

“Neglected children within classrooms or selective-teacher-attention in Albania: A call for action addressing learning opportunity”¹

ANGELA BUSHATI

Abstract:The topic of education has been of major interest since the implementation of the United Nations CRC (1989), according to which all children and young people have the right to quality education, no matter who they are or what their status is. Beside parents or other responsible party that fail to provide for the child's basic needs and support children's competencies with educational opportunities, there are also children neglected within classrooms that do not really benefit from learning opportunity and quality education. Most of them remain in school performing at low level and failing to acquire basic skills and being unable to participate adequately in learning processes. In Albania, these learning inequality of chances exists often in a traditional manner. Teachers in general pay serious attention only to a part of the class, teaching the average or good students while often neglecting those with relative learning difficulties. These children face the “Selective Teacher Attention” or STA, known in Albania as the “Hidden Drop-Out” or HDO phenomenon. One of the basic rights - that of a quality-learning-is practically not respected for all children. The paper argues that it is relevant to put attention on the “invisible” phenomenon of STA-HDO, because schooling of poor quality compromises children individual development and that of society in general. With the recent increased efforts in international arena to make learning “a central component of the Post-2015 Global Development Agenda”, studying the STA-HDO phenomenon and developing specific action plans could bring more efficient learning for children with relative learning difficulties in the lower-income countries. In addition, this paper also argues how this phenomenon also impacts children's agency and own voices and participation in everyday life.

Key Word:Albania, UNCRC, neglected children within classrooms, selective teacher attention, hidden drop-out, learning opportunities, learning outcomes, quality learning, children with relative learning difficulties, Education For All, lower-income countries, children's agency, participation.

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I. Introduction

In the recent years, the scholarly literature has challenged the concept of quality of learning in childhood education services. The contemporary discourse on quality (Ceglowski, 2004; Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002; Lee, 2003; Elfer & Wedge, 1996; Dahlberg & Åsén, 1994; Mabry, 2001; Pence and Moss, 1994; Woodhead, 1998; Rhedding-Jones, 2004, Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Langsted, 1994; Christensen & James, 2000) describe quality as a constructed concept, consisting on values, beliefs, and interests, characterized as subjective rather than being objective and a universal reality. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) argue that it's important to go beyond the notion of quality, and they put importance to “the discourse of meaning making” (pp. 103-119). Meaning making refers to processes that analyze and try to produce an understanding of what goes on in childhood institutions, making meaning from everyday practices of children. Defining “*quality*” requires the recognition of different actors and voices that are active in educational realities in order to bring different perspectives. Children, as active agents in their learning processes, are entitled to take part in processes that define quality learning, but in order to take part in this process and profit from learning opportunities they need to be involved and be heard in the first place.

In literature we often find that the concept of “*neglect* - typically involves a failure on the part of the parents, guardian, or other responsible party to provide for the child's basic needs, such as food, shelter, medical care, educational opportunities, or protection and supervision. Neglect is associated with abandonment and inadequate supervision (Maggiolo, 1998:5).

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In addition, we find that “it could be that a child's poor growth due to inadequate food may not be as dramatic as a broken bone and that the term “abuse” implicates a tone of urgency in such a way that “neglect” does not. But when we look at the statistics, almost half of the child fatalities are due to maltreatment each year as a result of neglect” (Maggiolo, 1998: 4). It is interesting to note that “neglect” has mainly been perceived as a failure only by the part of parents and responsible parties, but not by teachers. Schools are thought to be unfailing social equalizer institutions that should compensate such external failures that hinder the child normal development. In lower-income countries, often supporting children’s abilities and providing educational opportunities for all children can be challenging. What happens, if the school itself does not play properly the role it should play in supporting children’s competencies and agency, as well as access to quality education? The Albanian context example (of a decade ago, as the country was classified in 2010 as a lower-middle income country) provides an interesting example for an investigation on the issue and relevant perspectives on learning opportunities for all children, as well as exercising participation rights in educational contexts such as schools.

