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## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR THE 21st CENTURY - AUTISM IN THE CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** A society cannot be just if all children are not included and if children with disabilities are excluded, if their environment is not changed in a way that enables and supports their participation. All stakeholders should continue to maintain these multisectoral efforts so that children with disabilities are forbidden to fall behind. Mandal (2023) explains that the term *autism* derives from the Greek word "autós" meaning self and it was used by the German psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler to mean 'morbid self-admiration and withdrawal within self.' It is a developmental disorder that results from a disorder in the central nervous system. It is diagnosed according to different criteria for disturbances in social interaction, communication, interests, imagination and activities. The causes, symptoms, etiology, treatment, and other issues of autism are controversial. Blatt (2023) reminds that the concept of autism was coined in 1911 by Bleuler to describe a symptom of the most severe cases of schizophrenia. A child who is assessed based on his/her abilities will gain more self-confidence, will have better prospects for inclusion in education - starting from pre-school education and in everyday life. If one of the basic goals of education is to enable man to set his goals, to be self-determined and to realize his dreams, then education must provide equal access for all and provide access to the world of change, changes that set new requirements and open new opportunities. In almost all countries of Southeast Europe (OECD - Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, an international organization that works to build better policies for better lives), special schools, special classes and regular classes are found. In several countries, many of the schools are established at the same time, but they also have a residential character (home accommodation). North Macedonia is making immense efforts to bring inclusive practices into health, education and social protection. A new assessment model was also introduced, based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF - a framework for describing and organizing information on functioning and disability), primary education new law, which foresees the full introduction of inclusive education and the transformation of special schools into resource centers; cessation of placing children in large institutions for permanent care; introduction of screening for early detection of developmental delay; and expanding the range of community-based services that support families are some of the main determinants in efforts to ensure that children with disabilities take their rightful place in society. These inclusive changes in the legal framework imply changes in terminology, provision of financial conditions, but also changes in the scope and type of services that support education in the continuing education of teachers, provision of appropriate conditions and physical accessibility in schools, as well as in pre-school upbringing and education . A child who is assessed based on his/her abilities will gain more self-confidence, will have better prospects for inclusion in education - starting from pre-school education and in everyday life.

**Keywords:** Autism, education, disability, efforts.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

All children possess great potential. Focusing only on a child's disability without the opportunity to see the child as a whole limits that potential. Like all children, children with disabilities bring within themselves the opportunity for a happy and contented life, vital participation in the community and contribution to building an inclusive and sustainable society.

### 2. HISTORY

Although autism is a term coined in the 20th century, it is not a new phenomenon. The term autism was first used by psychiatrist by Eugen Bleuler in 1908 and referred to a schizophrenic patient who had withdrawn into his/her own world.

Researchers began to observe groups of children, compare their behavioral habits, and look for similarities only in the first part of the 20th century. There was much work searching for individuals and describing their conditions. Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger were pioneers in research into autism. They were working separately in the 1940's. Kanner described children who were severely affected. The children had shown difficulties in social interactions as well as in adapting to changes in routines, memory serves, sound provocation, resistance and allergies to food, intellect, echolalia or palilalia and difficulties in instinctive activity. Asperger, separately, described very able

children and the children he studied, however, did not have echolalia but spoke like adults. He refers to many of them as clumsy and different from normal children in terms of fine motor skills. Their views remained useful for physicians for the next three decades. Several children referred to Kanner's clinic showed similar characteristics that he called "early infantile autism". People who continued with work and are worth mentioning are: Bruno Bettelheim, Bernard Rimland, The Erica Foundation, Lorna Wing, along with Christopher Gillberg at BNK (Children's Neuro-Psychiatric Clinic) and Ole Ivar Lovaas.

Here is a timeline of some key events in the history of 21 century of autism:

- **2009:** About 1 in every 110 children has been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder is reported by The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that
- **2010:** Andrew Wakefield is barred from practicing medicine and loses his medical license, following the retraction of his autism paper.
- **2013:** Autism spectrum disorder is combined by the DSM-5 from Asperger's, and childhood disintegrative disorder.
- **2014:** The president signs the Autism Collaboration, Accountability, Research, Education and Support (CARES) Act of 2014.
- **2020:** 1 in 54 children have been identified with an autism spectrum disorder are determined by The CDC (centers for disease control and prevention).

