



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Children with Special Needs in the Municipality of Bujanovac – Victims of Discrimination

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Apr 17, 2025	This study examines the multiple dimensions of discrimination faced by children with special needs in the municipality of Bujanovac, a subject largely overlooked in international scholarship. It aims to uncover systemic and societal barriers that hinder the educational and social inclusion of this vulnerable group. Using a multidisciplinary methodology that includes system-structural, formal-logical, comparative-legal, and statistical methods, the research draws on empirical data collected through interviews with families and educators. This approach offers a comprehensive understanding of the intersectional challenges faced by children with special needs. The findings highlight not only localized discriminatory practices but also how these reflect broader structural inequalities in the region. The case of Bujanovac provides a rare and context-rich perspective from Southeast Europe, contributing to global discussions on inclusive education and disability rights. The paper presents actionable insights relevant to education policy and social inclusion efforts, both in local and international settings. It raises key questions about the implementation of inclusive education and underscores the urgency of protecting the fundamental rights of all children.
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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, concepts such as equality, tolerance, and social inclusion have gained increasing attention across various platforms—ranging from academic literature to media discourse and institutional policies. However, despite this growing awareness, the lived realities of children with special needs often reveal a stark contrast between formal commitments and practical implementation.

Children with disabilities in the municipality of Bujanovac, like in many other regions, continue to face systemic exclusion. They are frequently denied access to meaningful participation in social, cultural, and educational life. These children are often defined more by their impairments than by their capabilities, resulting in stigma, marginalization, and limited opportunities for development. Discrimination begins early—often within the family—and extends into schools, peer interactions, and broader society.

The educational system, in particular, has not always been responsive to the needs of children with disabilities. Infrastructural barriers, lack of trained personnel, inadequate policies, and negative attitudes among educators and peers contribute to persistent inequality. This form of structural discrimination transforms into a cycle of victimization, where exclusion becomes normalized.

Historically, the marginalization of children with special needs has been a global issue. Although positive reforms and inclusive policies have emerged, implementation remains inconsistent and often symbolic. This study aims to shed light on the specific challenges faced in the Bujanovac municipality, while contributing to broader academic discussions on inclusive education, human rights, and disability advocacy.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study Design and Data Collection

A qualitative, interdisciplinary approach was adopted, combining legal analysis with field research. Empirical data was collected via semi-structured interviews with 10 educators and 4 parents from primary and secondary schools in Bujanovac.

#### Participants

Educators from 8 secondary and 2 primary schools participated, alongside two families of children excluded from school and two families of children enrolled in school.

#### Instruments

Two questionnaires were developed: (1) for teachers working with children with special needs, and (2) for parents. The questions explored awareness of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), access to materials, and experiences with discrimination.

#### Ethical Considerations

Participants gave informed consent. Interviews were anonymized, and the study followed ethical principles protecting vulnerable populations.

## RESULTS

### Case Study 1

A father shared his emotional struggles and the societal pressures he faced:

"I've often encountered many problems, especially from the area where I live, where my child is seen as different. They pressure me, asking: 'How can you handle it? Can't he speak better? You need to shout at him because he is lazy and spoiled, and he can do better than this.' They mock his disabilities. I've often prayed to God to crash myself in an accident, and they pushed me to the point where leaving the country seemed like the only solution due to others' judgments. When I found out about a professional clinic, I immediately went there, but unfortunately, it didn't work out, and there were no results. I spent a lot of money on medical tests because I feared our next child might have the same issues. In 2008/2009, I had to register my son in a special school in Pristina, but due to financial reasons, I had to pull him out. He had learned a lot, but when we couldn't afford to send him back, he started forgetting what he had learned."

This testimony reveals the deep psychological toll that social discrimination can have on parents. As (Hrnjica 1991) noted, emotional distress, guilt, fear, and depression are common reactions among parents raising children with disabilities.

### Case Study 2

In another case, a family described their daughter's experience:

"She is our first child, and when she turned 1, we realized that she had disabilities on her left side. Since then, we've visited many doctors, both locally and abroad, to treat her, but it was unsuccessful.

As a family, we've encountered many hardships. Since our daughter needs constant assistance, she is kept at home most of the time and does not socialize with other children. She feels powerless and lacks self-confidence when seeing other children do things that she can't due to her disability.

This has led to her being mocked, and for this reason, she has been isolated in the house. She attended school for only one month because she didn't want to go due to the unsupportive social environment. After a year, she tried to return to school but was unable to cope with the challenges. To this day, she remains uneducated at home despite being of secondary school age. We are very concerned about her future."

These real-life stories underline the isolation faced by children and the emotional burden carried by their families. In underdeveloped areas like Pčinja District, where Bujanovac is located, these issues are further compounded by economic hardship and lack of institutional support. As (Lansandaun 2009) noted, discrimination against children with special needs persists even in more advanced societies when public awareness and community services are insufficient.

The child, like soft clay, takes shape based on how we treat them. This vulnerable group in society deserves care and respect, just like every other member of the community—free from discrimination and dehumanization (Abd Al-Rahman Al-Arifi, 2009).

### **Discrimination and Exclusion in Practice**

Despite international support, the reality in Serbia—and particularly in the municipality of Bujanovac—reveals that children with special needs continue to face significant exclusion from the education system. According to the 2020 report by the Republican Institute for Social Protection, 11.8% of children with special needs are not included in the education system, and around 30% either drop out or do not attend school at all. These statistics reflect a high level of structural isolation and discrimination.