The Albanian Government is committed to EFA-Education for All Agenda to ensure quality primary education for each and every child, but beside overall progress, achieving this goal remains a challenge. PISA 2012 scores both in reading literacy and science, show that Albania still remains at the last quartile. In an Albanian study (Ministry of Education and Science, now Ministry of Education and Sport or MoES, 2012:4), we find that “usually the analysis of factors, which impede EFA implementation, stops in front of the class door. The main impeding factors that are analysed in literature and which the educational policies of a country aim to attenuate, and even eliminate if possible, are mainly gender, economic, cultural ones etc. If we overcome such prejudices and obstacles and manage to get the child to seat in a desk, we almost believe that EFA was successful. In fact, once children are seated in their desks, in general, another harmful prejudice starts, which often affects more students than the other types of discrimination altogether -- *it is the discrimination of a part of students, because of their relative learning difficulties*. So far, there has not been any organized counteraction against this kind of discrimination, not even complete and reliable data about it.

A study which was undertaken by UNICEF in Tirana in 2002, in cooperation with the “Development of Education” Association, has focused on this phenomenon, which is now widely known as the “*Hidden Drop-Out*” or *HDO* (or *Selective Teacher Attention* or *STA*). It is not about students who do not attend school or drop it, but about teachers who ignore or neglect the students inside the class. If EFA goal is to completely fulfil every individual’s potential, even to develop it, HDO strongly impedes this”.

In general, teachers in Albania tend to neglect those students who face relative learning difficulties, or who are considered to be “not good enough”. “*Such practices lead to a process of disengagement on the part of thousands of students in the first cycle of primary school, a process that leads to the lack of achievement in learning core competencies, and eventually to the abandonment of school*” (Sultana, 2006: 5). Although learning outcomes are very low, “*however, social promotion policies may keep them enrolled during periods of sporadic attendance*” (Abadzi & Llambiri, 2011: 491). The authors mention not only the sporadic attendance, but also the “*neglect*” that these children experience at school. These HDO students, that often remain in silence and sit at the bottom of the classroom, are subjected to a lack of equal opportunities to quality learning, as well as cannot participate in processes such as deciding themselves on learning and “*meaning making*” (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 1999). This is problematic, since it hinders children’s access to resources that in the first place were meant to educate them and make them capable of facing the world, as well as change realities especially when considering low-income countries.

According to the Dakar Action Framework, as stated in the analytical study from Save the Children in Albania: “*Quality is at the heart of education and [...] A quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs, and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living*” (Save the Children, 2012: 23). Many factors define quality education such as:

- *Healthy, well-nourished and motivated students.*
- *Well-trained teachers and teaching promotion techniques.*
- *Suitable didactic equipment and tools.*
- *Curricula adapted to children’s learning needs and ability, and based on the teachers’ and students’ experience.*
- *An environment that is not only learning-friendly, but also welcoming, healthy and safe.*
- *Clear and detailed definition of the evaluation method and academic expectations.*
- *Maintaining of the cooperation with different communities and cultures.*

For children suffering from the STA-HDO phenomenon, quality learning, EFA and the Inclusive School principles (Peters, 2004: 5) are not a reality. The schooling of these students is not significant, because they are attending school without being able to learn the core competencies and basic 21st century skills that they

should acquire for a decent life. As a result, they are not actively involved in learning processes and decision making. Referring to the CRC (Article 28), the basic right for quality education, is not respected.

The objective of this paper is to (i) provide a sketch, or outline of the situation related to the STA-HDO phenomenon in Albania focused on learning opportunities, (ii) emphasize the importance of the phenomenon and its consequences and, (iii) make some recommendations with the purpose to draw attention for further learning-oriented action and broader scale implications. The methodology consists in: (i) gathering relevant literature related to the topic of STA-HDO for the context of Albania and lower-income countries, and (ii) discussing it critically in a form of a literature review.

