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A LOOK AT THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS IN THE KINDERGARTEN BEFORE AND AFTER ITS ESTABLISHMENT

Abstract: One of the most relevant policies at the global level is the expansion and improvement of the quality of early childhood education. Tracking the number of children enrolled in kindergarten and preparatory group is an important indicator for the implementation of education strategies in Bulgaria. The European Union recommends working with all stakeholders by changing parents' attitudes towards educational activities. Therefore, all necessary resources are provided by governments, flexible, timely. The paper analyses a large annual range of kindergarten enrolments and makes a point about the effectiveness of the inclusive process in the country. The conclusions are illustrated.

Key words: inclusive education, kindergarten, quality education.

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Introduction

It is a well-known fact in science that knowledge of the conjuncture of economic development in a country is fundamental for organizing successful educational policies with efficiency and quality in education [4].

One of the most relevant policies at the global level is the expansion and improvement of the quality of early childhood education. The idea finds expression in an international forum at the global level according to M. Daneva [2, 97]. This is the first of the six goals set at the global world forum in Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April 2000. The EFA (Education for All) Forum adopted an Action Plan endorsed by the 164 governments present [18].

On the part of the European Union through the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, funded from the budgets of EU education ministers, there is a push to work with all stakeholders according to Nikolova, Daneva [13, 321-324]. Priority for this is suggested to be interventions towards their attitudes towards educational activities. The recommendation is to provide all necessary resources,

flexible, timely. This is in order to constitute inclusive education systems. Within this discourse is another recommendation from the Council of the EU for governments to achieve more effective inclusive policies through the Early Childhood Inclusive Education Environment Self-Assessment Tool of the same agency [16, 11].

Inclusive education defines the child as a polyaspect personality. Therefore, it can be constituted as an educational system by transforming processes and attitudes towards removing all barriers to the development of the child's personal potential in the educational process. The age of children from 3 to 6 years is important for the process of their socialization because then they form the aspects of their self-concept in correlation with the surrounding world according to J. Doncheva [8, 19]. They have a need for an increasingly wider circle around them to stabilize their self-concept and self-determination, i.e. increase their social competence according to the author. And this happens naturally in kindergarten. Preschool education is perhaps the most important period for children's cognitive-emotional

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development, according to V. Kurkchiyska, who believes that the application of approaches, didactic means, forms of teaching and tools should be determined most responsibly and professionally [10, 113-125]. The context of this is to take into account the peculiarities and nature of the educational process with children of this age stage [10, 113-125]. In this regard, we agree with the opinion of V. Kyurkchiyska that a qualitative educational process in children is achieved when their interests and needs are fully covered, which is a matter of pedagogical mastery [11, 22-34]. Therefore, according to the author, it is important to create such ways of interaction with the children's families and the children themselves, so as to provoke interest in attending, and thus to achieve educational goals.

In this regard, tracking the number of children enrolled in kindergarten and preparatory group is an important indicator for the implementation of policies in the country to constitute education as inclusive in order to support educational professionals in a timely manner. According to a recent study by the Trust for Social Initiative (TSA), the abolition of kindergarten fees has been shown to increase attendance by more than 20%. The increase is from a World Bank impact evaluation prepared for TSA's Ready for School project [17].

The introduction in the country of the Pre-School and School Education Act (2017) and the relevant sub-legislative framework should have made a positive difference in the processes of enrolment and drop-out prevention, in particular in infancy and pre-school, compared to the period of integrated education until 2017. According to Daneva, Nikolova, this is possible when dropout risk assessment is carried out and specific factors are monitored, but in our country this is not yet among the inclusion policies [5, 273-277].

We will just mention the main difference between integrated and inclusive education. Education in our country up to and including 2016 is inclusive. It had as its focus transformative processes in children with labelled learning needs until they reach opportunities to be integrated into mainstream school.

