

Natasha CHICHEVSKA-JOVANOVA  
Olivera RASHIKJ-CANEVSKA

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## THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MAINSTREAM AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Primary and special education are two complementary worlds, where the first one provides a foundation for knowledge and socialization, and the second focuses on support and adaptation for each student to reach their full potential

(Karovska-Ristovska, Chichevska Jovanova, Rashikj-Canevska, Stanojkovska Trajkovska)

### **Abstract:**

*Inclusive education is a process that integrates students with special needs in mainstream schools, providing them with appropriate support and adaptations. This paper discusses the differences between mainstream and special education, focusing on the right to education, aims and approaches, responsibilities and competences, curricula, focus of education, teacher preparation, learning conditions, teaching methods, learning standards, assessment and evaluations, teacher competencies, educational research and legislation. In Macedonia, inclusive education started in 1998 and is still in the process of development, aimed at the full inclusion of students with disabilities, which is stipulated in the Law on Basic Education passed in 2019.*

*The methodology includes an analysis of existing research and laws, as well as a comparative study of regular and special education. Data from relevant sources such as European and national education agencies, UNICEF reports and laws on special education were used. This methodology enables a detailed overview of the current situation and challenges in inclusive education.*

*The conclusion is that although significant efforts have been made for the integration of students with special needs in mainstream schools, there are many challenges that need to be overcome. Better support for teachers, more resources and funding, and a change in attitudes of the society are needed. With appropriate measures and policies, real inclusion and quality education for all students can be achieved.*

**Keywords:** *inclusive education, mainstream education, special education, individual education plan, low legislative.*

## 1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a pedagogical concept that advocates the inclusion of all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other differences, in regular education systems. This idea derives from basic human rights and is in accordance with international legal documents that highlight the right to education for every child (Chichevska Jovanova, Rashikj-Canevska, 2022). Inclusive education focuses on adapting the education system to the needs of all students, rather than adapting students to the existing system.

The importance of the inclusive education can be seen in its ability to create society in which the differences are valued and understood, not just tolerated. It allows each student to achieve their full potential and contribute to the community. The inclusive education also prepares all students, with and without disabilities, for live in the world of diversities, building tolerance, understanding and mutual respect.

Experts often debate the best methods to include students with disabilities in the mainstream education systems without compromising the quality of the education. In this context it is essential to understand that inclusion does not mean only physical accommodation of the students with different needs in the same classroom, but also creating supportive and stimulating school environment in which every student can “flourish” and learn.

Today’s schools are becoming more and more diverse. Many teachers consider that in their classrooms they have gifted students, students with disabilities and culturally diverse students. All these differences make teaching more interesting and exciting, as well as more complex. In the last 20 years it has been shown that the traditional education cannot provide quality education for everyone. Therefore it needs to be adjusted to the needs of different groups and individuals.

In order to achieve that, the students with developmental disabilities should receive special education services according the conditions provided by the state institutions. The special education is a specially designed teaching provided by the schools that meets the special needs of the students identified as students with developmental disabilities. The special education is a set of services including instructions in regular classroom in mainstream school, in special classroom in mainstream school (support centers) or in special schools (primary school with resource center), community education for students who need to learn life and work skills and specialized help in the areas such as vocational training.

With the initiation of total inclusion in our country, there was a deliberate befuddling of the identities of special and mainstream education. In this paper we will review the differences between the mainstream and special education, which are historical and worth preserving (Chichevska Jovanova, 2018).

### 1.1. The right to education

- The mainstream school is a right of all students.
- Special education is reserved for specific groups of students, such as students with visual impairments, students with hearing impairments, students with motor impairments, students with intellectual disabilities, students with autism and students with multiple disabilities.

### 1.2. Goals and approaches

- The goal of the mainstream education is to provide basic knowledge and skills for all students.
- The special education aims to meet the specific needs of the students with different disabilities and specific educational needs.