II. The “Selective Teacher Attention, or “Hidden drop-out” phenomenon in Albania

The STA-HDO phenomenon is relatively recently recognized in Albania (almost a decade ago). It was evidenced by research, although it has been present in the educational system for a long time. The STA-HDO has been observed in many countries, but only in Albania we find systematic studies and reported data covering a period from 2002-2012.

Abadzi and Llambiri (2011: 491), underline that “*This phenomenon has been observed informally in various countries, but only one study, conducted in Albania, has reported actual data*”. This study (conducted with UNICEF support in 2002), found that “...many teachers overestimated the number of students who could follow the topics presented; they did predict that one third would be unable to answer questions, but made no efforts to remedy knowledge gaps.” According to the authors, “*Teachers of upper primary classes tended to give little guidance or attention to failing students but gave them passing grades until they dropped out*”.

“*Drop-out research in Albania emphasizes the link between drop-out and factors such as poor economic conditions, low educational level of the family, employment of the child, obligation to parents, and the child’s lack of motivation to continue going to school*” (Musai & Boce, 2007: 93). According to a previous study (supported by UNICEF in Albania in 2001), focused on school drop-out and conducted from the “Development of Education” Association, 38% of the drop-out students considered school and teachers to be unfriendly to them, they had very low achievements in all subjects and a very high rate of them were repeaters. The study found that not enough attention was paid to these children. They were neglected in class from the teachers resulting in low attainments and in feeling of discomfort towards school who lead in school drop-out.

The study focused on the STA-HDO (Llambiri, 2002), showed a problem residing in classrooms, where teachers were underestimating and not giving attention to the children who they considered to be not-achieving. Children who encountered difficulties in learning were neglected or left without help. Teachers reprimanded them 1.6 times more than other children who were considered to be achieving and good students whose were praised 5.4 times more. In addition, the problem was not only found in the classroom level, but also in other levels, such as school and educational system that were mainly oriented as input-driven rather than focused on the students learning and supporting their competencies as well as their agency, which contributes to the healthy development of the child.

According to the Salamanca Framework of Action, as stated in the article of Peters (2004: 5), “*inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities.*” This principle has not been respected primarily by the fact that children in many schools are not recognised as having diverse needs, nor having different styles or rates of learning. Curriculums, teaching strategies etc., employed by educators have not fitted to the frame of quality learning. One major problem refers also to viewing children as passive actors since children have been often seen throughout history “*only as dependent and passive recipients of adult’s actions*” (Lee, 2001:8), as well as they have been seen more as “*human becoming’s*” rather than “*human beings*”(Lee, 2001:7), which as a result does not facilitate children’s voices to be heard since they are only seen as “*future*” human beings that do not have a say in what happens to them and how. This poses a challenge in providing possibilities for learning since most of HDO children’s voices are never heard and their educational needs are not met.

Referring to the survey of Llambiri (2002) it also showed that the responsibility to provide quality learning was not clear, either if we talk about parents, school directors or teachers. The author also adds that the quality of textbooks and the curriculum were not designed in order to help children with learning difficulties. He mentions “...*overloaded textbooks, severe lack of necessary didactic base, poor pre-service and in-service training contribute to HDO*” (Llambiri, 2002: 29). Another important evidence underlined the high percentage of students in Albania who did not learn anything or learn very little at school and one third of children, around 150 000 were HDO children. Also, the outcomes of students were very subjective and there were no clear ways to track their progress in school, as standardized tools were lacking.

According to Musai & Boce (2007: 101) “more than half of the drop-out children reported that their parents only sometimes met with their teachers. On the other hand, teachers reported even lower numbers of parents communicating with them”. It can be clearly evidenced that the relationship between children, parents, teachers and school in general was lacking of communication, which is essential and also can be predictive of drop-out. The two authors also found a relevant fact that the majority of parents, whose children dropped-out “completed only basic education, which supports the thesis that drop-out children come from families with low educational backgrounds”.

