

# Teaching Assistance and Support for Inclusion

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## Introduction

### Educational inclusion and research on the role of teaching assistants

Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) stipulates that education is a basic right for all, access to education is still a major problem facing persons with disabilities and children with difficulties. In the past 20 years, inclusion has become the key policy in the development of “Education for All” (UNESCO, 2002), and educational inclusion is the basic strategy in fighting marginalization and segregation of vulnerable groups such as children with difficulties.

Although different concepts of inclusion still exist, recently there has been a move towards broadening the notion of educational inclusion to encompass much more than just education of children with difficulties, and discussions are focusing on what makes a school inclusive (Farrell & Ainscow, 2002). An inclusive school is a school where the teaching and learning, achievements, attitudes and well-being of every young person matter, which is reflected in the school ethos and its willingness to offer new opportunities to students who may not have had them.

During this difficult process of creating an inclusive school, many countries, including Croatia, have started developing new educational strategies and plans, and making legislation changes. Various support systems aimed at improving access to schools have been developed, and a lot of research worldwide examines effective methods of inclusion.

The teaching assistant program is one such support system, which has been available in many countries for some twenty years. Given that an increasing number of children with difficulties are being included into regular schools, the number of teaching assistants is also growing significantly. For instance, from 1997 to 2003, the number of teaching assistants in schools in the United Kingdom increased by 99 percent, reaching a number of one hundred thousand assistants (Blatchford et al., 2007; Karn, Cremin & Thomas, 2005).

Although the teaching assistant's role is recognized as crucial, some authors (Blatchford et al., 2007; Giangreco et al. 2001, cited in EPPI, 2003) point out that there are few international studies dealing with the impact of the teaching assistant on increasing educational inclusion. Many aspects of the teaching assistant's influence and effectiveness still remain unknown, and some authors (Mortimore et al., 1992; Schlapp et al., 2001) caution that the distinction between the role of the assistant and the teacher is blurred. Most studies examined teachers' opinions, and showed that teachers generally express a positive attitude towards teaching assistants, because of improved student attention and increased teaching effectiveness (Blatchford et al., 2001). However, not all studies confirm positive educational effects in classes with teaching assistants (Finn et al., 2000).

The EPPI review (2003) analysed more than one hundred studies and showed that positive perceptions that the teachers and students may have about teaching assistants can directly affect the school's inclusiveness and the participation of children with difficulties (French & Chopra, 1999). Both the educational and behavioural aspect of teaching assistants' work is significant. Parents find that social interaction was a more important part of teaching assistants' role than academic achievement. Results of a study relying on class observation and perception scales confirm that teachers value the work of teaching assistants (Rose, 2000).

Thus, teaching assistants may be considered effective mediators between different groups and individuals in the school community. Teaching assistants who are respected and well-integrated members of the school educational team have a stronger positive impact on the inclusion of children with difficulties. Teaching assistants working with a group of children are more willingly accepted than assistants working with a single child. Teaching assistants, who are not well integrated members of the school team, can be seen as contributing to the stigmatization of the students they support. Individual support of a single student may further isolate this student from the class, and reduce the teacher's activities regarding this student (EPPI, 2003).

The teaching assistant's impact on overall class achievement is small, the findings are inconsistent, and no connections are found with the teaching assistant's support or student characteristics. However, qualitative evidence shows that there is a positive impact of the teaching assistant on the achievements of other students.

Teaching assistants play an important role as mediators in many contexts – between students, teachers, other experts, parents and different cultures. Knowledge of students' behaviours, languages, interests and cultures can have a positive impact on students' participation and learning (EPPI, 2003).

With regard to the effects of particular aspects of teaching assistants' behaviour, the results show that assistants' continuous help in completing tasks, assignments, etc. can have positive short-term effects, e.g. successful task completion. However, longer-term aspects of such behaviour create a dependent student. Furthermore, when teachers are less engaged in working with target students, this causes negative effects in terms of student participation and results in the isolation of both the student and their teaching assistant (EPPI, 2003).

The practice in many countries and research results indicate that the role of the teaching assistant is to provide support to:

- the target student(s) (at least one student or a group of students), thus ensuring students' participation in the social and academic activities of the school, promoting the highest possible level of student independence and helping students to attain the same academic standards as their peers;
- the teacher, by monitoring students and reporting on their progress, implementing special programs in collaboration with the other members of the team, and assisting students with their personal needs, e.g. toileting needs;
- the curriculum, by ensuring curriculum accessibility depending on students' achievement levels; the school, by taking part in school activities (meetings, trips...) (Halliwell, 2003).