The spirit of the post-2017 inclusive legislation is child-centred with all its personal characteristics, according to which the environment is transformed according to M. Daneva [4, 10]. The enrolment in kindergartens is supported by the governmental

instrument called the Scoping Mechanism [12]. This is an intensively impacting measure on inclusive policies in our country according to Daneva, Nikolova [6, 69]. Joint field visits are conducted by multidisciplinary teams of experts to focus parents on the importance of enrolling their children in kindergarten or school. We agree with I. Boneva that this corresponds with negative attitudes towards education in general [1, 1031]. According to Daneva, Nikolova, violence against attitudes is perceived as violence to the individual and arouses negative reactions, usually irrational. The effect is negative and resistances are generated [7, 288-295]. Building trust between parents and teachers is of utmost importance. Establishing a close trusting relationship between them, according to M. Daneva is a major factor in the interaction of the educational institution and families [5, 3-7].

Study and analysis

Given the importance of the process of enrolment and retention of children in kindergarten and preparatory group, this study seeks to identify the positive effects of the ongoing transformation of the education system from integrated to inclusive education. The dividing school year is 2016/2017, before and after the introduction of the Preschool and School Education Act and the relevant regulations.

The following data are analysed: number of children enrolled in kindergartens and preparatory groups, group net enrolment ratio. The data are from the National Statistical Institute (NSI). The NSI definition of 'group net enrolment ratio' is: 'The ratio is calculated as a percentage of the number of students in pre-school education in the 3-6 age group to the population in the same age group' [14].

The transition year between the education policy period for integrated education in our country is 2016/2017. The policy period for inclusive education in the country is after 2017 in the period following the introduction of the Pre-School and School Education Act and the Inclusive Education Ordinance, when a large-scale awareness campaign on the need for inclusive education was carried out. By 2016/2017, in integrated education, the number of children enrolled in kindergarten and preschool relative to the number of all children at that age formed a share of 82% on average. There is a difference of at least 4% lower share in the years of implementing inclusive education - Fig. 1 [14].

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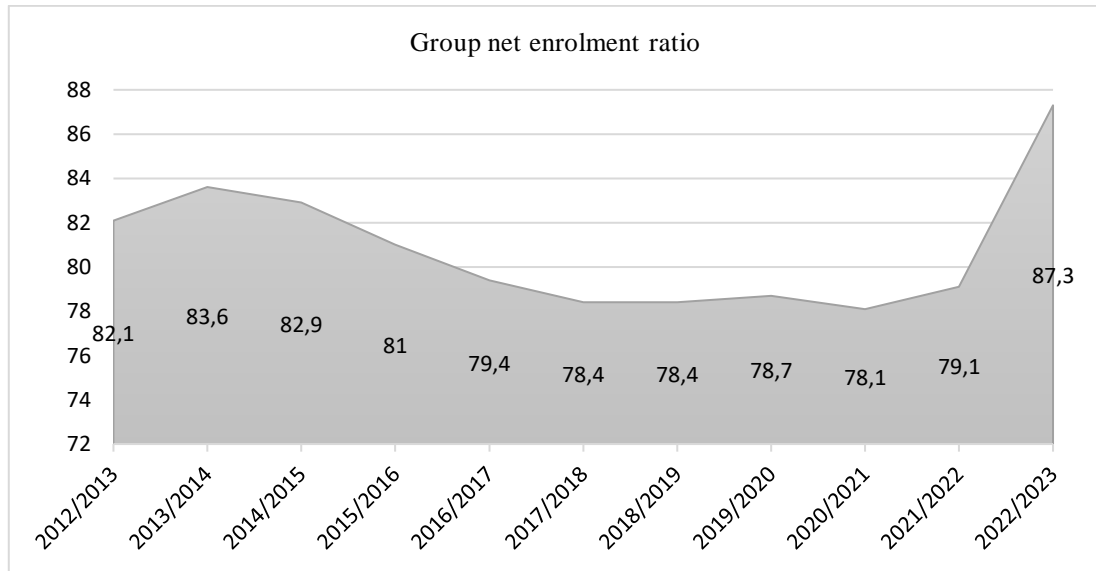


Figure 1. Group net enrolment ratio in kindergartens and preparatory group by year (NSI) [14]

Similarly, the movement of data on the number of children enrolled in kindergartens and preparatory groups in the period after 2017 is examined, as shown in Figure 2 [15].