In order to change the situation, it is imperative to change the mentality of educators, and improve the policy and practice who don't promote a system oriented on the children's learning outcomes, as well as participatory methods where children take part in the process of learning themselves. As a result, a specific program was tested for four years in Albania from 2002 to 2006 in six regions out of twelve. The STA-HDO phenomenon was approached thanks to the cooperation between UNICEF Albania, the “Development of Education” Association, the MoES, and related local educational bodies. In order to reduce the phenomenon several program components were approached by:

- (i) Targeting the learning outcomes: focusing on outputs/learning results;
- (ii) Teaching “Minimum Necessary Learning Objectives” (MNLO): for teaching and learning;
- (iii) Constant monitoring of learning – by applying the MNLO through mini-tests;
- (iv) Supporting under-achieving students through peer-tutoring;
- (v) Community involvement in accomplishing learning objectives at the central, local and school level;
- (vi) Designing an annual school plan with learning objectives in mind to effectuate changes in the “official curriculum” and “applied curriculum” through carrying out surveys about teaching and learning (Sultana, 2006:25).

According to Sultana (2006) (external evaluation report supported by UNICEF), the STA-HDO intervention had a positive impact in Albania. “Many reported that weak students had improved self-confidence, given that their progress was monitored so carefully, and so much additional support was being offered to them” (Sultana, 2006: 33). The community and the school have made serious efforts to implement the project and assure that children were monitored and were given good care in order for them to remain engaged in school and learn. There was a positive regress to the tendency of dropping out of school. Moreover, teachers were put in front of the challenge to change their attitudes towards children and start thinking in a friendlier way to implement the curriculum so that everyone in class can be involved and let children also organize their learning so that the power imbalance between teachers and children is adjusted.

Teachers state (Sultana,2006: 34), that they stopped giving insults in class like “‘Oh! That boy is a wooden head!Now we understand that he is part of the class.” Students have significantly increased their learning outcomes and also the environment has become more productive, friendlier while putting also a priority to the learning results. The MNLO initiative has had a great impact to make the learning monitoring process easier to verify. Teachers seemed to be more collaborative and they have developed a sense of teamwork, which facilitates the monitoring process.

Minimum necessary objective	% baseline	% project
MATHEMATICS		
1 Adding two natural numbers with up to five digits	78 %	92 %
2 Problem from children's everyday life requiring students to add	80 %	91%
3 Subtracting two natural numbers up to five digits	43 %	72%
4 Problem from children's everyday life requiring students to subtract	76%	89%
5 Multiplication of two natural numbers with up to four digits	31%	63%
6 Problem from children's everyday life requiring students to multiply	44%	58%
7 Division of two natural numbers with up to four digits	32%	51%
8 Problem from children's everyday life requiring students to divide	35%	46%
ALBANIAN LANGUAGE		
Reading comprehension*	62%	79%

*Note: These percentiles represent average results for the four reading comprehension tests that were set. In these tests, the students were given a short text to read, and then asked multiple-choice questions to measure comprehension.

Fig. 1 Percentage of average results in comprehension tests (Sultana, 2006: 35)

The table above shows results of students being tested starting their fifth grade in 2003-2004 and students being tested starting their fifth grade in 2005-2006. These last ones were part of the pilot schools the year before taking the test. These students had better results in the tests and mastering the minimum objectives than those who were not part of the project (Sultana, 2006: 34). Reading comprehension for example, has increased from grade five significantly from 62% to 79%.

In order to implement the MNLO, teachers and school heads were trained to effectuate and develop different assessment techniques, so to evidence the learning outcomes or the lack of them. The STA-HDO approach has provided support to teachers and schools in order to support the learning processes of children who were evidenced as being in a state of “at-risk of dropping out” through elaborating different ways of helping these children such as, peer-learning programs, or adult volunteers. A bigger attention was paid also to the curriculum and to the annual school planning emphasizing and ensuring the partnership between teachers, parents, children, community and school heads.