Croatia followed these international trends and made provisions in its national educational plans, strategies and legislation for the teaching assistant. Their number is on the increase, and there are several hundred teaching assistants in Croatian schools, all of them still funded by non-governmental projects and local educational boards.

At the same time, Croatia has also seen its first studies dealing with teaching assistants and their impact. Teachers expressed a positive attitude towards teaching assistants' activities (Stančić & Sekušak-Galešev, 2008). A study which

qualitatively analysed the impact of the teaching assistant on a target student with ADHD based on observation data showed significant improvement in the target student's behaviour (Igrić et al., 2008).

Further development of this inclusion support system in Croatia (which has been professionalized abroad) requires looking into the ways of organizing the process in Croatia, determining exactly what the assistant's role will be, and investigating which methods will be effective in achieving an inclusive school.

## **Children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder in school**

In Croatia, most experiences with teaching assistant support involve children with ADHD. In this section, we will discuss some of the findings related to the effective inclusion of students with ADHD in a school environment.

Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder is a developmental disorder with pronounced, developmentally inappropriate symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity-impulsiveness, which has a clinically significant negative impact on social, school or work functioning (Barkley, 1990).

Because of difficulties in keeping their attention, which is manifested in a lack of persistence in performing longer uninteresting tasks, making mistakes, difficulties in organization, planning etc., students with ADHD have difficulties with traditional classroom instruction. Symptoms of hyperactivity, such as constant squirming, leaving their seat and walking around the class, are often ascribed to students being badly behaved and spoilt. If there are pronounced symptoms of impulsiveness, such as interrupting conversations, having trouble with waiting for something they want and a low tolerance for frustration, these behaviours lead to rejection by their peers and teachers' aversion to them. It is generally difficult for teachers to understand children with ADHD (DuPaul & Stoner, 2003, cited in Sekušak-Galešev, 2008). They find it difficult to grasp the incongruity between high cognitive abilities and the inability to meet the so-called simple school tasks, such as copying from the board, sitting still in their seat and following other school rules. They are perceived as lazy and "ill-behaved", and are thought to disrupt class work. Thus, children with ADHD are more exposed to school failure, social isolation and antisocial behaviour than other children (Biederman, Faraone & Milberger, 1996). Research has shown that successful classroom intervention providing cues to remain on

task and prompts desirable behaviour reduces ADHD symptoms and leads to better school success (Du Paul & Eckert, 1997). In accordance with the described symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsiveness, strategies and support techniques are developed to be used by teaching assistants, primarily based on the behavioural approach. Given the child's distractible attention, support is given to keep him/her on task, by repeating instructions, removing distracting stimuli, pointing to mistakes, breaking down tasks into smaller parts, etc. Given the child's increased restlessness and the need to move around, acceptable classroom behaviour must be agreed upon with the teacher, e.g. going for a short walk, wiping the board, handing out papers, drawing while in the seat, squirming in the seat, fidgeting, etc. Similarly, undesirable behaviours disrupting the other students should also be identified. Desirable behaviours are rewarded by praise and unacceptable behaviours ignored. The aim is to eliminate undesirable behaviours, i.e. to interrupt them when they appear. Children with ADHD frequently exhibit a low tolerance for frustration, so it is sometimes more effective to ignore inappropriate behaviours than insist on changing them.

## Aim and research questions

In order to ensure the student's full inclusion in a regular classroom, it is necessary to provide support, which will keep in mind the student's needs, without "stigmatizing" him/her. Therefore, the teaching assistant's interaction with other children and cooperation with the teacher are crucial. This study, which is a part of an international project<sup>35</sup>, explores support to a student with ADHD, because most requests for teaching assistant support in Croatia concern students with this disorder. The aim of this study is to evaluate the role of the teaching assistant in a support model for educational inclusion of a student with ADHD. The study addresses the following research questions:

- How does the teaching assistant support the class?
- How are the assistant's interventions linked with the target student's behaviour?