The data presented shows a significant downward trend that started one year before the introduction of the new legislation. Although the number of children enrolled is decreasing annually, given the demographic crisis, the proportion of

children of this age is decreasing, i.e. all children, regardless of whether they are enrolled in the education system. It is evident that as the trend in the number of children enrolled is decreasing, so is the trend in the proportion of all children enrolled. And this has been happening in the last five years with strict implementation of instruments like the Scoping Mechanism.

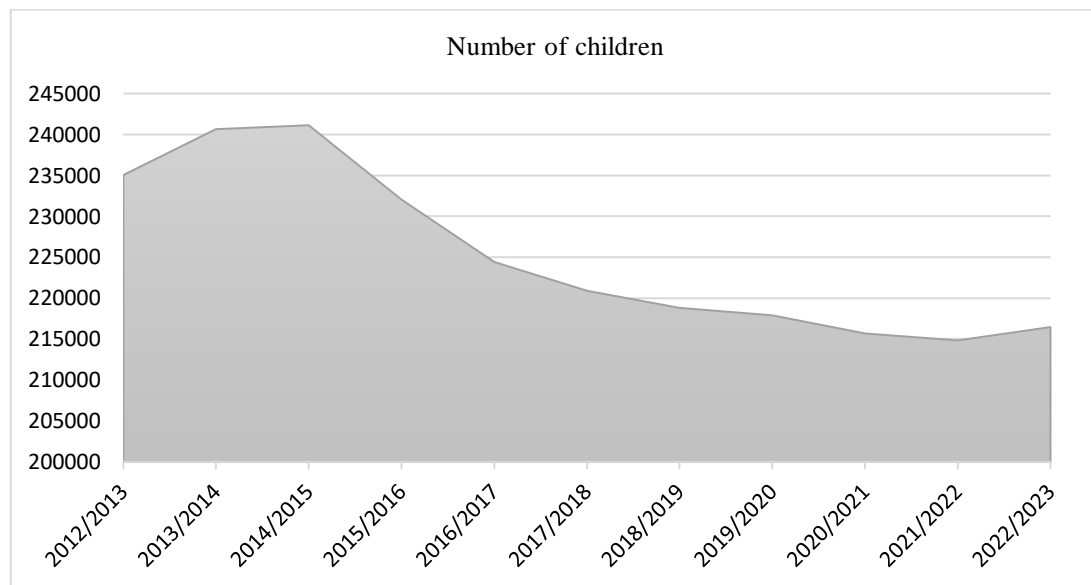


Figure 2. Children enrolled in kindergartens and preparatory groups in the country by year (NSI) [12]

Of interest is the extremely high growth in the group net enrolment ratio for the last two school years - 2021/2022 and 2022/2023. If one were to disregard the enrolment data for the country as a whole by year, which shows that there is no significant change in the

years from 2018 to 2023, it would be erroneous to conclude that there has been a positive trend in kindergarten enrolment and retention for the last two years. However, since the group net enrolment ratio is that of nursery and preparatory group enrolments

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nationally, and there has been no change in it, then, according to the definition given above for it, the total number of children of this age has declined strongly. And this is explained by declining birth rates and demographic decline as a consequence. Consequently, there has been no increase in nursery and pre-school enrolments.

Conclusion

The process of supporting inclusive education in our country is not efficient enough in the 3-6 age group. This conclusion is consistent with the demographic trend of population growth in the analysis.

The effectiveness of the outreach mechanism remains questionable until indicators considered by the European Commission to be a satisfactory target in the inclusion of drop-outs and the unreached in the education system are achieved.

It remains a serious challenge to provide all the necessary flexible, timely resources in order to constitute an inclusive education system in the country, even though it is defined as such by legislation.

The problem is systemic and its solution seeks strategic changes in organizing and guaranteeing the inclusive process in our country.

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