Taking in consideration the 10 year period trial of the STA-HDO approach in Albania, the results have been significant. Since 2002, there has been an evident reduction of HDO suffering students. According to a recent study of 2012 supported by UNICEF and conducted by Albanian Government Institutions, the percentage of upper cycle (grade 7-9) students who have not answered correctly, has been reduced from 47% to 19%. This is what 98% of principals and 88% of teachers think. Nevertheless, beside good achievements, the study shows also that low-efficiency still persists inside the classrooms. Obviously, the phenomenon is complex. According to this report, still round 100 000 Albanian students complete basic schooling with minimum grades, below their presupposed age potential. *“While class efficiency about minimum knowledge is the same in both basic education cycles, about 80%, chapter efficiency is lower in the lower cycle compared to the upper one. The incorrect answers for chapter are 29% in the lower cycle (grade 1-6), whereas it is 24% in the upper cycle (grade 7-9)”*. These findings were also evidenced by PISA 2000, 2009 and 2012 - assessing the student’s abilities in reading, which resulted to be one of the lowest levels of learning outcomes in CEE-CIS region.

If, we refer to PISA 2000-2012 findings in terms of relative improvement, Albania is among the three best scoring countries in the past decade (MoES, 2012, p. 6). Reading literacy in both low performing students and high performing ones was improved (the share of low performers in reading was reduced). However, PISA scores, both in reading literacy and science, show that Albania still remains at the bottom (last quartile). To address this concern, the MoES has undertaken some key measures to prevent and attenuate STA-HDO at the national scale. Teachers and school directors have received more training and have a much bigger sense of responsibility towards students than they used to. The schooling system in its whole conception has started to improve to shift gradually from an input-driven to an output-learning outcome-driven system.

In short, the STA-HDO intervention proved to be fundamental, as it started to provoke a general mental shift through raising awareness and by providing tools that ensure higher responsibility of concerned actors for increased learning opportunities and active participation of neglected students attending school and aim for a better quality education system. Nevertheless, evidence shows that beside tangible results for more than a decade, *discrimination and neglect inside classrooms* are still present in Albania, urging as such, a call for action to continue to address gaps in learning opportunities and promote children’s agency.

III. The STA-HDO phenomenon and its importance

The above evidence shows that many teachers in Albania still engage most of the time by giving attention only to “achieving students”. The rest of the class students usually goes to school, but is often ignored from the teacher as being referred as “not capable”, while the teachers themselves are often responsible of the “non-achievement”. *“Dropouts, non-enrolled, disappeared - all these children should be in school and if they are not, where are they? And who are they? Answers go beyond the simple responses of compulsory schooling laws, enforcement and data collection on school attendance”* (Crighton, Budiene & Dedze, 2005: 3). These authors stress that it is a duty for the educational system, stakeholders and all educators to make sure that, children are not pushed away from school and receive quality learning, while being also actively involved in “meaning making” and learning processes. Children come to school with different social backgrounds: some have never seen a book, or received help from their parents. In such cases, education becomes for these children a deep struggle, because they need to adapt to the new situation and start experiencing things that they haven’t done before.

Clearly, the STA-HDO phenomenon is not only an educational problem, but it also implies that society as a whole systematic function is not working as it should be. The school does not respond to the needs of all children and does not support children’s competencies and voices. It excludes students with the pretext of including them in the first place. This remains a severe issue, leading students to find no reasons or motivation in attending school. On the other hand, *“making a claim for children (or any other minority, low status group - the poor, the disabled, etc.) in terms of ‘meeting needs’ emphasizes their dependencies. While children’s right to protection from neglect, ill-treatment and abuse is an important principle within the UNCRC, the underlying*

image of the needy child has been criticized, for its neglect of children's agency"(Woodhead,2005:13). Talking about children's needs is somehow reductive and not enough and emphasizing children's participation in this process is crucial for inventing new pathways for fulfilling educational standards. New pathways mean also considering children's agency and involving them in their learning environments. Focusing on children's agency means reconceptualizing *"the ways in which children themselves can be understood as active participants in society"* (James, 2009:34)

There is a crucial need to understand the importance of inclusion and participation in order to make a substantial change in order to include children also in the process of participating on many levels. Listening to children's voices and enabling them to take part actively in the process of decision making requires an explicit commitment on the part of adults to share their power, that is, to give some of it away. *"Children's participation in decision-making is complex: it is undertaken for different purposes and is reflected in different levels of involvement, different contexts and different activities"* (Sinclair, 2004:106).