### 3. UNDERSTANDING AUTISM

According to Christensen and Zubler, "autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that typically manifests in early childhood as impaired social communication and restricted, repetitive behaviors and falls on a spectrum ranging from mild to severe". It is a complicated and lifelong condition. It includes problems with communication and behavior. As a spectrum disorder, it means that it affects people in different ways and in varying degrees. It usually appears by the age of three. Children with autism experience delays in social interaction, language as a communication tool, or symbolic and imaginative play. The three main disorders and characteristics of autism are precisely the inability for social interaction, communication and limited and repetitive interests and activities. Autistic people typically learn, communicate and interact differently than most other people. A number of people with ASD are nonverbal or use very simple sentences, while some have problems with social communication and pragmatic language. Their response is inappropriate in conversation and they misunderstand nonverbal communication. They even lack age-appropriate competency to establish friendships. Christensen and Zubler, list a number of common concurrent conditions according to CDC data that commonly occur with ASD as the following:

- 28% to 44% are with motor abnormalities, up to 79% attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD),
- 9% to 70% with gastrointestinal problems,
- 50% to 80% with sleep problems,
- up to 68% with aggressive behavior,
- 42% to 56% with anxiety,
- 12% to 70% with depression.

### 4. INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS AND CHALLENGES

The implementation of inclusive schools in the Republic of North Macedonia is inspired by the right of children to obtain an education. Schools are a place that can develop skills for life that are useful in society. There are places where children are also guided to socialize with other people. According to Mutini and Bakar, the right to education is also "stated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was later updated at the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (the 1990 World Conference)" which, regardless of individual differences, aims to ensure that these rights are for all. Children with special needs have the same needs as normal people. The main source of stereotypes and prejudices is precisely the lack of information about this type of disability. It has often been shown that people with autism, especially children, try very hard to fit into the environment and overcome the problems they have. They achieve the best results when they encounter understanding and acceptance from the environment. According to the prejudices and stereotypes, the decision to overcome only one's own perspective will lead to trust, (building mutual trust), democratic capacity, (building common policies) where you find children, and come out participants of society, who are not only knowledge, but they also transfer social skills and prejudices and stereotypes to their municipality, workplace and see the wider environment.

The most important thing is to work on raising awareness and changing people's attitudes towards people who are different. We should work to create equal opportunities for everyone by developing modern treatments, by adapting the conditions at home, in schools, at workplaces. Some advices for teachers working in inclusive schools:

- Children with autism can hardly apply what they have learned in one context to another (that is, what they have learned in one room they can apply in another room with difficulty). Therefore, a certain activity that they learned in the classroom, they can hardly perform at home. That is why it is necessary to continue what teachers and therapists do with the autistic child, with the same technique and method, in the home. It should be insisted that a certain activity takes place in several places, in order to encourage the child to transfer what he has learned from one environment to another.
- Visual cards can serve as reminders of classroom rules, and resources available to students. Using pictures means a lot more to children with autism than a long verbal explanation. Visual signals can be very useful, especially in the home where places and objects that are dangerous for the student will be marked.
- Connecting with a child with autism can be challenging, but sometimes you don't have to talk at all – or even touch – to communicate and connect. You also communicate non-verbally with the child, according to the way you look at him, according to the tone of voice you use, also with your body language. And the child with autism also communicates, even if he does not speak. It is only necessary to carefully observe the child and recognize the signs of non-verbal communication that the child displays. Allow enough time and be patient and you will learn the "language" in which the child communicates. If you are attentive you will notice the non-verbal signs that children with autism use to communicate. Pay attention to all the sounds they make, facial expressions and gestures they use when they are tired, hungry or want something.

People with autism will be much happier if they are allowed to feel competent. In the end, what we can conclude is that each student is unique, individual, for himself/herself, that there are differences between them, but that they are also similar.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The difficulties, which at first seem enormous, become smaller and the engagement around the tasks is easier and more organized. Establishing a positive emotional attitude towards learning and building self-confidence in children is of inestimable importance for any further treatment. If our goal is to achieve long-term results, then these students should be motivated at school, but also at home so that they can function independently in society. In the course of work, teachers are faced with a great challenge that they need to accept by applying an individual approach to students, putting it before the usual way of working. Accepting the fact that each student is unique, special and individual to himself/herself, and each student with different needs, was enough for me to start this study. I know for sure that in general, it can be said that each teacher individually modifies the learning approach according to the needs of the students, as I also do according to the needs of students with disabilities. Every challenge we face, if we truly accept it, will only further enrich our personality. In this case, I personally became richer with a lot of knowledge from theory, knowledge about autism and the involvement of students in the school, but mostly from the very contact with the students and the realization of specific difficulties, opportunities and potentials. With constant work, I began to draw ideas for future exercises and activities that I will apply. I dared to study along the way, and for this experience I am grateful above all to my students and the school, with whom I learned a lot. From personal experience, I learned to recognize the needs of students who needed more attention, in order to do so in a planned and structured way. At first, I had problems distinguishing the different behaviors of students resulting from their capacities, but step by step, practice and daily investment taught me to recognize what I had doubts about before. My opinion is that there is still a lot of work to be done, but any work that we approach with love, active curiosity and maximum commitment will be fulfilling and fruitful.

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