In Bujanovac, the number of students with special needs increased from 26 in the 2013/2014 school year to 76 in 2023/2024. However, infrastructure and support services have not kept pace with this growth. The lack of a specialized school and the absence of education in the Albanian language for Albanian students in the special school in Vranje constitute double discrimination—based both on disability and language.

### **Challenges Faced by Teaching Staff – Analysis of Teacher Questionnaires**

Questionnaires completed by 10 teachers from primary and secondary schools in Bujanovac reveal critical issues:

- 20% of teachers do not understand the purpose of the Individual Education Plan (IEP).
- None of the teachers mentioned clear strategies to reduce discrimination against students with special needs.
- All reported a lack of materials for inclusive education.
- Only 10% had participated in professional training for inclusive education.

This highlights a substantial lack of preparation and institutional support for teachers working with children with special needs.

### **The Parents' Voice – Family Perspectives**

Interviews with two mothers highlighted similar challenges:

- Delayed identification and professional treatment of developmental difficulties.
- Late school enrollment (at ages 7 and 8).
- Ongoing communication with teachers, but a lack of information about the IEP in one case.

These findings demonstrate that the lack of early intervention and poor family guidance negatively affect children's inclusion and development.

### **Physical and Infrastructural Barriers**

Beyond social and institutional barriers, schools in Bujanovac face serious infrastructural challenges. The absence of ramps, accessible toilets, and classrooms equipped to proper standards hinders the real inclusion of children with disabilities. These physical barriers violate the right to education and contribute to further isolation.

## **HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

International human rights legislation has been slow to recognize that disability is a critical issue of human rights. Earlier conventions on civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights did not contain specific provisions addressing the rights of persons with disabilities or expressly include them as a protected category against discrimination.

A significant turning point occurred during the period of 1983–1994. In 1984, the Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution recommending the appointment of a Special Rapporteur to study the connection between serious human rights violations and special needs. A milestone development came in 1989 with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which for the first time recognized the rights of children with special needs in the context of

international human rights law. The CRC addressed the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children, including those with disabilities.

Further progress was made in 1993 with the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (Resolution 48/96 A, Annex), which established global standards for ensuring equal rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities.

In 2000, the then Commission on Human Rights (now the Human Rights Council) adopted a general resolution on children's rights that reiterated governments' obligations to uphold the rights of all children without discrimination. That same year, a separate resolution specifically addressed the rights of children with disabilities, urging states to implement the Standard Rules with sensitivity to the unique needs and rights of these children.

The issue of discrimination also extends to the criminal justice system. As early as 1940, Gunnar Dywad documented the overrepresentation of children with disabilities in criminal justice systems across Europe and the United States. These children were not afforded equal treatment compared to their non-disabled peers, demonstrating the persistence of systemic discrimination.

The UN Secretary-General's Report on Violence Against Children (2005) further emphasized the vulnerability of children with disabilities to violence, neglect, and exploitation. It called for a comprehensive, rights-based approach to protecting this group from abuse in both institutional and domestic settings (UNICEF, 2005).

## **DISCUSSION: ISOLATION AND SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1998) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2008) clearly affirm the right to education for all children. This right is further supported by other key human rights documents, such as Article 26(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 5(e)(v) of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Article 13(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and Article 30 of the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (Schulze, 2010).

Discrimination against children with special needs often begins with the moment their disabilities are discovered. Parents may choose to isolate their children—sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of protection—believing that their children will not be able to adapt or that they will be bullied, ridiculed, or harmed by others. This family-based exclusion is often the first step in a broader cycle of marginalization, which ultimately hinders the child's ability to integrate into society.

A democratic society should embrace diversity—including differences in race, ethnicity, and abilities—as assets rather than as causes for exclusion. However, this ideal is not yet realized in many communities. As (Levkov, 2003) noted, inclusivity must be an essential pillar of democratic development.

Children with special needs are frequently kept at home, deprived of peer interactions, due to societal stigma, lack of support systems, and limited understanding. This isolation is driven by fear—both for the child's safety and the family's social standing.

The data reflects persistent exclusion in both educational and social contexts. Families often keep children at home due to fear of ridicule or systemic neglect. The lack of support personnel and inadequate facilities exacerbates this isolation. Discrimination affects not only children but also their families, leading to psychosocial stress and emotional distress.

From a legal perspective, although Serbia has ratified international conventions (CRC, CRPD), implementation at the local level remains weak. The absence of special education centers and the inability of ethnic Albanian children to access services in their language further reflects structural inequity.

## CONCLUSIONS

Considering international conventions, national legal acts, field analyses, institutional reports, and the current state of schools in Bujanovac, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The inclusive education system needs to be strengthened through inter-institutional cooperation at both local and national levels.
- Social discrimination is present and negatively impacts both children and their families.

## Recommendations

1. Systemic Reform for Inclusion: Inclusive education must be a priority. Equal support and opportunities should be guaranteed for all children.
2. Intersectoral Cooperation: Cooperation between education, healthcare, and social services must be strengthened at all levels.
3. School Stakeholder Involvement: School administrations, teachers, parents, and students must collaborate to reduce stigmatization.
4. Specialized Center in Bujanovac: A specialized center for children with disabilities is needed, with professional staff and adapted facilities.
5. Improving School Infrastructure: All schools must adhere to universal design standards.
6. Training and Awareness-Raising: Organize training for parents and professionals, along with community awareness activities.
7. Awareness Campaigns: Disseminate informational materials and organize public forums to raise awareness in the community.

## Authors' Contributions

FB conceived and designed the study, collected data, and drafted the manuscript. AHM contributed to data analysis and reviewed the final draft. Both authors approved the final manuscript.

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