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35 "Development towards the Inclusive School: Practices – Research – Capacity Building", which is a project with participation from 7 universities (Skopje, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Tuzla, Sarajevo, Zagreb and Oslo). (Project leader: B. H. Johnsen).

## Methodology

**Participants.** A second-grade class with 25 students was selected in a primary school in Zagreb willing to participate in the study. The class had three students with difficulties, all of whom were certified as eligible for an individualized education program. After one month's classroom observation, one of them, D, was selected for the study. The selection criterion was the teacher's opinion that D presented the biggest challenge and needed most support, for his sake and the class. D is nine years old. He finished first grade with excellent grades. He has well-developed abstract thinking and logical reasoning skills, is above average at mathematics and creative in fine arts. He demands the teacher's attention, may give up, showing anger and cursing, has conflicts with the other students and demands a leading role in group work. These difficulties consequently are affecting his academic progress, social and emotional development.<sup>36</sup>

The teaching assistant is a female student enrolled in the final year of a teaching qualification program. This is her first time involved in supporting students in a classroom. She works four hours every day.

The teacher volunteered to be involved in the program, and this was the first time that she worked with a teaching assistant.

**Procedure.** This study is part of a program<sup>37</sup> to evaluate the efficiency of support for educational inclusion by means of a mobile team of experts and a teaching assistant.

In the context of this program, support for educational inclusion refers to:

- a) The teaching assistant's support to the student with difficulties (ADHD) and to the other students in cooperation with the teacher.
- b) The Mobile Team of Expert's (MTE) supporting the teacher and teaching assistant. The MTE consists of educational and rehabilitation specialists – one experienced in developing individualized education plans, and one experienced in working with children with ADHD. The MTE consults the teacher and the teaching assistant twice a week for two periods during the first semester and once a week for two periods in the second semester.
- c) Supervision of the teaching assistant by the MTE members, held once a month throughout the school year.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Described in Igrić et al., 2014.

<sup>37</sup> The program, including the assistant's work, was funded through projects of the IDEM association (project leader: Lj. Igrić), funded by the National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society and the United Nations Development Programs.

<sup>38</sup> Described in Igrić et al., 2014.

The MTE and the members of the international research project evaluating the program used classroom observation to plan what type of counselling the teacher and the teaching assistant needed. Student's behaviour in the class and the teaching assistant's activities were observed over a period of five months.

A focus group interview with the students and an interview with the teacher and the mother were conducted immediately after the observation period, and two school years later with the mother, the teacher and the target student.

**Data collection procedures.** Two cameras were used to record the activity of the teaching assistant, one videotaping the class, and one videotaping the assistant. At the same time, three observers observed D's behaviour in class and the classroom atmosphere.<sup>39</sup>

**Data processing methods.** Since this study was conducted in a real social context, qualitative methodology was used for the analysis and interpretation of data. Summarizing and structuring were conducted according to the principles and procedures described in Strauss and Corbin (1991) and Mason (1996).<sup>40</sup> The analysis was performed using the NVivo 8 software, which was used as a means of handling the data and a database, for the mass of data on the research problem.

## Analysis of the assistant's activities from the video recordings

In order to provide the answer to the first research question, which concerns the teaching assistant's support for class work, the assistant's interventions towards D and other students as well as her communication with the teacher were analysed.

One hundred nineteen concepts were summarized into twenty-nine categories of activities that consist of the following categories:

- Ten categories of activities towards D: communication, ignoring, interrupting behaviour, intervention attempts, lack of intervention, providing cues for D to remain on task, prompting desirable behaviour, helping D do his work, watching D's movements, writing in her notebook;

