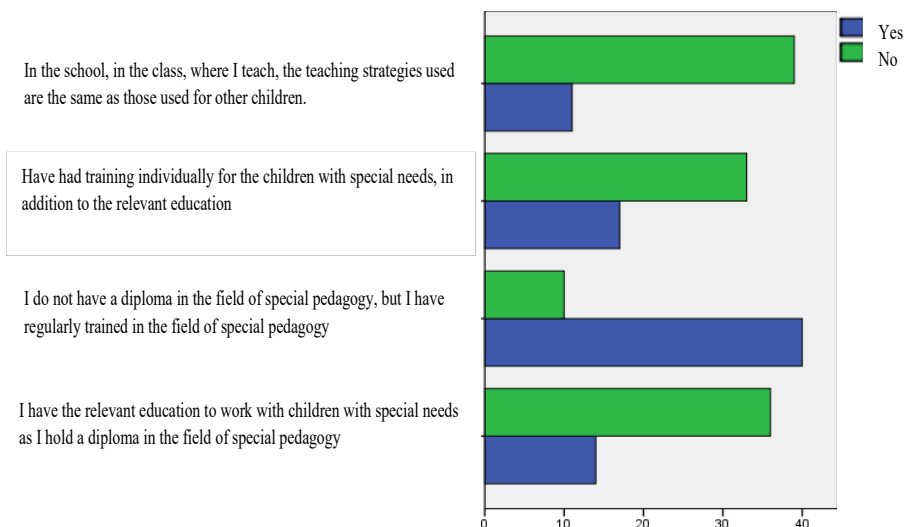
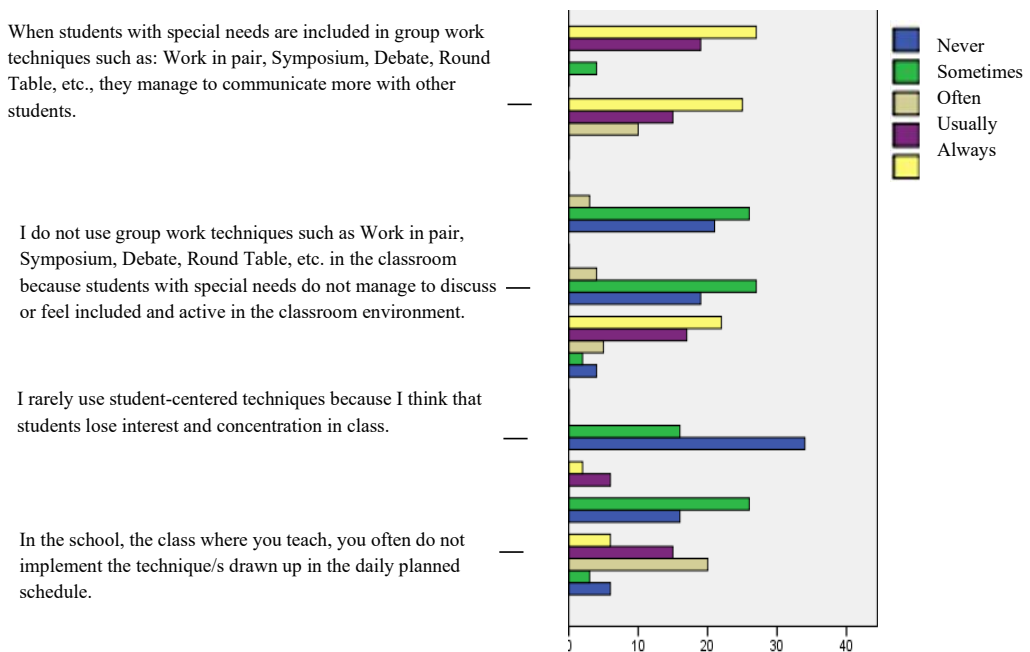


Chart 2 helps us provide the answer to one of the research questions of the study, which specifies what specific group work strategies are most effective to use in mainstream classrooms that include children with special needs? It seems that the most effective techniques are: work in pairs, symposium, debate and round table. Their use and inclusion of children with special abilities in these groups increases the degree of concentration of students in the lesson, increases the willingness of students to participate in class activities, increases their active and real involvement in these activities. They also improve learning and help in their socialization. The reason why some strategies are more effective than others according to the majority of teachers surveyed is due to the group affiliations of these children. In the presence of other students, and belonging to the group, students with special needs take the initiative to get involved in discussions, freely expressing their opinion and getting involved more and more, compared to the cases when the teacher develops a task individually.

Chart 2.



The Chi-Square test was used to study the relationship between the variables: ‘Group work techniques such as: Expert group, Groups work, Symposium, Debate, Round Table, etc., you use more than other techniques and students with special needs to feel included and active in the classroom’ and ‘During the transmission of new information, you use teacher-centered techniques such as: lecture, demonstration, explanation, etc. because they are the only ones with which students with special needs learn the lesson’. From the test results we have:

and $p\text{-value}=0.01$ (<0.05), indicating that there is a significant relationship between the two variables.

4. Conclusion

Teachers who have a relevant education and hold a diploma (Bachelor or Master) in the field of special education have a predisposition to be more ready and prepared to work with children with special needs. This can be seen in the results of students' learning, which according to them were several times higher compared to the case when the teachers of students with special needs did not have the relevant education. It is encouraging that despite the lack of relevant education of these teachers, they still refer to participation in various trainings and qualifications in this context, with the aim of improving their work and increasing learning outcomes for students with special needs. Strategies centered on group work such as: work in pairs, group of experts, symposium, debate, round table, etc., bring these benefits when implemented in classes where there are children with special needs. These methods do increase the motivation and concentration of students during the lesson, they increase the willingness to express themselves in a group, the level of active participation in class and the objectives of the Individual Plan (IEP).

Consequently, the academic and social outcomes of students with special needs are significantly improved.

References

- Bateman, D., & Cline, J. (2016). *A teacher's guide to special education*. Arlington, USA: Alexandria.
- Bryant, D. P., Bryant, B. R., & Smith, D. D. (2020). *Teaching students with special needs in inclusive classrooms, Second Edition*. USA, Los Angeles: Sage.
- Gjini, F. (2001). *Bota sociale e fëmijës*. Elbasan: Sejko .
- Hooper, R. G. (2016). *Understanding special education: An examination of the responsibilities through case studies*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield .
- Isa N. Engleberg and Dianna R. Wynn. (2016). *Working in Groups: Communication Principles and Strategies Books a la Carte (7th Edition)* . USA: PEARSON.
- Mitchell, D., & Sutherland, D. (2020). *What really works in special and inclusive education, using evidence -based teaching strategies*. New York: Routledge .
- Nikaj, I. (2023). *Socologjia*. Tiranë: AlbPaper.
- Striniqi, A. Dibra, A. (2024). Promoting adolescent wellness through health education. *Academic Journal of Business, Administration, Law and Social Sciences*, Vol. 10. No. 1.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ajbals-2024-0008>
- Theresa A. Quigney and Jeannine R. Studer. (2016). *Working with Students with Disabilities (1st Edition)*. New York: Routledge.