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ASPECT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS IN KINDERGARTEN IN BULGARIA

Summary. Inclusive education has been constituted in Bulgaria with the introduction of the Law on Preschool and School Education and the relevant bylaws. This put an end to the integrative educational approach. In the period after it, the focus in education is the child, who is accepted as a person with a wide range of characteristics, not assessed as good and bad but as different. It is placed in the center of the system to be supported by it. Educational approaches, management and organization of processes, subjects, community are the changing environment in the direction of meeting the needs of the child. This is accomplished successfully, if teacher-parent trust is established. It is a prerequisite for the prevention of children dropping out of kindergarten and school afterwards. The existing mechanisms in Bulgaria for dropping out prevention as processes may have indicators of effectiveness. Such one is the number of children enrolled in kindergartens. The research draws conclusions about the inclusive process of children in kindergartens and in preparatory class.

Key words: inclusive education, integrating education, dropping out of school, parent, kindergarten

One of the most up to date educational policies at the global level is the expansion and improvement of the quality of education in early childhood. This is the first of six goals set at the Global World Forum held in the period 26–28 April 2000 in Dakar, Senegal. The EFA (Education for All) Forum adopts an Action Plan until 2015, approved by the 164 governments present [8, p. 8].

The European Union, through the European Agency for Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education, funded by the budgets of EU Ministers of Education, calls for effective and active work with all interested parties. Priority is given to interventions to the attitudes that form the motivation for effective educational and educative activities. The recommendation is to provide all necessary resources, flexible, timely. It aims to constitute inclusive education systems in the EU countries. In this discourse is another recommendation of the Council of the EU to governments to achieve more effective inclusive policies through the Tool for Self-Analysis of Environment for Inclusive Education in Early Childhood of the same agency [6, p. 11].

Inclusive education holistically defines the child as a multifaceted person. Therefore, it can

be constituted as such an educational system in which by transforming the educational process and attitudes at all levels, all barriers to the development of the child's personal potential are removed. Through the organization and management of educational institutions in our country within the inclusive educational process, the creation of various prerequisites for dropping out of kindergarten should be prevented. The success of this activity is in identifying the problems preventively and in conducting an adequate intervention according to their genesis, even at the lowest level. The work of teachers with parents on site is just one of the possible approaches for successful prevention of children dropping out of education. Since, according to the scientists G. Eischsteller and S. Holtov, happiness and well-being are strictly individual categories for each person, the socio-pedagogical approach should also be strictly individual to each child [9, p. 1–4].

The number of children enrolled in kindergarten and in preparatory group is an important indicator of the implementation of policies in our country to constitute education as inclusive. According to a recent study by the Trust for Social Initiative (TSA), the abolition of the fee for attending kindergarten

has been proven to increase attendance by more than 20%. The increase is evident in the impact assessment prepared by the World Bank under the TSA project “Ready for School” [7, p.1].

J. Nunev (2017) defines inclusive education as the elimination of barriers to pupils for studying and learning. It is an aspect of the inclusion in the society of a country [2, p. 12]. According to T. Booth, M. Ainskow and D. Kingston, inclusion puts the child in its capacity as a whole person who is not determined by deficits or weaknesses [1, p. 3–4]. The authors agree that play, learning and participation in activities for every child should be accessible and possible, without exception. The established relationship of trust between teachers and parents is the foundation in the processes of prevention of dropping out of pupils at risk, according to A. Henderson and K. Map [10, p. 14]. Based on their research on the prevention of dropping out of school, the authors P. Shargel and D. Schmink point out that the success in school is as much as the degree of trust between parents and teachers [11, p. 13–18]. These are some of the principles of inclusive education.

The Law on Preschool and School Education (2017) introduced in Bulgaria and the relevant by-laws framework should have made a positive change in integrative education to inclusive [3]. The processes of enrollment and prevention of dropping out of the education system, especially in childhood and preschool age, should have positive indicators for the growth of enrollment compared to the period of integrated education until 2017.

What is the main difference between integrated and inclusive education? Education in our country up to 2016 inclusive is integrative. It focuses on transformative processes in children with labeled

educational needs until they reach opportunities to be integrated into the general education school. The principles laid down in the inclusive legislation after 2017 put at the center of the educational process the child with all its personal characteristics, according to which the environment is transformed. Kindergarten enrollment is supported by a government tool, the so-called Scope Mechanism [4]. Joint field visits by multidisciplinary coverage teams are taking place. The goal is to persuade parents to enroll their children in kindergarten or school.

We believe that the process of enrolling and retaining children in kindergarten and preparatory group is very important. The supply with pupils at the entrance of the educational system as a whole is carried out by it. To have an inclusion process, the activities at this entrance should be subject to the principles of inclusion.

The current study seeks the positive effect of the ongoing transformation in our education system from integrated to inclusive education. The dividing school year is 2016/2017, before and after the introduction of the Law on Preschool and School Education and the relevant bylaws.

The data for the school years in the period 2012–2021 are analyzed according to the following indicators: number of children enrolled in kindergartens and preparatory groups, group net enrollment ratio (GNER), growth rate increase of each of these two indicators (Table 1, Figure 1).

