

# THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS— INFLUENCING THE MOTIVATION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The study aims to analyze the climate factors in inclusive classes in motivating students with special needs to increase their academic achievements and improve social behavior. Through a qualitative methodology, the study investigated several dimensions of supportive and open classroom climate on their impact on the performance of students with special needs in inclusive classrooms.

**Method.** For the realization of this study, ninety-two (92) students/teachers of the “Teachers in Primary Education” program of the second cycle of studies at “Aleksander Moisiu” University in Durres were included and were divided into four (4) focus groups. At the same time, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-one (21) primary education teachers (grades 1-5) in three schools in the Municipality of Durres.

**Results.** The findings of the study highlight that collaborative climate factors in inclusive classrooms influence and motivate students with special needs. Several issues related to students’ motivation have been identified, specifically: their motivation increases during group work, their motivation increases in project-based learning, and their motivation increases in the reinforcement of hard skills they bring to teaching supported by ICT.

**Conclusion.** Students and teachers also reported that all these beliefs and attitudes directly affect the performance of students with special needs and therefore their achievements. Teachers emphasize that students with special needs are more involved in group work, and some of the benefits that students with special needs have, are: improved communication and interaction by strengthening cooperation and self-efficacy.

**Keywords:** students with special needs, motivation, teachers, collaborative climate, group work, inclusive classrooms, project-based learning

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is increasingly understood as a systematic approach to education for all students of all ages (Kondrla et al., 2022). It aims to provide all students with meaningful and high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, together with their friends and peers (Watkins, 2017).

This study aims to address the influencing factors in the motivation of students with special needs, where they find support in the classroom climate, during the learning process in different teaching methods. They are noticed in work models such as project-based teaching, group work, as well as ICT-supported teaching, etc., highlighting the contribution of each member of the group, regardless of ability or the way this engagement is approached, highlighting everyone’s values.

An inclusive classroom fosters an environment where every student feels intellectually and academically supported, enhancing their sense of belonging regardless of their identity, learning preferences, or educational background. Such environments, characterized by collaboration, respect, and academic rigor, are vital for the academic achievement of all students (Kaplan & Miller, 2007).

Project-based learning is an excellent way to differentiate instruction in an inclusive classroom, especially when that classroom includes students with diverse abilities, such as those with cognitive or developmental disabilities to gifted children Webster, (2017). Project-based learning is also excellent in resource classrooms as well as independent classrooms with typically developing partners, and sufficient support, or where the teacher and students create projects that will support the content in a way that will challenge students to go deeper or further in their learning Webster, (2017).

Supporting active student participation with centered creator project-based learning can be challenging in inclusive classrooms, where active student participation is seen in collaboration through teacher-led reflective discussions (Sormunen et al., 2020).

The climate in inclusive teaching plays a primary role (Margas, 2023) more precisely, by identifying classroom influencing factors that are directly related to outcomes in inclusive classrooms. In previous research, students with special needs are less accepted by their peers (Zurbriggen et al., 2023).

The connection between students with special needs and their self-perceived social participation is influenced by the social atmosphere within the classroom. Specifically, this discrepancy lessens when the classroom's social climate is more positive (Zurbriggen et al., 2023).

The atmosphere within inclusive classrooms significantly impacts the effective execution of inclusive education. Although classroom diversity poses challenges, negative behavioral climates can specifically hinder the learning of students with special needs, presenting a broader obstacle to equity in inclusive classrooms (Hoffmann et al., 2021)

Whereas, group and teamwork promote key skills in the process, which is seen as an active and authentic way of learning, supporting the gain of knowledge among peers (McPherson et al., 2019). However, expectations management, group dynamics, and group and individual assessment for worthwhile contributions are challenging considering diversity promote equity in participation from all students, improve the culture of the learning environment, and are more likely to lead to productive interactions in the group, just like the development of guidelines for inclusive teaching focuses (Králik & Máhrik, 2019). Group work is an educational way that promotes learning and socialization among students, where even students with disabilities are increasingly taught in general classroom settings (Riden et al., 2018).

Despite the focus on technology and the widespread availability of assistive devices, there remains limited understanding of how these tools are utilized among individuals with varying disabilities, severity levels, and ages. Consequently, the technology needed is occasionally overlooked (Alper & Raharinirina, 2006).

