

## ***The Identification of learning disability and its nature, at primary school children***

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### **Abstract**

This research focuses on primary education students of Korça who have difficulties in learning process, with the aim to identify and evaluate their needs. The challenges of education in Albania require the promotion of children's needs in all inclusive classes, whose expectations satisfy the interests of individuals and society itself. The difficulties in learning process would be analyzed from the viewpoint of the students' interaction with the surrounding environment, with all in and out school experiences.

Through information collected from questionnaires completed by students, teachers, and parents, the research analyses the difficulty phenomena in learning process as a product created within school and its community. For many children, there are situations which create barriers to learning, especially if the adults, parents, teachers and all other social factors do not engage for the integration, reduction of limited abilities and their inclusion.

Key terms: all inclusive education, special needs, integration, difficulties in learning process, teaching strategies.

Primary education in Albania has marked important quantitative and qualitative achievements in the field of teaching and learning by successfully challenging social and cultural demands of the democratic society. Particularly nowadays, the demand (need) for students, formation with new scientific knowledge, with an open, critical and independent mind has gradually become evident and a new social model of European citizen is profiling. Primary education constitutes not only the basis of cultural formation of generations, but also determines the future objectives in the highest level of education.

Among the many factors that enhance the achievements in this field, continuous attempts of teachers and parents to recognize the abilities, needs and individual desires of the age groups are fundamental. In conditions of the intensive development of information and wide variety of its spreading, a cultural and intellectual diversity is greatly and increasingly evidenced. Successful teachers should necessarily know and understand

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their students, who represent unique combination of their culture, gender and living place. Thus, every student has his own way of learning, his own personal history, skills, values and special attitude towards the world and society. Some are quick learners, some students reflect more than others towards the information, others need some more time to learn but successfully acquire teaching materials. There are also students with low working rates in learning, with problems in writing and reading, in understanding concepts, or they might have a low level of concentration, behavioral and social relationships problems.

Nowadays, due to multicultural dynamics, social context plays an undisputable role in cognitive development and “in fact they create our cognitive structures and thinking processes” (Palinosar, 1998), Psikologji edukimi (Educational Psychology), p. 18, A. Woolfolk, CDE, 2011

The complexity of these different problems will be the target of our study in order to observe and analyze the learning phenomenon, the conditions in which it happens, the methods that should be used to solve the dilemmas, etc.

The importance of this undertaking is reinforced referring to Gardner’s statement in his book “Illiterate mind”; “We now assess in quite a deeper way compared with that of previous generations, how beautifully our growth is hampered not only by the epigenetic factors but also from the institutions activities. Nevertheless, the awareness to these problems should not embitter us. On the contrary, this awareness because of our inner nature, might serve as a safe way towards the planning and application for a more effective society from educational viewpoints.” (2003: 338)

### **The aim of the study**

To analyze the nature of learning from the viewpoints of various psychological theories intending to explain the individual factors that define the “history” of learning.

To explain the role of social factors which affect the learning process so as to modestly and concretely contribute to their improvement

To make evident the present learning problems, the impact of behavioral problems, to analyze their causes, to assess the main strategies for their solution

To consider school responsibilities in teaching children about the learning process.

To draw measurable conclusions important to the advancement of the Albanian educational program

### **Working methodology**

The choice and definition of the theme is based on some considerations:

Learning is a social and psycho - pedagogical keen phenomenon in the conditions of the present cultural development of Albania

The presence (existence) of multiple sources of information. Besides the theoretical and specialized sources in psychology, pedagogy and didactics, many other documentary and official statistical sources might be used.

Data collection is obtained from the questionnaires filled by parents, students and teachers of some schools randomly chosen in Korca region

### **The nature of learning**

“To learn means to understand what you know, while to teach is to remind others what they know as well as you do” (Richard Bach)

Learning and teaching are two different processes which realize learning by developing important collaborative and partnership relations between teachers and students. In this reciprocal coexistence, teaching is an interpersonal activity between teachers and their students, while learning is an individual activity which is defined by individual factors that psychologically and biologically condition teaching and behavior.

“I do not believe that someone will sometimes have taught something to anyone. I doubt in the value of teaching. The only thing I know is that anyone who wants to study, he does it. A teacher mostly might be someone who makes things easier, is the one who fills the table with a lot of food and proves to the others that it is interesting, incentive, amazing and invites you to help yourself” (Charles Rogers, Buscaglia, 16)

“No one should compel someone to learn something, when he is not ready. The teacher’s task is to motivate, lead, ease and guide the learning process by putting knowledge, mind and heart expressions in its service, by inviting the educated people to sit at the wonderful table of knowledge.