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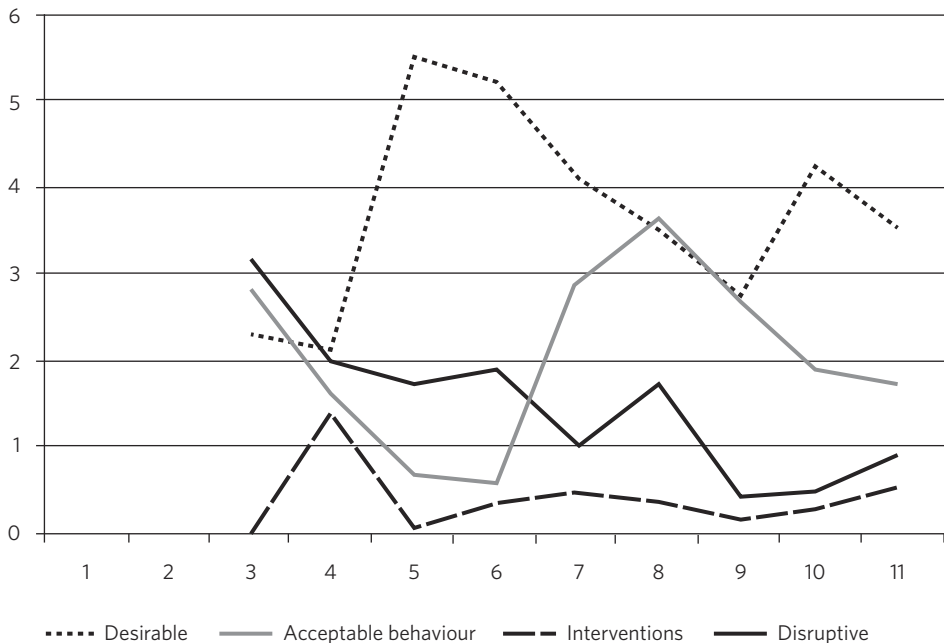
39 Described in Igrić et al., 2014.

40 Described in Igrić et al., 2014.

- Three categories of activities towards the other students: intervention, communication and helping the other students do their tasks; in this study we only analyse the category of helping the other students, which was the most frequent one;
- Three categories of activities towards the teacher: looking at the teacher, reacting after the teacher's intervention, oral communication with the teacher; in this study we analyse oral communication, which was the most frequent category.

The frequencies of these categories were determined during each observation, and their trend from the first to the eleventh observation was monitored.

The following graphs represent observation points 1 to 11 and the most frequent categories during each observation point. They were triangulated with the histogram of frequency of the student's behaviour in order to detect any trends concerning the connection between the assistant's activities and the student's behaviour (Figure 1). Additionally, the following data were analysed: classroom atmosphere, the MTE counselling topics, teaching methods, lesson structure, and data from interview with the mother, teacher and the student focus group.



**Figure 1.** Frequencies of D's behaviours



## Categories of the assistant's activities

The analysis of video tapes and summarizing were used to determine the basic categories of the assistant's activities. We present here seven most frequent categories of activities towards D, the most frequent category of activity towards the other students and the most frequent category of activity towards the teacher. The data are presented for all eleven observation points.

**Activities towards D: Lack of intervention.** This category is defined as a lack of a necessary intervention when the student's behaviour requires it or not providing assistance to the other students when D was focused on his task for a longer period of time.

During the initial time points, lack of intervention and failed intervention attempts appeared more frequently. This was to be expected because at the time mutual trust between the assistant and D had not yet developed. Moreover, because of her limited experience, the teaching assistant was not yet willing to help the other students. At time point eight, lack of intervention reappeared, which may be ascribed to the classroom context (the way in which the students were seated during the class), which may have prevented the assistant's interventions.

**Activities towards D: Prompting desirable behaviour.** This intervention consists of two subcategories: successful and unsuccessful prompting. Successful prompting mostly appears during the third and fourth month of observation, and unsuccessful prompting prevails during the first observation point, when a good relationship with the boy has not yet been established.

**Activities towards D: Intervention attempts.** This category includes unsuccessful interventions. The assistant's intervention did not stop D's undesirable behaviour or did not result in starting the expected desirable behaviour.

This category appeared most frequently after the winter break, when the assistant patiently intervened in various ways, including providing substitute activities, such as letting D draw.

**Activities towards D: Communication between the assistant and D.** This intervention includes oral and nonverbal communication, and a combination of both channels. Oral communication refers to a conversation between the target student and the assistant, when both are interested in communicating. Nonverbal communication refers to many different activities, such as touching, eye contact, nodding etc. used in communication between the assistant and the target student.

This category appeared most frequently during the third and fourth month of observation, when D developed trust towards the assistant, resulting in better cooperation. D would frequently initiate communication himself. However, at the time, he was not really willing to work on classroom tasks.