Students with learning disabilities have less persistence in academic exercises, showing a lack of motivation, for this reason, ICT-supported teaching increases internal motivation and is more effective in increasing achievement, motivating students, and improving their attitude toward learning (Gkora & Karabatzaki, 2023).

Students with disabilities exhibit positive attitudes towards learning and teaching with the aid of ICT and are sufficiently confident in their computer skills. This confidence allows teachers to employ modern teaching methods with ease, particularly in primary schools. Additionally, these children display motivation and a favorable attitude toward such teaching methods (Bagon & Vodopivec, 2016).

Teachers claim that to provide students with ICT, specifically students with hearing impairment, learning media becomes more exciting and necessary, as well as their desire to make student learning more enjoyable. To ultimately improve the achievement of students in learning, constitutes the main motivation to use ICT in the classroom, regardless of their need for support in terms of facilities and training to make this teaching more fruitful (Puspawati & Juharoh, 2021).

The use of tablets in the classroom by students with disabilities as well as suggestions about the challenges that teachers in inclusive classrooms go through when using these devices in the classroom are to increase student motivation throughout the lesson (Burke & Hughes, 2018).

## METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative method using inductive content analysis was used. This analysis was considered more appropriate to find and explore the factors that were of most interest in this study. The study was conducted in Durres—Albania in the academic year 2022-2023.

The purpose of this study has a dual role. On the one hand, it researches the impact of the climate in inclusive classrooms, which affects the motivation of students with special needs. On the other hand, it investigates the teachers' perception of group work/learning activities, the learning project as well and ICT teaching support, which influenced the motivation of students with special needs in primary education classes in inclusive schools.

## PARTICIPANTS

Based on the objectives of the study, the sample in this study consists of two groups. The first group consisted of 92 students of the professional master's program in "Primary Education", at the University of Durres, who are also teachers in primary education (grades 1-5). This was also a criterion to participate in the study. At the same time, they

had to also be teachers of inclusive classrooms where they have students with special needs in their student groups. Four focus groups were organized with these participants. Two focus groups were organized with first-year students and two focus groups with second-year students of the master's program. In these focus groups, the main questions were about the role of the climate in the classroom, and how supportive it was for students with special needs, which directly affects the achievements of these students.

In the second group, 21 primary education teachers (grades 1-5) from three schools in the city of Durres were included in the interviews, including teachers who have students with special needs in their classrooms. The main questions with the teachers interviewed consisted of the role and motivation of students with special needs using a climate of cooperation with all students in the class to encourage them and strengthen learning.

## DATA COLLECTION

Two different methods were used for data collection: The first method for data collection was the focus group, which was organized with first and second-year students at the master's level in the "Elementary Education Teacher" program of the University "Aleksander Moisiu" in Durres. The questions addressed to the students/teachers were to investigate how supportive and influential the supportive or cooperative classroom climate is for students with special needs about their motivation.

The semi-structured interview format was used as the second method for collecting qualitative data where the participants were primary education teachers (grades 1-5). The interviews aimed to gather detailed information through general questions about the use of contemporary techniques in teaching, such as group work, project-based learning, or supporting teaching with ICT, through specific questions, regarding how motivating these techniques were for students with special needs in the classroom when the climate was supportive or non-supportive. First, the interviewees' data were transcribed and then coded to develop the thematic analysis. This process was followed by the next phase, of identifying topics, categories, and subcategories.

The following Table provides a summary of the themes, categories, and subcategories identified about the study questions.

**Table 1.***Influencing factors in the inclusive classroom climate to motivate special needs students*

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Category 1. Group work motivates students with special needs for learning achievement.                   | Subcategory 1. Students with special needs strengthen their learning achievements when they are part of group work.  |
|  | Subcategory 2. Students with special needs have questionable learning achievements when the classroom climate is not supportive of group work activities.                            |
| Category 2. Project-based learning motivates students with special needs when they become part of it.    | Subcategory 1. Students with special needs have learning achievements when they are also supported by project-based learning.  |
|  | Subcategory 2. Students with special needs have unsustainable learning achievements when project-based learning support is not effective.  |
| Category 3. ICT-based learning motivates every student with special needs with specific characteristics. | Subcategory 1. Students with special needs have more sustainable learning achievements when they are also supported by technology in teaching.                                       |
|  | Subcategory 2. Students with special needs have inefficient learning achievements when technology support in teaching is not adapted to the specific characteristics of the student. |

*Source.* Own research.

