

Supporting Inclusion of Children with Special Needs

Methodology in the Pilot Study on Mobile Expert Teams

Ljiljana Igrić, Daniela Cvitković and Natalija Lisak

Introduction

The aim of this research is to scientifically evaluate efficiency of the support of a new organisational model for classroom support for the benefit of both pupils with disabilities and the whole class, focusing on 1) a mobile expert team and classroom assistants and 2) cooperation between teachers – mobile team – assistants. Croatian schools do not have the necessary conditions for inclusion because of the lack of special needs teachers in the ordinary school and teachers' lack of specific knowledge and skills concerning pupils with various difficulties and disabilities. The practice of inclusion in Croatia as in the rest of the world indicates that we need changes made in school that will provide professional support for children with special needs.

A model of inclusive support is the focus of this evaluative study. The model has been developed in the non-governmental organization (NGO) called IDEM and consists of mobile expert teams and classroom assistants. The mobile team plans activities and gives advice and supervises classroom assistants who directly provide support to the child with disability as well as the other children in class. In this study attention is particularly directed towards evaluating the teaching efficiency for pupils with ADHD in regular classes.

Research design

This study may be called a pilot study because until now there has been insufficient information concerning evaluation of the effects of the organisation of support within the regular education system that this model offers. The project provides support for the development and implementation of this model of support for educational inclusion in Croatia. Therefore, evaluation of its effects is necessary for initiating the further implementation of this support model.

This pilot study has a qualitative approach, as there are no previous studies in accordance with the model of support for educational inclusion in Croatia. Consequently, it is very important to evaluate the impact of this program, in this case on pupils with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in regular school, in order to identify deficiencies and revise the model in accordance with the findings and principal aim of developing an inclusive school. This qualitative research involves descriptive qualitative methods to understand barriers to implementing the guideline recommendations and to refine the intervention strategy to becoming useful in creating an inclusive environment for every child. This pilot study is intended to be baseline for creating further action research in the area of educational inclusion and thus develop a model of support for children with disabilities in Croatia as well as be an incentive to improve educational legislation. Action research is neither quantitative nor qualitative research, but it may use techniques that are involved in either or both of these approaches. The phases of action research are (Stringer, 1996):

- Identification of the problem
- Discussion and negotiation between researcher and practitioners
- Literature review
- Re-definition of the problem
- Selection of research and evaluation methods
- Implementation of change, data collection and feedback. This often involves revisiting earlier steps in a cyclical process of research and change
- There may be an overall review of the study, recommendations and dissemination to a wider audience

Action research typically cycles through the following phases: targeting an area of collective interest; collecting, organizing, analysing, and interpreting data; and taking action based on this information (Calhoun, 1994). Action research is a systematic process of observation, description, planning, action, reflection, evaluation, modification (McNiff & Whitehead (2002). In our research it is the

basis for the development of an inclusive environment in regular schools and for the implementation of this support model through legislative acts.

Informants

One regular primary school second grade class (8–9 yrs.) has been selected as the case school for this study. There are 25 pupils in the class, and 3 pupils have individual educational programs (IEP). An assistant mostly provides support to one boy, D, with ADHD on the recommendation of the teacher and mobile team of experts, who have estimated that this boy needs this kind of support more than other pupils.

The boy D is 9 years old at the beginning of the research project period. He is an only child. He finished first grade with excellent marks. He is excellent in abstract thinking and logical inference, in mathematics, very creative in visual art, very fast in doing tasks and capable. Pupil D has difficulties in writing and has developed resistance toward writing and rewriting. He is very motivated for success, but frustrated because of his many mistakes. He also needs frequent changes of activities and becomes very frustrated when this need isn't recognised. He shows his need for the teacher's approval and attention. Very often, he does the opposite of the learning tasks he is given. When he makes a mistake, he becomes very angry and shows undesirable behaviour. He is easily provoked and was therefore very aggressive in the first grade. He frequently causes conflicts in group work if not allowed to take the lead.

There is good cooperation between parents and school. There is general agreement that the described difficulties have made an impact on the boy's educational progress as well as personal development.

The mobile expert team has selected a graduate of some social studies program to be classroom assistant. In the selection process the team took into account the fact that the assistant needs to have personality traits that will accommodate the special needs of boy D. The assistant has prepared for the task by going through preliminary education for duration of 5 hours with additional related literature studies. During her practice she has had regular consultations and supervision with the mobile expert team.

Observations are done in the selected classroom. The team used a preliminary period of observations in the classroom in order to try out the most appropriate observation methods. In the main observation study the observers are participants, but they do not interact with the pupils. There are three observ-

ers on the team. They take account of the pupil's characteristics and needs as well as the classroom environment. Two researchers observe pupil D's actions and reactions, and the third observer observes the teacher, who is actually the class-teacher (the observation interval of each is 15 minutes, descriptive way). The fourth and fifth researchers record the work of the assistant and the general classroom atmosphere using video cameras.

Research method/s

Observations are conducted once a week during one teaching lesson and in accordance with the school schedule; every other week in the morning and biweekly in the afternoon. The observation method is divided into minute-observation intervals with one minute to take notes in between. After every observation session, the team of observers gives their comments and consolidates the information.

In addition to the observations, interviews are conducted with the assistant and teacher (approximately three times), and two interviews are conducted with the boy's mother. The interviews have been tape-recorded. Information about estimations of the pupil's progress and the impact of the mobile team and assistant are collected. There is also one focus-group interview with boy D and some of his classmates. This is also tape-recorded. They talk about their experiences with having a class assistant. Additional information is collected through school documentation and notes taken by the mobile expert team and the classroom assistant.

Analysis

We are trying to answer research questions through qualitative methods; observations/interviews/ document studies – transcripts – definition of analysis units – compression – data compaction and interpretation.

Framework analysis used in this research starts with former research and some theoretical frameworks. In this study framework analysis has been partly obtained from previous studies and predetermined categories.

In the analysis of pupil D behaviour, the categories were: appropriate – acceptable – inappropriate – interfering behaviour.

In the analysis of assistant behaviour, the categories were: communication (with pupil D, with other pupils, with teacher) and interventions- guiding, ignoring and stopping, toward pupil D and other pupils.

The intention of the analysis is to filter some components of transcripts via category system and assess relative frequency of these components (Novak & Koller-Trbović, 2005).

We have made some research ethical considerations about the way the research is conducted. One aspect that we need to clarify is the double role of the observers, who are also supervisors; therefore, there may be some subjectivity in analysis as well as in the counselling process. One important research ethical aspect is the assurance of anonymity, which we have guaranteed. Doing classroom research also has ethical aspects that need to be considered; for example, the presence of the research team in the classroom probably affects natural class dynamics.

References

- Calhoun, C. (1994). *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. NY: Wiley.
- McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J. (2002). *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. NY: Routledge Falmer.
- Novak, T. & Koller-Trbović, N. (2005). Qualitative Methodology and Qualitative Analysis /Kvalitativna metodologija i kvalitativna analiza/. In N. Koller-Trbović, & A. Žižak. (Eds.). *Participation of users in the process of needs assessment and planning of interventions /Participacija korisnika u procesu procjene potreba i planiranja intervencija: socijalnopedagoški pristup/* (64–83). Zagreb: University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences /Sveučilište u Zagrebu Edukacijsko-rehabilitacijski fakultet.
- Stringer, E. (1996). *Action Research: A Handbook for Practitioners*. London: Sage.