**Activities towards D: Ignoring behaviour.** This category includes the assistant's activities that, based on cognitive behavioural theory, lead to a discontinuation of undesirable behaviour. In addition, some behaviours were agreed upon with the teacher as tolerable because they would not disrupt the class. In these situations the assistant would remain with the student, ignoring him, or would leave to help the other students. Alternative activities are introduced to prevent unacceptable behaviour and to induce acceptable behaviour and MTE advised assistant to provide that activities.

Ignoring was most frequent during the third and fourth month, i.e. after the first half of the observation period. Before this time, the assistant had not learned to use this procedure, although it had been recommended. The assistant had to see for herself that the procedure was effective, in other words, she had to realize that the student could learn that some behaviours are not rewarded (with the assistant's attention). Certain behaviours were also introduced (such as drawing), and were used to replace unacceptable behaviours. Such behaviours, it was agreed in the classroom, would be tolerated by all. At the end of the observation period, there was again less ignoring, i.e. there were fewer behaviours that required to be ignored. In order for this intervention to be effective, the procedure needs to be agreed upon with the teacher, because it requires a cooperative effort.

**Activities towards D: Interrupting behaviour.** This category refers to positive effects of the assistant's actions and a successful interruption of undesirable behaviour.

Most interruptions occurred in the third and fourth month of the observation period, i.e. when the assistant learned effective intervention techniques and developed a trusting relationship with the student. There were fewer interruptions later because the number of unacceptable and disruptive behaviours decreased.

**Activities towards D: Providing cues to remain on task.** This category includes various procedures aimed at motivating the student to keep on task, e.g. by organizing the student's desk, collecting material or the assistant providing a model behaviour to imitate.

This category appears most pronouncedly in the seventh observation period, when the assistant was using different ways to try to stimulate D's interest in class work after a school break. It was possible for the assistant to use this procedure

only after she felt more confident in selecting one of the suggested approaches, and when she allowed herself the creativity and spontaneity in her interventions.

**Activities towards the other students:** *Helping the other students.* This category refers to all the assistant's activities directed at working with the other students, both by going around the class and checking on their work or sitting next to a student and working with him/her. This stimulates good classroom dynamics and prevents the isolation of the student with difficulties, which may happen if the assistant focuses only on the student with difficulties.

This intervention varies from one observation to the other. At first, such activities may be related to ignoring D, when the assistant's intention was to show to D that she was not interested in one of his undesirable behaviours, in order to stop it. Later, when undesirable behaviours were reduced, and the assistant gained the confidence to be more active in the classroom, she worked with the other students primarily to help them. In addition, when D was having "a bad day", she would go to the other students in order to be useful in the classroom, and to arouse D's interest in class work. Working with the other students contributed to the development of an inclusive classroom, where nobody is stigmatized.

**Activities towards the teacher:** *Oral communication with the teacher.* This category refers to the assistant's communication with the teacher about D's class work, initiated by the teacher, by the assistant or as supplement to D's communication with the teacher (additional explanation of D's work).

Communication with the teacher, especially oral communication, was not particularly pronounced during observation, appearing largely in the second part of the observation period. On the one hand, this is due to the teacher's uncertainty on how to treat the assistant, on the other, the assistant's attempts to deal with the situations herself, because she thought that controlling D's behaviour was solely her responsibility. Despite urged by the MTE to cooperate more with one another, oral communication was not evident.

## **Analysis of the teaching assistant's activities by observation points**

This section presents the analysis of trends of the assistant's procedures from the beginning to the end of the five-month observation period. The frequencies of each category were determined during every observation, and their trend from the first to the eleventh observation was monitored.