The participants in the interviews were primary education teachers (grades 1-5) from three schools in the city of Durres, Shk. (1), Shk. (2) and Shk. (3). The duration of each interview was approximately 25-30 minutes.

**Table 2.***Teachers' data from three schools (grades 1-5) n=21*

| <b>District</b> | <b>School</b>             | <b>Number of teachers (Class 1-5)</b> |
|-----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Durres          | Shk. (1) "Jan Kukuzeli"   | 4 teachers                            |
| Durres          | Shk. (2) "Maria Kaculini" | 9 teachers                            |
| Durres          | Shk. (3) "Nënë Tereza"    | 8 teachers                            |

*Source.* Own research.

In this Table, you can see the representation of teachers of inclusive classrooms for the school year 2022-2023. The data for the selection of teachers who have students with special needs in the classroom were obtained from the local education office of Durres. The selection of these schools was done intentionally because they have a large number of students with special needs enrolled in primary education classes (grades 1-5).

About the use of modern methods in teaching or even access to the use or equipment of classrooms with technology, we have the following table:

**Table 3.**

*Access to the use of techniques & use of technology in inclusive classrooms*

| <b>Use of teaching techniques &amp; technology in inclusive classrooms</b> | <b>% of classroom use (grades 1-5)</b> |
|--|--|
| Inclusion of students with special needs in group work                     | 49 %                                   |
| Inclusion of students with special needs in educational projects           | 39 %                                   |
| Access to classrooms with technology                                       | 17 %                                   |

*Source.* Own research.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

With the participants of the study, who were students/teachers at the Faculty of Education at “Aleksander Moisiu” University in Durres, two training sessions were held by two lecturers from the Department of Pedagogy of the same faculty covering the subject of “Scientific Research in Education “. This training included two days with three lessons on the subject of Scientific Research, where students were trained in research ethics, including ethical considerations regarding the use of contemporary techniques in the teaching process that teachers use throughout the lesson (Kondrla & Pavlikova, 2016). To protect the privacy of the participants in the study, the use of the concrete names of the interviewees were changed to pseudonyms such as “Student A/ B/ etc” & “Teacher A/ B/ etc”, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

## RESULTS

This study aimed to examine the factors that influence and make the classroom climate supportive even for students with special needs, such as a collaborative climate between students performing group work, learning projects, or group activities supported by technology in the classroom. Analyzing these factors highlights the motivation of students with special needs if we have a cooperative and supportive climate among students in the classroom.

The answers received from the focus group meetings with the master’s students in the “Teachers for Primary Education” program, as well as the answers received from the semi-structured interviews conducted with primary education teachers (grades 1-5) in the city of Durres, were subjected to a thematic analysis. Both the answers

to the semi-structured interviews and the answers in the focus groups were subjected to a qualitative analysis, and a thematic analysis was made with these data. The responses received were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. From the perspectives obtained from the participants, categorizations were created based on the importance of the perceptions that students majored in teaching and teachers had about the supportive climate in inclusive classrooms.

Both during the focus group meetings and during the interviews, the participants answered freely, as they thought. Sometimes, these answers were longer than expected. There was also a repetition of their arguments. However, the collected information was selected and organized very carefully to be collected in terms of the research questions of the study.

Focus group meetings as well as the interviews were conducted face to face with the interviewer. The topics of the discussions revolved around the experiences and perceptions that teachers had about the climate of inclusive classrooms. Both the teachers and the students who had developed practices in the inclusive classrooms underlined the fact that some students with severe characteristics or specific diagnoses, regardless of the inclusive techniques or even the presence of technology in the classroom, were not involved in group work or projects with other students (Pavlíková, 2017).

This could be for two reasons, first, due to the very fact that some specific diagnoses or other factors, such as unsuitable weather, made these students not be involved in group work with other students in the classroom, as they show signs of nervousness and lack of concentration.

Secondly, for various reasons, such as the absence of the assistant teacher or the specific tools required by the diagnosis, these students were non-cooperative. As teacher A pointed out, “On the days that the assistant teacher is not with the student with special needs, this student appears distracted and does not participate in group work”. The importance of the assistant teacher’s role is still not being reflected near every primary education class in Albanian schools, as highlighted in the study carried out a year ago in the same district: there exists a significant unmet need for specialized recruiters in the educational sector (Ferri-Duka et al., 2023).