Learning includes a sustainable and relatively permanent process of change which leads to the formation of knowledge and behavior as a result of experience. Change and experience are the basic elements. The question to what aspect of behavior the change is realized, is given the answer by cognitive psychologists who answer that it happens in knowledge, viewing learning as an internal mental process, directly irreplaceable during which the information is received, processed and remembered. The behaviorists consider the change in behavior as a result of the external stimuli on the individual. Given these theories, learning is realized through associations, the formation of behavior, thinking, processing of information, solution of problems and decision making.

If these theoretical principles were practically applied, we would come to the following learning conclusions:

- The children learn better when their physiological needs are accomplished and when they feel physically and psychologically safe. (Thorndjak, Skinner)
- The children learn better when they develop themselves a self-awareness of the world and comprehend it. (Piaget, Osjubel, Montesori)
- The children learn better and more naturally in varied social contexts. Learning is a social process. (Bronferbrener, Vigotski)
- The children learn better when they are actively involved and when the content and the context of learning are comprehensible and consistent. (Piaget, Osjubel, Bruner)
- The children learn better when they initiate, assess and develop their task and their game. The child is constructor oh his own world. (Constructivism, Montesori)
- The children learn and increase their ability in different areas and different levels. (Gardner, Blum)
- Learning is a guide to child development. (Vigotski)
- The children learn better when the curriculum is integrated and when all child developmental areas are brought to the process of learning. (Vigotski, Bruner)

Identifying pupils with difficulties in learning and accepting them in standard classes

Learning is a process of individual change; it refers to knowledge or behavior

acquisition as a result of experience and it has a social nature. Acquiring and processing the information depends on schema, mental structures, control processes and the organization of information.

The individuality of the learning process is determined by the learning nature, and the style of learning, thus, by the psychological abilities such as: skills, needs, interests, attention, the level of concentration and its control, memory etc. For that reason, not all the pupils can learn in the same way, by using the same cognitive and processing strategies. Some learn faster, are more analytical; they comprehend and connect the information; some are more focused, while others are slower learners; they learn by heart; they prefer other subjects, have a minor control over the focal point; they have special needs etc. Consequently, the learning results are different.

Due to such individual characteristics, the pupils manifest some behavior problems such as: lack of focus, inability to share work in groups, lack of attention, incapacity to plan, difficulty in managing the assignment, as well as certain emotional problems such as: fear of failure, low self-esteem, anxiety, need to be sustained, the necessity to be encouraged, problems with the communication etc.

By using the term “special needs”, a lot of teachers imply retarded, unskillful, late-in-comprehending pupils. Therefore, they do not consider the behavior difficulties as part of their special needs. Indeed, the learning special needs and the behavior ones are strongly and tightly related affecting one another. Due to the density of occurrence and the impact on the learning process, the aggressiveness and lack of focus are two of the most common problems encountered in today’s classes requiring immediate solution.

The aggressive pupils do not cooperate. They are troubled and negative, oversensitive and inattentive. They tend to contradict the teacher and be hostile to the others. The scholastic success depends on the time the pupils spent on a task without being interrupted. The relation between the focal point and the progress is critical for the pupils with learning difficulties.

Through the surveys done with the pupils and the teachers of the primary schools in the subareas of the city of Korca (May, 2012), it is concluded that attention disorders constitute the main reason among the learning needs, constituting the highest percentage (31%). Lack of attention is closely connected to problems of comprehension, memory and language, to difficulties in reading, and listening as well as to troubles with sight and communication etc.

According to the interviewed, 18% of the children reflect difficulties in reading, 16% incapacity to comprehend, 18% family problems, 11% show logic and interpretation problems etc. It has also been observed that the issues developed within the family, the school and the peers determine such difficulties in learning

The research on the family factor carried out by many sociologists and education specialists has revealed the impact of a considerable number of components, such as the social and cultural background of the family, economical standards, the number of children, relationship between parents, etc.

The data about the family situation of the children with learning difficulties in this school show that 65% of 217 pupils have unemployed parents; both or one of the parents of 9% have emigrated; 29.2% are Roma or Egyptians, whose parents in general reflect either low education levels, or no education at all, etc

Because of the above reasons, the interviewed children do either need the assistance

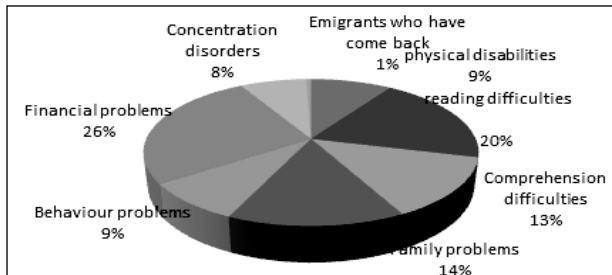
of their parents (30%), of their teacher (28%) or of their classmates (23%).