### 1.3. Responsibilities and authorities

- Local municipal authorities are responsible for the work of mainstream schools.
- The Ministry of Education and Science is exclusively responsible for special schools and classes (resources centers and centers for support).

### 1.4. Teaching programs

#### *Mainstream education:*

- The Bureau for development of education prepares teaching programs (curriculums) for mainstream schools.
- Teaching programs are unified and generally designed to meet the needs of the average student.
- Prescribed programs and recommended methods are suitable for the largest number of students (about 80%) and they do not need special adjustments in order to be able to follow the teaching successfully.
- Teachers work with all students in the classroom and provide general education, using different styles of learning, applying Bloom's Taxonomy to plan instructional objectives, with basic adaptations of materials, and using general teaching methods. For the goals that are more difficult to realize, they mainly focus on cooperation with the professional (expert) colleagues in the school.

- The focus is on the academic subjects such as mathematics, science, languages and art. (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024)

*Special education:*

- Teaching programs are individualized and adapted to meet the needs of each student.
- Includes additional services like speech therapy, physiotherapy, assistive devices.
- Special educators and rehabilitators provide individualized support to students with specific needs, using specific methods and techniques, as well as specific materials, devices and often work in a team with speech therapists, physiotherapists and other experts. Although both approaches are aware of the importance of different learning styles and the adaptation of materials, special educators make deeper and more specialized adaptations.
- If the individualized approach and adaptations do not work for the student with developmental disabilities, then the following type of support can be provided:
  - \* **Level II** – *Intensified support* – is provided to students in case the general support does not give the expected results. The recommendation for the intensified support is made after an assessment by the school's inclusive team and professional bodies for functional assessment. Intensive support is with multiple and/or simultaneous interventions and is provided to the student based on an individual educational plan.
  - \* **Level III** – *Special support* is provided when the intensified support does not meet the needs of the student or in other case when the decisions has been made after the assessment by the professional bodies for functional assessment. The special support is similar to the intensified support, but is more intensive and with even more simultaneous interventions and is provided based on a modified curriculum.

**1.5. Focus of the education**

- - Mainstream education is oriented toward groups.
- - Special education is directed toward the individual.

## 1.6. Teacher training

### *Mainstream education:*

- Teachers from the mainstream schools are prepared to teach bigger groups of students.
- In general they have diploma for teacher in primary or secondary school.
- They have basic knowledge about different educational methods, but they are not specialized to work with students with special needs (Teacher Certification Degrees, 2024; U.S. Department of Education)

### *Special education:*

- Special educators and rehabilitators are prepared to teach individuals or small groups.
- They are specialized to work with students with disabilities.
- They often work together with other experts, such as speech therapists, psychologists, physiotherapists (Special Education Guide, 2024; Council for Exceptional Children, 2024).

## 1.7. Environment and learning conditions

### *Mainstream education:*

- The students learn in standard classrooms, with standard schedule and structure.
- The environment is adapted for students without specific disabilities (NCES, 2023; Education Commission of the States, 2024).

### *Special education:*

- The students can learn in special classrooms (support centers) or specialized schools (primary school with resource center), but they also can be integrated in the mainstream education by appropriate adaptations.
- The environments and the learning conditions are adjusted to meet the physical, cognitive and emotional needs of the students (Reading rockets, 2024; National Education Association, 2024).

### 1.8. Teaching methods

- The mainstream education uses differentiated teaching for different educational levels.
- Special education uses intensive, specially designed instructions for specific needs.

### 1.9. Technology usage

#### *Mainstream education:*

- The technology is used to improve the teaching process and to facilitate access to information for all students.
- The use of the technology is more focused on general use, such as computers, tablets and internet resources (Edutopia, 2015; Teach and learning, 2024).

#### *Special education:*

- The technology plays significant role in the support of students with disabilities, through the use of assistive devices such as communication devices, learning softwares and specialized devices.
- The assistive devices are designed to meet the specific needs of students, such as audio books for students with visual impairments, or communication applications for students with speech and language impairments (ATIA, 2024; Special education guide, 2024).