Teacher C “The day there is no internet at school or the non-functioning of the smart board in the classroom makes it difficult for the student with special needs to develop a group activity”. These cases are challenging by inhibiting cooperation throughout the lesson. Teacher J claims that “If these cases are repeated often, then we have a violation of the work in inclusive classrooms”. However, so that these cases do not become an obstacle to the cooperative climate in the classroom, a teacher affirmed that “The cooperative activities for group work should also be reflected in the IEP (Individual Education Plan)”. Regarding the obstacles that arise from different causes such as Wi-Fi or technology maintenance, a teacher emphasized “In terms



of access or technology maintenance, the school's management staff should take measures so that every lesson or teaching day is well supported and without any of the aforementioned problems".

Focusing on the answers of students/teachers obtained from the focus groups, 87% of them reported similar problems to the interviewed teachers, in those cases when the assistant teacher was absent for objective reasons. From the answers received from the students, who developed the practices in the primary education classrooms, 83% of the inclusive classes did not have technology assistance. Also, 61% of the students who did not complete the project tasks were students with diagnoses who did not have regular attendance at school as a result of recurring health problems. While 51% of students with special needs were not involved in group work but performed the activities requested by the teacher individually.

## Discussion

From the interviews conducted with teachers of inclusive classrooms regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in group work during various activities in the lesson, 49% included them. However, teachers also emphasize that they are more involved in group work, students who have mild characteristics in limitations or diagnoses, and those who have support from assistant teachers, (who adapt the command working with the IEP). Also, they emphasize that group work highlights the benefits that students with special needs have, such as:

- Improved communication skills and interaction by strengthening cooperation;
- Self-efficacy is strengthened, evaluating every aspect of working in a group.

In group work, not only students with special needs benefit, but other students also benefit. They become even more sensitive to the "problem" that these students have by becoming part of the solution to the problem. They often take on the role of "teacher", helping their friends.

Parents highlighted some of the benefits of project work:

- children become more social;
- lasting friendships develop;
- self-esteem increases;
- everyone's values and abilities stand out, etc.

By cooperating and finalizing the project, the children develop social communication, as for the tasks developed in the classroom, completing the project in the planned time. The more they use group assignments in different projects, the more each skill is developed both inside and outside of classroom.

From the focus groups, we have almost the same discussions as in the interviews regarding the benefits that students with special needs have when they work in groups or when they carry out group learning projects.

Regarding the use of ICT in school, studies have shown that there is a wide range of digital tools that are used today by educators to improve learning environments for students with physical difficulties, learning difficulties, visual impairment, dyslexia and other reading difficulties (Azizi et al., 2020; Gadušová et al., 2021; Gusho et al., 2023).

Regarding the development of the lesson with technology in the schools included in the study, the teachers had some dissatisfaction or even suggestions for the school's management staff, but not only. Even the local or regional education office could and should invest in inclusive classrooms.

They wanted to equip classrooms with smart boards, to equip with tablets for students with specific characteristics. They also required trainings in new contemporary techniques in inclusive teaching. These trainings should not only be offered in the theoretical aspect but also in the practical one since it is very challenging for untrained teachers to implement group cooperation techniques in inclusive classrooms.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Analyzing the situation provided by interviews and focus groups regarding the factors of the supportive climate in inclusive classrooms versus students with special needs, using contemporary techniques of group work or the integration of ICT in teaching and to make possible a motivating learning environment for these children, inclusive schools should invest in the direction of teacher training in relation to the most modern techniques where group work takes a greater place in the lesson (Gadušová et al., 2021; Khonamri et al., 2020, 2021).

Importance should be given to project-based learning, where the learning project should be evaluated take a well-planned place in the curriculum, and be adapted to the learning activity. Pointing out the values and benefits that students with special needs have in these tasks in cooperation with other students, school staff should give importance and proper place to these techniques.

But more attention needs to be paid to equipping inclusive classrooms with tools and technology. Investments should be made in those tools or technologies that mitigate the “problem” that children with special needs have. By “softening” these characteristics, these students are motivated by directly influencing the results or competencies they benefit from.

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