The majority of the children who encounter difficulty in understanding the homework or reflect writing or speaking problems have parents who lack appropriate education and spend little time with their children.

The distinctive social and cultural traits of these children inhibit the communication and collaboration with their classmates; this explains why 23% of them admitted that they need one another. They claim that they necessitate discussing about their need with their friends at school, maybe to balance the lack of communication with their parents. This is a statement that even interviewed teachers and parents have maintained.

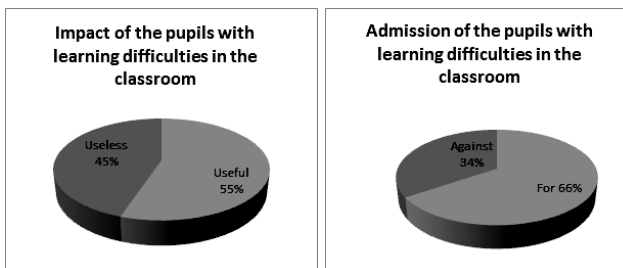
The majority of the children with learning difficulties encounter reading and writing hardship. Their handwriting is almost illegible, their speech lacks the structure, concept comprehension is very low and memorizing new items of knowledge is underdeveloped.

Another survey carried out among the primary teachers of three schools (with different social and cultural contexts) in the city of Korca, revealed that 20% of the pupils in these schools lack reading skills, and 13% lack comprehension skills, 26% have economic problems, 14% family problems, etc. In two of the schools the family and its cultural background, low level of education and the negative education attitude of the Roma and Egyptian community, prevent the setting of a social environment which would ease the above problems and enhance the learning abilities of these pupils. Therefore schools and teachers are responsible for the implementation of inclusive strategies with individual objectives and plans, which would orientate and facilitate the learning process of these pupils.



*Graph 1. Classification of pupils based on the types of difficulties*

Most of the interviewed teachers (66%) claim that the admission and inclusion of the pupils with learning difficulties in normal classrooms has affected positively their learning process because of the interaction opportunities it offers with peers and teachers. The other 45% are doubtful about the above claim since they find pupils with learning difficulties troublesome in the classroom and likely to distract their peers' attention from the lesson.



*Graph 2.*

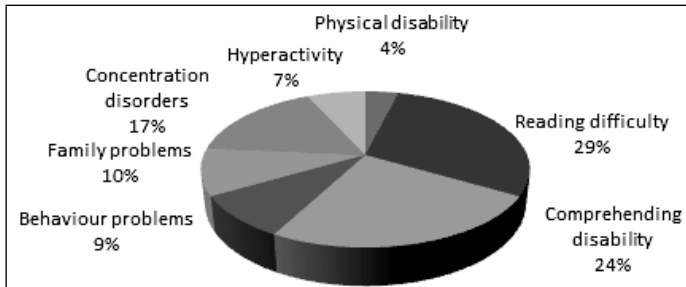
During October 2012 a survey was carried out among teacher, pupils with learning difficulties and their parents

in different schools of the city and the region of Korca. The survey revealed enough

information to draw a quite accurate map of the distribution of learning difficulties as well as of the teachers' attitudes towards them. These were set in a larger context of more specific social and cultural problems.

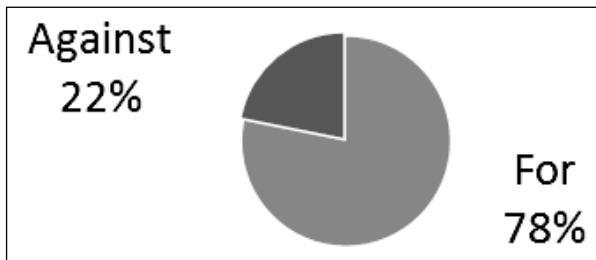
The graph below (Graph 3) states clearly the domination of the difficulties in reading (29%), in comprehension (24%) and of concentration disorders (17%). By assessing the special and individual needs of their pupils, the teachers necessitate more

frequent attendance of the parents at school and further parental attention at home.



*Graph 3. Distribution of the learning difficulties according to their types*

Despite the positive attitude that the teachers reflect about the admission of these pupils in normal classrooms (78%), and in spite of the various teaching methods they make use of, they do frequently consider them a hindrance for the teaching and learning activities in the classroom.