<i>First observation, November 13</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p><b>The teacher</b> reads a text, and the students are supposed to answer questions about it. D is in a bad mood and angry.</p> <p><b>The student</b> starts exhibiting some behaviours, refusing to do his assignment, and disrupts the other students.</p> <p><b>The assistant</b> spends the first part of the period with D, and the rest with the other students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• oral and nonverbal communication between the assistant and D</li> <li>• interventions for stopping undesirable behaviours</li> <li>• managing to keep the student on task</li> <li>• sitting next to the student</li> <li>• giving support to the other students and ignoring D's behaviour</li> </ul>
<i>Second observation, November 20</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p><b>The assistant's interventions</b> are successful.</p> <p><b>The assistant</b> successfully interrupts.</p> <p><b>The student</b> was in a good mood from the very beginning, willing to cooperate, and the assistant's interventions were therefore successful.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• D's good mood as one of the preconditions for the assistant's successful interventions</li> <li>• sitting together with student D</li> <li>• communication between assistant and D. is longer and successful</li> <li>• using nonverbal communication for successful interventions</li> <li>• student starts remaining on task without the assistant's intervention</li> <li>• assistant works with the other students while the teacher is working with D</li> </ul>
<i>Third observation, November 27</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p>Because of the <b>assistant's unpleasant experiences</b> from the day before, which were a result of D's impulsive behaviour towards her, she avoids any interventions directed at the target student.</p> <p><b>The student</b> had a conflict with another student in the class.</p> <p>This observation point was the lowest point during the entire observation period.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ignoring D's undesirable behaviour during the entire class, sitting next to another student</li> <li>• assistant does not react on teacher's requests for intervention</li> <li>• sitting with students who also exhibited undesirable behaviours</li> <li>• talking and helping the students next to her</li> </ul>
<i>Fourth observation, December 4</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p><b>The assistant</b> was trying to follow the mobile team's instructions from the previous counselling session to ignore the target student's undesirable behaviour.</p> <p><b>The target student's behaviour</b> changed and may also be ascribed to counselling the teacher about how to cooperate with the assistant.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ignoring the student when he sat under the desk</li> <li>• allows D to be under the desk for a period of time, communicating with him during this period</li> <li>• assistant does not help the other students</li> </ul>

<i>Fifth observation, December 11</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p><b>The target student</b> exhibited the greatest number of desirable behaviours. Acceptable behaviour is on the increase, thanks to the <b>assistant's</b> successful, frequently nonverbal <b>interventions</b>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assistant helps D. with his tasks, talks to him, cooperates with him</li> <li>• assistant asks the teacher for crayons and supports D. when he is unsure whether his answer is correct</li> <li>• interrupting the student when he answers a question without being called on</li> <li>• communication with the teacher</li> </ul>
<i>Sixth observation, December 18</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p><b>The student's desirable behaviour</b> is very pronounced, and acceptable behaviour is not present to a great extent.</p> <p><b>The assistant</b> was praised for her ignoring interventions, and was encouraged to be freer in deciding about her interventions, because she was well acquainted with the target student by this time.</p> <p><b>The teacher</b> was advised to inform the assistant about class activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assistant is sitting next to the target student during this period, watching what he is doing</li> <li>• assistant remains D. on task for most of the time, communicates with him when necessary</li> <li>• assistant does not work with the other students</li> <li>• assistant does communicate with the teacher</li> </ul>
<i>Seventh observation, January 22</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p>This was one of the first classes after the Christmas break.</p> <p><b>The student</b> is more restless than usual, but disruptive behaviour is less pronounced than at previous time points.</p> <p><b>The assistant</b> adapted her activities to D's behaviour and was advised to suggest drawing as an acceptable substitute activity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• when D leaves his seat, the assistant immediately goes to help another student (a technique of ignoring)</li> <li>• drawing significantly increased the category of acceptable behaviour</li> <li>• assistant and the teacher communicate about D's tasks</li> <li>• ignoring when D plays with a plane or sits under the desk and communication through whispering</li> </ul>
<i>Eight observation, January 29</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p>Immediately before the class there was a <b>conflict between students</b>. At the beginning of the class <b>D sits</b> in the first bench, and soon leaves, goes to the back of the class and sits next to a boy with behavioural difficulties, his disruptive behaviour has increased considerably and acceptable behaviour prevails.</p> <p><b>The teacher</b> reads a lengthy text, which cannot attract the children's attention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the assistant moves around the class the most in order to intervene, communicating with the other students and helping them</li> <li>• the assistant just watches D's movements and was trying to establish contact with D, but was unsuccessful, so she sits in one of the seats behind him</li> </ul>

