

# Supporting Inclusion of Children with Special Needs

*A Study of Classroom Assistants and Mobile Team of Special Needs Educators in Regular Schools*

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## Introduction

For more than 25 years, children with special needs have had the legal right to educational integration in Croatia. Still, around 4.000 children, which comprise 10% of the total number of primary school pupils, cannot be successfully integrated into the regular school system because no specific support has been provided to their schools and families. The term *special needs* applies to any pupil who has learning difficulties considerably more serious than their peers and is therefore in need of specific kinds of educational support. The Croatian National Educational Standard distinguishes between the following groups of impairments and special educational needs: visual impairment – hearing impairment – speech impairment – motor impairment and chronic illnesses – intellectual disabilities – attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) – specific learning difficulties – emotional and behavioural difficulties – autistic spectrum disorder (Igrić, 2007). There is a lack of special educational expertise in assessment and education responding to these difficulties and impairments, which is especially noticeable in schools in Croatia. For example, in the case of Zagreb, there is one psychologist per 3.000 pupils and one special needs teacher

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per more than 2.000 pupils. Children with special needs and their families face a number of challenges, such as not understanding the needs of their child and not being familiar with their legal right to education under the same conditions as all other children. Finally, children with special needs and their families are often excluded by their extended families and society.

Assessment of special educational needs is often implemented late, such as in third or fourth grade. Until then, the child may be apprehended as being lazy, irresponsible or naughty in school and at home. Even when the children's difficulties become known, parents and teachers do not know how to help them. This results in underachievement in school, which in turn often leads to emotional and behavioural difficulties (Kavale & Forness, 1995, in Mishna & Muskat, 2004). Therefore, providing support for pupils with special needs as well as their teachers and school is necessary.

Basic preconditions for equal access to the educational system are listed in the National Strategy of Equal Policy for Persons with Disabilities from 2003 to 2006 (2003), which have been included within the Croatian National Educational Standard – CNES (Igrić, 2007). The CNES states that high level of competency in school is one of the most important preconditions for inclusion, and that educational rehabilitation support by mobile teams of experts and classroom assistants is imperative for its success. There are no systematic records in Croatia of past experience or effectiveness of this new kind of support through mobile expert teams and classroom assistants. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out a scientific evaluation of existing practices in order to develop national standards for this kind of special needs educational practice. The goal of this research project is to implement this evaluation. This study is also part of a larger collaborative project entitled *Comparative Classroom Studies towards Inclusion* (Johnsen, 2013), which is the main section of an international research cooperation project (WB 04/06).

Specifically speaking, in our Croatian project, focus is on the role of the assistant, who is viewed from different aspects indicating the success of integration and inclusion. Pupils' academic achievement is one aspect, since underachievement of pupils with special educational needs has been noticed. A common cause of their underachievement is assumed to be inadequate teaching methods, or in other words, insufficient support in learning. Teachers play a major role in integration, especially in respect to their readiness to accept children with special needs and find the most relevant methods for their up-bringing and education (Kiš Glavaš, 1999; Levin, 1992; Villa & Thousand, 1992).

An even more important aspect is the child's self-evaluation and self-esteem, the latter contributing to individual satisfaction and quality of life. As regards schoolchildren, their academic self-concept is especially important. Several research findings have shown that children who see themselves as more successful are more motivated for success and more persistent in doing their work (Bogiano, Main & Katz, 1988 and Harter, 1988 in Vasta, Haith & Miller, 1998.). Children with special needs are found to have lower self-concept than their classmates (Chapman, 1998; Grolnick & Ryan, 1990 and Rogers & Saklofske, 1985, in Dyson, 1996).

One of the most important indicators of success of integration is peer acceptance. Indeed, pupils tell us that it is the most important element for them (Goodlad, 1998). Making friends and playmates, however, depends on more than whether children like each other's behaviour or not. Development of friendship is also affected by factors such as how the surrounding environment is structured to provide opportunities for social interaction, whether or not there is encouragement to interact with peers and share common activities, and whether or not different settings provide a continuity of relationships across settings and time (Searcy, 1994; Searcy & Meadows, 1994). Our social and environmental structures may therefore either enhance or limit the opportunities children have to develop and maintain relationships.

International as well as Croatian studies show that children with special needs are less accepted than their peers (Harper, 1999; Waddell, 1984; Zic & Igrić, 2001). These results indicate that peers more seldom choose to spend time together with children with special educational needs than other children, either for sitting and learning together or for company.