The data for the number and for the group coefficient are of the National Statistical Institute (NSI). The definition of “group net enrollment ratio” of the NSI is: “The coefficient is calculated as a percentage of the number of learners in preschool education in the age group 3–6 years to the number of population in the same age group” [5]. Growth is

Table 1

Number of children enrolled in kindergartens and preparatory groups of the NSI [5]

School years	Group net enrollment ratio (GNER) в %	Number of children enrolled in kindergartens	Growth of the GNER in %	Growth of the Number of children enrolled in kindergartens in%
2012/2013	82,1	235015		
2013/2014	83,6	240622	1,83	2,39
2014/2015	82,9	241123	-0,84	0,21
2015/2016	81	232025	-2,29	-3,77
2016/2017	79,4	224380	-1,98	-3,29
2017/2018	78,4	220877	-1,26	-1,56
2018/2019	78,4	218767	0,00	-0,96
2019/2020	78,7	217867	0,38	-0,41
2020/2021	78,1	215666	-0,76	-1,01

$$((\text{new} - \text{old})/\text{old}) * 100$$

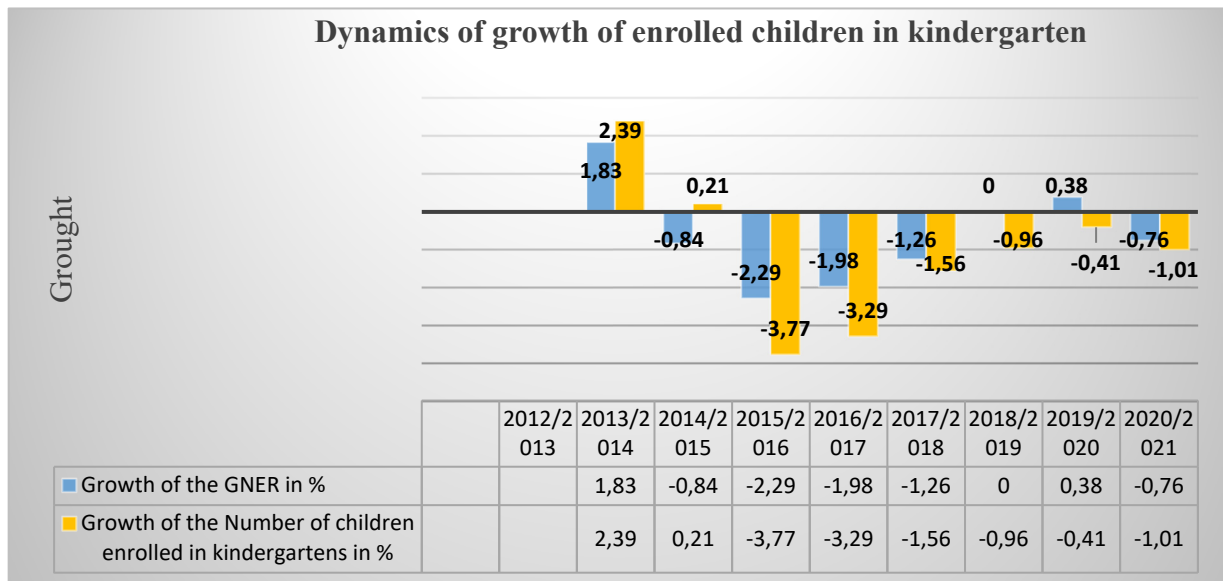


Fig. 1. Dynamics of growth of enrolled children in kindergarten composed by the authors

calculated by the authors in the study as the difference between the new to the old indicator, relative to the old one, as a percentage.

The transitional year between the period of the educational policy for integrated education in our country to inclusive one is 2016/2017. The period of the policy for inclusive education in our country is after 2017, in the period after the introduction of the Law on Preschool and School Education and the Ordinance on Inclusive Education, when a large-scale information campaign on the need for it has been carried out.

- Until 2016/2017, at integrated education, the number of enrolled children in childhood and preschool age, related to the number of all children in this age, forms a share of average 82%.
- There is a difference of at least 4% smaller share in the years of inclusive education conduction. The growth of this indicator is negative with values around zero.
- Even more negative is the growth in the number of children enrolled in kindergarten, which has no positive values in the period after the introduction of inclusive education (Figure 1, Table 1).

The course of data on the number of children enrolled in kindergartens and preparatory groups in the period after 2017 is similarly considered.

The presented data show the trend of a significant decline in the growth of enrolled children, which has begun one year before the introduction of the new legislation.

Although the number of enrolled children is decreasing every year, given the demographic crisis, the share of children of this age is decreasing, i.e. all children, whether or not enrolled in the education system. It is obvious that as the tendency

is to reduce the number of enrolled children, so is the tendency to reduce their share in relation to the number of all children. The same applies to the growth of increase, and an indicative trend in the decline is the growth of enrolled children. This means that the demographic pressure leading to a sharp decrease in children in the studied age of 3–6 years did not affect the decline and the downward trend in the number of enrolled children.

The study covers a period of 4 years before and 5 years after the constitution of inclusive education in our country. In the last five years, the Coverage Mechanism tool for children of kindergarten and preschool age has been strictly applied.

Conclusions:

- The process of supporting inclusive education in our country is not effective in the age group 3–6 years. This conclusion is consistent with the demographic course of population growth according to data of the National Statistical Institute.
- The effectiveness of the government’s Coverage Mechanism remains controversial until it achieves indicators considered by the European Commission to be a satisfactory goal in the inclusion of children dropped out and not included in the education system.
- An individual approach to parents and children through this mechanism is not applied. Therefore, it is not possible to build a trusting parent-teacher relationship through multidisciplinary teams that visit parents with negative attitudes towards education. This creates a prerequisite for compromising the inclusive process in education in our country.

The serious challenge to provide all the necessary flexible, timely resources to constitute an inclusive education system, although it is legally defined as such one, remains.

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