<i>Ninth observation, February 5</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p><b>The class</b> is preparing for the <b>Carnival</b> and a masquerade ball and they are wearing masks.</p> <p>There is a cheerful atmosphere, and everyone is in a good mood.</p> <p><b>Student's</b> desirable and disruptive <b>behaviours</b> are not very frequent, and acceptable behaviour is one of the most frequent ones.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the assistant mostly ignores acceptable and disruptive behaviour and talks with D</li> <li>the assistant manages to stop undesirable behaviours thanks to her interventions</li> <li>the assistant found this situation difficult to cope with, and did not interact with the other students very much because a lack of structure agitates D</li> </ul>
<i>Tenth observation, February 12</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p><b>Student's</b> disruptive and unacceptable <b>behaviour</b> are on the decrease, and there is more desirable behaviour.</p> <p>One part of the class is organized as <b>group work</b>. D is trying to dominate the group and be the leader.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the assistant is active in helping D</li> <li>the assistant uses ignoring procedures up to a certain point, and in some critical situations and is more forceful in making demands</li> <li>the assistant sometimes help other students, and the teacher comes to work with D's group.</li> <li>the assistant's communicate with the teacher and they cooperate</li> </ul>
<i>Eleventh observation, March 18</i>	
Context	Assistant's Interventions
<p><b>The teacher</b> had D do an assignment on the board in front of the class, and the assistant was helping one of the students sitting in the back bench.</p> <p>When D completed his task, he and the assistant sat together, and communicated. Student left his seat from time to time and then returned.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the assistant kept prompting student to remain on his task</li> <li>the assistant is considerably more confident in her activities towards D and the other students</li> <li>the assistant matched her activities to the student's mood, not insisting on stopping some behaviour, but used ignoring techniques</li> <li>the assistant was suggested by MTE to avoid forcing some activity and when the student "declined twice" to prompt him to do something else</li> </ul>

## Interpreting the assistant's interventions

The changes in the assistant's interventions during the 11 observation time points, their comparison with the student's behaviour and triangulation with all the remaining sources leads to the following conclusions:

At the beginning, the assistant was very insecure, which was reflected in unsuccessful attempts to intervene. However, as she was getting to know the student and as she was given advice by the MTE, she became more resolute and made her demands to D more clearly. Later, the relationship between D and the

assistant became more trusting. The assistant started using substitute activities, talking to D and ignoring some of his behaviours.

During the first two months, the assistant ignored D's behaviour by leaving to help other students, but did not manage to be as involved in their work as later on (in the third and fourth month). The assistant's activities were influenced by D's sporadic aggressive behaviour towards her, which occurred outside the observation period. Initially, when this happened she reacted by becoming passive, and later on she would turn to working with the other students. The assistant did not cope very well with D's aggression (which is corroborated by her own statement), and this might have had an impact on the appearance of this impulsive behaviour.

During observation points when the classroom atmosphere was good, D's desirable behaviour was on the increase; at first in such cases, the assistant helped D do his class work, and later on, she helped the other students. When there were conflicts between students immediately before class or during class (even if D was not involved), this significantly influenced D's mood. Such situations required great skill from the assistant to adapt to them. Group work has turned out to be a desirable activity, both in relation to the student's behaviour and to the assistant's actions. Supporting the assistant by praising her and encouraging her to use particular interventions made her stronger, i.e. she was more confident in using certain procedures, which the students recognized and reacted to her better.

Information obtained from the parents also helped the assistant in eliminating undesirable behaviour and the assistant increased talking with D, explaining certain situations to him. The mother knows her child very well, she worked with the teacher and regularly exchanged information with the assistant, and her positive attitude towards the changes during the program was important.

By supporting the other students, the assistant contributed to a better inclusion of the target student. In class, the assistant had to cope with very demanding requirements. Consideration her lack of experience and the fact that this was the first time the teacher worked with a teaching assistant, understandably the two of them could not focus on improving their mutual cooperation.

Our results and their interpretation suggest that the answers to the first and second research questions, which are summarize in the tables below.

### 1. How does the teaching assistant support the class?

Results and their interpretation suggest that the answer to the first research question may be the following:

- The assistant most frequently employed seven intervention categories towards the target student (communication, ignoring, interrupting behaviour, intervention attempts, lack of intervention, providing cues to remain on task, prompting desirable behaviour)
- The set of intervention procedures changed during the program, because trust developed between the assistant and the target student
- In the second part of the observation period the assistant more frequently ignored undesirable behaviour, was more successful at stopping it and at communicating with the student
- In the last part of the observation period, the assistant was more successful in prompting desirable behaviour and keeping him on task
- Helping was the most frequent intervention category towards the other students (going around the class, to helping a single student, to managing group work together with the teacher)
- Regarding the activities towards the teacher, oral communication prevailed, but not until the middle period of the experimental program and also nonverbal communication with each other regarding interventions