## **Purpose of the study**

In this study it is assumed that support by an assistant will lead to better school achievement, better self-concept, especially regarding academic skills, and better peer acceptance and interaction. The study focuses on two main topics:

Analysing the performance of classroom assistants and evaluating their effect on integration of pupils with special needs in regular classrooms.

Comparing educational, psychological and social effects of new kinds of support to pupils with special needs under former conditions without any assistant.

## Methodology

In this study both quantitative and qualitative analysis will be used.

In the quantitative section, the following instruments will be applied to measure pupils' psychosocial wellbeing as well as academic mastery and possibilities:

- Perceptual and intellectual abilities, knowledge
- ACADIA test (Atkinson, Johnston & Lindsay, 1972; Croatian adaptation, Novosel & Marvin-Cavor, 1985)
- PMZ test (Levandovski & Igrić, 1990)
- Croatian adaptation of BRP-2 Rating Profile II, BRP-2 (Brown & Hammill, 1990; Croatian adaptation, Žic, 2000)
- Profil samopercepcije za djecu (Brajša-Žganec, Raboteg-Šarić & Franc, 2000; Croatian adaptation of Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC) (Harter, 1985).

In the qualitative section, the class will be observed and video recorded. This part of the study starts and ends with interviews with children with special needs, teachers and assistants. The focus will be on questions regarding two main aspects – pupil and communication – through the following topics:

- How have pupils requested that their needs be addressed?
- Are pupils active partners?
- Can the teacher describe/define pupil's mastering of the teaching material in the zone of proximal development?
- How is the pupil seen by others?
- What kind of resources does the teacher use when adapting his/her teaching to the individual needs of the child?
- What is the active participation of the pupil like, both in and outside the classroom?
- What is the participation of professional (psych-pedagogy) service like in the process of inclusion?
- Is there coordination between systems of support (assistants, mobile team)?
- How is care incorporated into the system (how is it conducted, how is it evaluated...)?
- In what way and how much do teacher – assistant, assistant – pupils... communicate?
- In which way do teachers check pupils' understanding?

- Is there any specific aspect of communication with children with disabilities in comparison to children without disabilities? How can we explain communication between a child having a disability and a child without any disability?
- Does the teacher adapt different aspects of the teaching according to the abilities and needs of pupils?

## Location of project implementation – the case

A fourth grade in a regular school has been selected for this study starting at the beginning of the school year 2007/08. The class consists of pupils with special needs and their peers as well as classroom teachers and assistants. In the preparation period during 2006–07 leading up to this project plan, the selected school was described as consisting of a total number of 643 pupils. The number of teachers was 15 at the lower grade level (1–4) and 26 at the higher grade level (5–8).

12 children in the school have individual education programmes.

3 children are waiting for individual education programmes.

9 children are taught in accordance with an individualized approach

3 children are waiting to be taught with an individualized approach

46 pupils have some kind of learning difficulty, but their level of mastery and educational needs have not been formally assessed.

## Project activities

The implementation of the study has been planned to consist of the following participants and activities:

**The mobile expert team** is a team of professionals providing all necessary support to schools for the education of children with special needs. Members of the expert team include 1) one academic coordinator from the school in which educational integration is implemented. The best option is a professional employed at school. 2) Two external experts, with specialisations in different but relevant areas, such as special needs educational professionals with a specialisation in educational inclusion, intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, visual and speech impairment as well as a social pedagogue or psychologist.

The coordinator for educational inclusion is the key person in school who determines the special educational needs of pupils and develops an action plan

together with members of the mobile team. The coordinator also prepares the necessary documentation and organises work with pupils with special needs (teacher, assistant and experts).

The support of the mobile expert team consists of offering professional help to teachers through guidance and workshops focusing on a series of topics relevant to integration and inclusion:

- familiarization with characteristics of certain special educational needs
- development of an individual education programme
- evaluation and assessment of pupils
- didactic–methodical support to teaching
- the process of pupil observation
- collaboration with parents
- working with assistants

Guidance is conducted once a week for 2 hours by one member of the mobile expert team. In the selected partner school, we expect a total of 80 hours over a 10-month period. The mobile expert team provides support to professional associates in school and assistants through supervision.