The HDO children, not engaged to be active and participating in the learning process, experience a lack of achievement in the basic competencies of school. Their voices are not being heard and their right to participation is not being exercised. This leads to a "mental drop-out", or finally the definite abandonment of school. They enter school and develop insecurities, often suffer from lack of self-esteem, might even drop-out, fail to attend high school, fail to find jobs, get out of poverty and live a decent life like they should and contribute to develop the society. Education in Albania, according to Sultana (2006: 10) is *"...an important priority for policy-makers given the contribution it can make to furthering democracy, to promoting an active citizenry, as well as to creating a vibrant, skilled workforce essential to the country's competitiveness, especially in a context marked by resource-scarcity."* Every child can be compared as a kind of different 'plant' or 'flower' and all the flowers together make the world a 'colorful garden'. In order to maintain this 'garden', a crucial component such as education could be a very strong element of society, since it enables change. Nevertheless, if education is of poor quality, the chances that children change their worlds is very low. If a lot of children in Albania are not learning adequately, then, the country's and children's realities, are at stake. Therefore, the STA_HDO phenomenon constitutes a very important issue for the educational and social world.

IV. The global education challenge: The STA-HDO phenomenon and lower-income countries

Based on the study of Lockheed and Harris (2005), as referred to at (Abadzi & Llambiri, 2011: 492), the STA-HDO phenomenon can be considered as a worldwide issue. The authors mention the study done in Jamaica, where school performance and teacher interactions were observed. The findings are very shocking and show some relevant data to the STA-HDO phenomenon. In high performing schools, attendance was better than in low performing ones, where weak students get no help. Teachers often tended to ignore the not-performing students and their notebooks often contained questions copied from the blackboard without noting answers. Teachers concentrated on students who were more likely to pass the examinations. Children who were considered to have less knowledge were left neglected. *"Despite a lack of skills, however, the weaker students had already been promoted up to advanced primary grades"*. These findings show the importance and potential global implications related to this issue.

H. Abadzi (2014: 9) cites that in poorer countries *"... the initial deficits are large. Many children start school without having seen a book, or held a pencil, and they may have limited vocabularies even in their own languages"* (e.g. Hart & Risley, 1995; Paxson & Schady, 2005). The problem is when children who come from lower-income backgrounds sit in schools and receive only mistreatment from teachers. As such, they will see school rather as an enemy and a waste of time. *"Low-income children who enrol in school must first overcome obstacles that include gender, poverty, and their parents' hesitations. But when they finally sit down at their desks, they may learn very little"* (Abadzi & Llambiri, 2011: 492).

H. Abadzi (2014), asks the question if schools in poor countries teach students the needed basic skills that will help them rise out of poverty? The answer is obvious. According to her article, many students around the world don't learn a lot and don't reach even the basic and core competencies. In some countries, 90% of second or third graders fail to read even just one word and perhaps they don't even know individual letters. This leads later on students to abandon school and remain in a state of illiteracy. Many other examples can be found. As per the Africa Learning Barometer overall 53% of poor children and 43% of children coming from rural areas fail to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills. Similar data can be found for Yemen, Papua New Guinea and East Timor as lower-income countries.