### 2. How are the assistant's interventions linked with the target student's behaviour?

Results and their interpretation suggest that the answer to the second research question may be the following:

- There is a close two-way link between the student's behaviours and the assistant's interventions
- The student's behaviour changes considerably, and the assistant's interventions follow the same pattern
- When the student is willing to work, is in a good mood and does class work, the assistant occasionally helps the other students
- The entire context influences the student's mood, including a less structured lesson or a conflict between students before or during class
- When the assistant developed a more flexible approach to D, the student, although agitated, exhibited less disruptive behaviour.
- In the last part of the experimental program the assistant's interventions were clearer and more structured and she was able to communicate well with D and influence his behaviour

## Critical comments

The results of this research should be taken with caution with reference to other difficulties caused by specific disabilities or environmental obstacles. It should be kept in mind that these data are based on a single case concerning a student with ADHD, who has good support from his family, and there was close cooperation between teacher and parents.

The results of the research might have been influenced by multiple factors related to methodology such as:



- The researchers were also classroom observers. One of them occasionally participated in counselling the teacher and the assistant, which could have influenced the objectivity of the analysis and the interpretation. Attempts were made to avoid this by always involving two researchers in jointly transcribing and summarizing recordings, one of whom never participated in the counselling or observation.
- Given that the aim of this study was to test the effectiveness of involving a teaching assistant in a classroom in Croatia, the researchers had certain expectations of the assistant, which could lead to being very critical in assessing her work. Therefore, the assistant was monitored and supported by the members of the MTE who were not involved in this study.
- This was the first study in Croatia looking into the involvement of a teaching assistant in an inclusive classroom, and the practical experience of all those concerned was limited. Therefore, the MTE focused largely on the target student and his behaviour challenges, giving insufficient attention to the assistant's involvement with the other students, which certainly was reflected in her activities.
- The development of the relationship between the assistant and D could have been influenced by their socialization outside the school. This was not part of the program: the assistant and the mother informed the research team about D socializing with the teaching assistant at the end of the observation period. The development of the boy's trust towards the assistant was an important factor in the program. However, it also caused the assistant to assume a different role; that of a "friend". The "friend" role could have had an adverse effect on the assistant's actions towards D, and may have encouraged D's unpleasant impulsive aggression towards the assistant. In the long term, this was an inefficient way to establish a relationship, which was evident later, when D, after the first teaching assistant departure, could not accept a new assistant.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to address certain issues related to conducting support programs in an inclusive classroom. The study analysed the procedures of a teaching assistant working in a class attended by the target student D, whose difficulties are a result of ADHD. The program involved a mobile team of experts (MTE), who provided continual support to the assistant in her choice of methods and procedures.

The assistant's flexibility in the choice of methods proved very important in working with the target student with ADHD. In achieving flexibility, two things proved crucial: providing the assistant with continual expert support and the assistant's personality traits, which allowed her to form a complex relationship with a student who has a low tolerance for frustration.

In order for the teaching assistant not to contribute the isolation and additional stigmatization of the student with special needs, the assistant's classroom role needs to be taken more broadly than just helping a student with difficulties – it needs to be seen as helping the teacher. Moreover, the assistant must be willing to learn through counselling, to cooperate with the teacher, and, last but not least, and to cooperate with the parents.

It should be pointed out that group work proved very effective with regard to the target student's behaviour, the assistant's involvement with the rest of the class and the cooperation with the teacher. Frontal instruction, which is still dominant in Croatian schools, makes it much more difficult to establish a dynamic and inclusive classroom atmosphere that group work provides. It will be difficult to develop a "school for all" without improving teaching methods in the classroom. Teachers do not entirely understand their role cooperating with teaching assistants; they are uncertain about what is expected of them and unsure whether the assistant's role is to focus on the single student or to be the teacher's helper.

The adoption of the "school for all" approach allows the teaching assistant to play an integral role in supporting an inclusive school, because the assistant can help the teacher to get to know his/her students better, matching curriculum requirements to their abilities and interests.

The complexity of involving a teaching assistant in the classroom, as presented here, may be fully addressed once all regulations controlling this activity are in place. Moreover, teachers need access to lifelong education working in an inclusive school, and mobile teams of experts may play a major role in making this happen.

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