### 1.10. Learning standards

- In the mainstream education annual learning outcomes are set with certain standards.
- In the special education there are few or no guidelines for developing standards for students with disabilities.

### 1.11. Grading and evaluation

#### *Mainstream education:*

- The students are graded according to standard tests and criteria.
- Grading is generally uniform and based on achievement of academic goals (Glossary Of Education Reform, 2015; ETS, 2024).

***Special education:***

- The evaluation is carried out according to the Rulebook for the evaluation of students with disabilities, according to the achieved goals of the IEP.
- The assessment is individualized and alternative methods of assessing progress are often used.
- Includes continuous assessment and adjustment of teaching methods to meet the changing needs of the learner (Special education guide, 2024; NCEO, 2024).

**1.12. Teacher's competents**

- Teachers from the mainstream and special education should not have same competences, although there is a tendency for that, at least in our country.

**1.13. Financing and resources*****Mainstream education:***

- The financing is provided by the local, regional and national budgets, focusing on the general school needs.
- The resources allocation is directed toward supporting regular curricula and activities (Education next, 2017; US Department education, 2024).

***Special education:***

- Financing often includes additional funds to support specific needs of the students with disabilities.
- The resources are provided for specialized programs, assistive technologies, therapeutic services and teacher training (US Department education, 2023; Special education guide, 2024).

**1.14. Involvement of the parents*****Mainstream education:***

- The parents are involved by parental meetings, school events and regular communication with teachers.
- The involvement of the parents is important, but it is not always intensive and specialized (PTA, 2022; Edutopia, 2024).

*Special education:*

- The parents play key role in the development and implementation of the individual education plans (IEP).
- Family involvement is essential and often includes regular meetings, consultations and active collaboration with teachers and specialists (Wrightslaw, 2014, Center for Parent information and resources, 2013).

**1.15. Transition and preparation for the future***Mainstream education:*

- The transition from primary to secondary school and further to higher education is generally structured and unified.
- Preparation for the future is mainly directed toward academic and career goals (ACT, 2024; CCRS Center, 2024).

*Special education:*

- Transition often includes specific programs to prepare the students for life after school, including employment, independent life and community participation.
- Transition and future preparation programs are individualized and may include life skills training, vocational rehabilitation and employment support (NTACT, 2024; Family care connections, 2023).

**1.16. Low legislation and policies***Mainstream education:*

- The education system is regulated by general laws and policies that cover all the students.
- The low frame is focused on ensuring quality education for all students (U.S. Department of education, 2024; NSBA, 2023).

*Special education:*

- Unlike western countries where special education is regulated by specific laws and policies, such as the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (IDEA) in the USA, in the Republic of N. Macedonia there are no special legal legislations governing special education. The Decree on Special Education is included in the Law on Basic Education from 2019, and additional explanations can be found in the Concept for Inclusive Education, the only official state document



that refers to the education of students with disabilities and explains it more precisely (Rashikj-Canevska, Chichevska Jovanova, 2021).

- Policies are directed toward ensuring the rights and support for students with disabilities, including individual education plans and services (New York State Education Department, 2017; Special education guide, 2024).

### **1.17. Educational researches**

- The mainstream education has recently embraced the need for educational research.
- The special education has long history based on the researches.

### **1.18. Determination**

- Mainstream education is place.
- Special education is service.

## **2. Conclusion**

The differences between mainstream (regular) and special education are significant and reflect different goals, approaches, and teaching methods. Inclusive education, which aims to integrate students with special needs in mainstream schools, represents a challenge but also an opportunity to improve the educational system. It is an important step towards creating a society that accepts and supports all its members. N. Macedonia has made significant efforts to include students with special needs in regular schools, but there is still much to do.

Inclusive education not only opens doors to all students, but also creates a community where everyone can reach their full value and potential

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