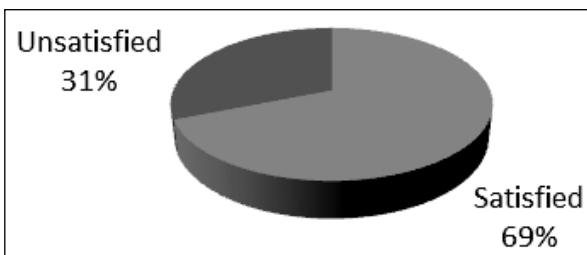


*Graph 4. Admission of the pupils with learning difficulties against – 22% for – 78%*

When asked whether they need help in this respect, the teachers frequently considered the presence of a special assistant or a teaching assistant vital in the classroom. This would not only facilitate the work of the teacher to reach the teaching objectives, but would also provide useful instructions for specific needs for each individual pupil with learning difficulties.

On the other hand, when parents were asked whether they were satisfied with the

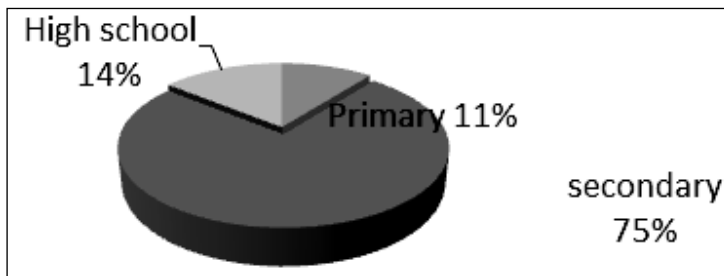
amount of work carried out by the teachers and the school, they urged further assistance from the teacher and the classmates of their children. This is the main factor, according to them, that would help their children overcome learning difficulties.



*Graph 5. Level of satisfaction for the work carried out in the classroom*

Both parents and teachers agree on one point: there is need for partnership between the school and the family, as a reciprocal means of collaboration to manage the learning difficulties and to enhance the general educational standards of the schools (which for the sake of the truth suffer shortage of satisfying learning levels). However, this partnership has not always been helpful, not all the teachers train the parents of their pupils on how to assist their learning at home and not all the parents tell the truth about the learning background of their children.

In spite of the fact that there are parents who spend 1-5 hours a day assisting their children in doing their homework, the expectations are very low. The main reason for this is the low level of education of the parents themselves: 75% have only completed secondary education, 14% have high school education, while the education of 11% of them is primary.



*Graph 6. Parents' educational level*

The question on how learning difficulties are manifested is very clearly answered by the parents, but they

also need the teachers' help for supporting, training and taking care of their children academically and emotionally.

The majority of these parents are concerned with the burden of knowledge, the difficulty in comprehending several subjects, which, according to them does not fit the level of their children. This is also expressed in the answers of the pupils who love school a lot (as they themselves claim), but they do not quite understand what they read in books. For this reason they demand more help from their teachers simply "to learn more." Despite of the teacher's help, the children also need the help of their mates and siblings. One of the children said, "I want my sister to help me because my father does not know how."

The question how "a good teacher" would be like they answered in this way:

- ❖ I would like him/her to help me at home.
- ❖ To help me with any hard question.
- ❖ To help me to make correct sentences.
- ❖ To help me to read books.
- ❖ I want them to be clear and support me.
- ❖ To be able to spend more time with me.
- ❖ To play with me.
- ❖ To help me with everything, etc.

The essence of these desires is suggesting some more qualified and systematic work, "with much more emotional care, great emotional intelligence" (Fullan, 2002:207) and empathetic professional attitudes.

Another issue is the way how the children manage their time after school. From the questionnaire it is noticed that they do not spend enough time on studying. They watch too much television and read very few books. Some children say they do not have any books, although they would like to read books with fairy tales and stories.

All these have a great impact on children's low self-esteem which is implied as a result of the difference between how the child wants to be and how he/she knows and recognizes himself. If this difference is big, the child does not feel well about himself, he is afraid of failure.

It is the duty of the school to change the pupils' perceptions about themselves by motivating them during the process of teaching, by positively observing them, and by encouraging them to participate in special activities where they can feel more capable of managing their difficulties and abilities.

As we have been emphasizing throughout our study case, being different does not mean being abnormal, accepting individual differences does not mean accepting that the teachers can do nothing to change stressful behaviors. On the contrary, it means trying hard to modify them. It would be very unfair to consider these children as incapable of learning only because their learning is different.

To sum it up, we modestly recommend:

The teacher should know his pupils' individuality and their way of learning.

The teacher should have the proper information about other family and social-cultural factors.

The teacher should:

- Insist on the overall involvement of the pupils in the teaching process.
- Motivate his pupils, and find different ways of working with the pupils so that they participate actively.
- Compile a special plan working with children having learning difficulties by cooperating with their parents.
- Stimulate and preserve the interest, initiative and motivation in school activities. They should also keep the performance pace based on intellectual abilities.
- recognize that each child, especially those with learning difficulties, has the right to follow qualitative education. They all need special attention and specialized and well-organized work.

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