The above overall evidence shows that even though the EFA global action has had a large impact in terms of increasing school access in lower-income countries, the equity and quality aspect of learning outcomes are compromised because of the STA-HDO remains almost a hidden phenomenon, as it is not sufficiently studied in extended scale. Meanwhile, there is good progress in international EFA policy terms, as awareness is increased in terms of addressing gaps in learning opportunity agenda through developing tools that are missing. To address this global concern, the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF), is an international effort convened

since 2012 by UNESCO Institute of Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution. The overarching objective was “to create a shift in the global conversation on education from a focus on access to access plus learning”. It aimed to make learning “a central component of the post-2015 global development agenda and to make recommendations for common goals to improve learning opportunities and outcomes” (*Critical Reflections on the LMTF*). We can deduce that these efforts, if combined with a specific attention on the STA-HDO phenomenon, open up a new perspective to improve learning opportunities of more and more children especially in the lower-income countries.

V. Discussion

The “EFA” expression means that countries ought to educate not just the best or even the average students, but practically everyone who is eligible to attend school. The emphasis to educate all children has challenged the educational systems of poorer countries to accommodate many additional students with severely limited budgets (Abadzi, 2014: 1). The STA-HDO phenomenon is a derivation of the system failing to support and provide children with learning opportunities in order to progress their capabilities and allowing them to participate and be included in their learning environments actively. It is the professional role of the educators and teachers of schools to give to these children the appropriate tools, educational help and mentoring that children need in order for these children to exercise their power, learn and achieve their potential as well as by providing tools that enable children’s own organization of learning. There is a need to understand the role of the teacher differently and that the teacher “changes from purveyor of knowledge to being an autonomous, responsible designer of student learning who is a valued member of the community, a partner in learning, a researcher and social scientist” (Yelland, Lee & ORourke, 2008: 7). This guidance and attention would allow children to be able to integrate their beings in the learning process and acquire new knowledge and at the same time bring a difference in their communities. As, often this is not the case, children who come from lower and economically poor social backgrounds fall victims of this “veiled-drop-out” and are usually more predisposed to be marginalized than others, which later on continues the vicious circle of supporting poverty, low income and marginalized communities.

Llambiri (2002), mention in his survey that school is not a heavenly place and children are forced to go there and they are expected to acquire knowledge and perform fast. “We need to admit that school attendance is however a kind of violence. Perhaps for this reason, we call it “school compulsion”. We cannot imagine how many people we would have in class, if coming was at students’ free will” (Llambiri, 2002: 47). The author stresses the lack of understanding of the child’s needs that exist among educators and the idealization of an imaginary child, which is very different from the reality. “It happens that we require from the student what the child cannot do” (Llambiri, 2002: 47). Children who attend school have committed by entering to school to perform a ritual, be disciplined, follow rules, achieve knowledge, be good, be quiet etc. and therefore, every child must accept the burden of being a social life soldier and perform the way he is told. Llambiri (2002) argues that children have the right to the *reward from job satisfaction*, which they often don’t get. Many children do all the schooling ritual, but at the end of the day get very few benefits out of it or not at all.

Schools are often designated to act as social equalizers where all children get a chance to develop, acquire new knowledge and increase their capabilities and exercising participation rights. Abundant evidence shows that often, this is not the case. When the STA-HDO phenomenon occurs, it preserves the disparities that exist between children and it does not help children to overcome them. These disparities can be poverty, social and cultural background, learning difficulties, disabilities etc. If school doesn’t overcome these obstacles in learning opportunity, it has failed to provide its minimum duty. Equity and quality education are key issues for a society that strives to overcome social imbalance. There is an urgent need for a broader view of learning which includes different dimensions, such as the transformation of old mentalities into new forms of knowledge and learning that has contemporary relevance or promoting a balance of agency which is shared between the participants in the learning process and that these participants are able to transform this knowledge in a way that has application to society (Yelland, Lee & ORourke, 2008: 7). Such shifts can be made by involving children in “meaning making” requires also involving them in processes such as research and hearing their voices. In a study conducted on playschools in Reykjavik (Einarsdottir, 2005), children’s views on their early childhood program were sought using different methods that involved children’s interviews, drawings, photographs, questionnaires through games etc. This is an excellent way of making every child participate in their community of learning and also receiving feedback on quality and on what needs to be improved.