**The classroom assistant** represents a new kind of support focusing on the integration of children with special needs in the regular school. The assistant works directly with a pupil in the classroom during teaching and provides support to:

- the pupil with special needs, concerning the pupil's participation in the learning in class and overcoming socio-psychological barriers
- the teacher and other professionals, participating in creating goals, mutually making individual educational plans, implementing planned activities with teachers and other professionals by directly working with pupils, giving feedback, etc.
- developing a curriculum in accordance with the pupil's capabilities
- the school through team work, participating in school life, and sharing knowledge about school regulations

The mobile expert team selects assistants, taking into account their personality traits and levels of competence. Each assistant receives training organised by the school coordinator. An assistant works in a partner school during 10 months, 20 hours per week for a total of 800 hours per year.

**Supervision** is a modern method of developing professional skills and helping professionals in the field of education and up-bringing. It will be conducted

once a month in the form of group supervision for members of the mobile expert team, and individual supervision for assistants.

**Collaboration with teachers.** During the project, teachers will receive continuous support from the mobile expert team and assistants. They will be aided in their preparation of teaching through receiving advice, participating in workshops and collaborating with assistants, enabling them to integrate pupils with special needs into all activities with their peers, and in this way develop inclusive practices.

The mobile expert team offers advice to assistants who are working directly with pupils.

## Dynamics of project activities - timeline

First year:

- Selecting the actual grade four class which will be the arena of study
- Identifying pupils with special educational needs in this class
- Determining capabilities and characteristics of pupils and their initial level of knowledge and skills
- Selecting classroom assistants and determining their initial training
- Determining criteria and assessment methods of pupils and assistants
- Preparing instruments for assessment of pupils in classroom and assistants
- Determining methods of observation and providing further training to researchers in order to conduct qualitative research

Second year:

- Developing an individual education plan (IEP) for each pupil with special educational needs
- Classroom assistants begin working in the class
- The mobile expert team starts giving workshops and advice
- Work of assistants is monitored and supervised
- Pupil behaviour and work of classroom assistant are observed as regards their relationship with pupils with special educational needs as well as with other pupils
- Class functioning with and without presence of assistant is observed

Third year:

- Analysing and interpreting results

## **Connection between the Croatian study and the joint comparative classroom studies towards inclusion (WB 04/06)**

This study contributes to our joint international comparative study through describing and discussing an example of the new conditions in the Croatian regular classroom that includes an assistant for pupils with special needs. The effects of introducing classroom assistants for pupils with special needs will be investigated. The study will produce quantitative and qualitative data about the new situation in one regular school and class having integrated pupils with special needs. The main topics of this research are those regarding the individual pupil, especially the pupil with special needs, and communication between all individuals in the class.

### **Relevant ethical research ethical questions**

The first and fundamental principle is to consider the welfare of the subjects participating in the study. A main ethical task is to secure privacy for all participants. Research based on naturalistic observations of subjects in their everyday settings raises particular ethical concerns regarding privacy and psychological wellbeing (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 2003). All participants will be requested for their permission to implement the study, including the children in the selected class and their parents. Names of the participants will be kept anonymous, and they will be informed that the use of video will be limited to the purposes of observation and analysis only. The participants will also be informed about the purpose of the investigation and their role in it. In short, we are seeking informed consent from all participants.

We have already been granted permission to implement the study from the Ministry of Science and also from the principal of the school in which this research will be conducted.

Information about the findings of the study will be presented to participants. The researchers will be in contact with the participants during the entire research process and answer questions that participants may have.

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## Changes made to research design during implementation

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- The purpose of the study has remained unchanged: To determine effective forms of supporting the educational inclusion process via the engagement of 1) mobile expert teams (MET); 2) cooperation between MET, teachers and teacher assistants; 3) through teacher assistants' classroom-related activity. The goal is to develop national standards for providing support to the educational inclusion process.
- Data acquisition methodology was changed and instruments for acquiring data related to differences between initial and final testing/sampling were not applied. Data was collected through the following methods: 1) observation (because it is flexible enough to incorporate an entire range of behaviours of the target student, including all the relevant details) 2) video recordings 3) focus group interviews with students and 4) semi-structured interviews with the target student's teacher and mother.

- The data analysis method was changed (original design included qualitative and quantitative data analysis). Qualitative data analysis was predominant (using NVivo 8) because it is based on data collection and processing methods which are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data is produced. Quantitative data analysis was performed on behaviour categories obtained through qualitative analysis.
- During the project, workshops proved to be of great benefit, as they enabled us to acquire new understandings that helped us further develop our research methods and implement suggested improvements based on peer review.

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