Currently, there is an increasing interest in adjusting schools in accordance to the 21st century skills. In this logic, there is no point in making efforts and build strategies on how to bring children - who come from marginalized social backgrounds - to school, if the education that they will receive will not take into consideration every child’s own needs and learning difficulties to develop at least, the basic core competencies in primary school that are fundamental to develop the 21st century skills. Relying on old fashioned curriculums and ways of teaching does not benefit societies on all levels. If marginalized children come to school and have

bad experiences with teachers, it reinforces low self-esteem and increases social injustice. Many of these neglected children, when they grow up, often still preserve a low self-esteem and all the consequences of it. Therefore, it is of major interest to invest in learning environments, “where those who do not ‘fit’ the educational model are not discarded but valued and included as participants, thus creating educational contexts that are characterized by justice, fairness and equity” (Yelland, Lee & ORourke, 2008: 7).

Every individual in the society should be able to live decently according to his personal needs and benefit from the human rights core principles. Every child who is attending school deserves to be treated with respect and not be ignored or demoralized by school. No child should be left-behind or left-out, if human rights are respected and children are taking part actively in their learning communities. Nowadays we live in a society where some basic skills are required in order to overcome poverty or other life-threatening situations. In this logic, eliminating the STA-HDO phenomenon can be the right approach to increase teaching effectiveness and create a more prosperous environment for effective learning, as well as creating a healthy environment enabling children to thrive and achieve their full potential. Training of teachers and modification of the curricula is crucial in order to identify learning problems and possible remediation for the future.

By accepting the fact that all children are different and learn in a different way, teachers should be able to support every child in their learning processes, also seen from a child’s own perspective and not be treated the same or expected to achieve the same way. Facing the STA-HDO problem and implementing an “equity-inclusion” policy and practice is critical for learning acquisitions and the development of children who suffer from this phenomenon, which in substance is denying a basic human right. *It is the duty of every educator or any other educational stakeholder to make sure that every child receives the appropriate quality-need oriented-education.*

VI. Conclusion

The EFA challenge is to transform the educational systems to assure that all students receive *quality learning* so that they can fully develop their inner potential and help also the society socially, economically and culturally. There is an urgent need to promote a shift in thinking towards children’s agency and consider children as active participants in the society and not be understood as passive recipients of adult supervision and mentality. In addition, involving children in decision making, as well as including children’s perspectives and voices in research and everyday education processes still remains a challenge.

The systematic research done in Albania on the STA-HDO phenomenon is a relevant gateway towards a new mental shift on the phenomenon of “*neglect*” especially within schools in lower-income countries. Studying the STA-HDO phenomenon and developing specific action plans to reduce and eliminate it by raising awareness and increasing primarily school teachers’ and other educational stakeholder’s capacities, accountability and improving children’s learning monitoring tools, as well as increasing their participation in decision making within schools and communities could help to significantly decrease equity gaps in learning outcomes of students with learning difficulty.

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Figures

Figure 1

Minimum necessary objective	% baseline	% project
MATHEMATICS		
1 Adding two natural numbers with up to five digits	78 %	92 %
2 Problem from children's everyday life requiring students to add	80 %	91%
3 Subtracting two natural numbers up to five digits	43 %	72%
4 Problem from children's everyday life requiring students to subtract	76%	89%
5 Multiplication of two natural numbers with up to four digits	31%	63%
6 Problem from children's everyday life requiring students to multiply	44%	58%
7 Division of two natural numbers with up to four digits	32%	51%
8 Problem from children's everyday life requiring students to divide	35%	46%
ALBANIAN LANGUAGE		
Reading comprehension*	62%	79%

**Note: These percentiles represent average results for the four reading comprehension tests that were set. In these tests, the students were given a short text to read, and then asked multiple-choice questions to measure comprehension.*

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