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## **Educational work with children and students with developmental disabilities in special educational institutions**

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary inclusive efforts are aimed at the positive use of the development capacities of each member of society, on an individual and social level, precisely on the basis of their unique specificity and contribution. In the spirit of achieving an adequate and maximally individualized approach to upbringing and education and the socialization of each individual, special educational institutions for children and students with more complex developmental difficulties are inevitable, in addition to regular ones. An inclusive approach to upbringing and education is emphasized in such special institutions, and the quality of its operationalization can be brought into relation with the existing programmatic, organizational and personnel assumptions of work, as well as models and methods of cooperation of special educational institutions with external stakeholders

on the local and broader social levels. With the aforementioned as the goal, qualitative empirical research was conducted through the method of semi-structured interviews with employees of two special educational institutions for children and students with developmental disabilities. In doing so, a non-probabilistic purposive sample was used, selecting participants with the required characteristics (N=16). In conducting the interviews, educators and teachers, as well as educational rehabilitators, who directly and daily work with children and students with developmental disabilities, and members of professional teams of special educational institutions (speech therapists, pedagogues and psychologists) where the research was conducted were involved. Therefore, the research sample included all relevant employees of special educational institutions at the level of Zadar County, with the aim of collecting data on the programmatic, organizational and personnel assumptions for the implementation of inclusion within the institutions and ways of achieving cooperation with relevant external stakeholders in an effort to adequately include children and students with developmental disabilities into their social environment. Ultimately, we can conclude that all the parameters of the implementation of quality educational inclusion of children and students with developmental disabilities monitored by the research are present at a satisfactory level with a clear tendency for their permanent development.

### **Keywords**

cooperation, difficulties in development, educational work, inclusion, social inclusion, special educational institutions

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, at the international level, inclusion has emerged as a global movement that aims to eradicate existing prejudices and prevent the creation of new prejudices against people with special needs. This is an attempt to abolish their segregation from the wider social community, often based on discrimination resulting from lack of information and misunderstanding. Therefore, inclusion is realized through the development of social and individual tolerance and positive feelings and opinions, which implies the inclusion of people with special needs in social activities and processes, especially those with developmental disabilities. At the same time, it is necessary to have an environment ready to adapt to the needs of all members of society. The aforementioned is the basic premise of creating the possibility of their equal participation in everyday life within the community, and the provision of professional support along the way is an indispensable part of well-implemented inclusive efforts.

Such an approach to upbringing and education gives each child a sense of belonging and partnership, with community members accepting the fact that individual children have different needs that need to be met, compared to other children.<sup>1</sup> We can say that inclusion is considered a conceptual requirement of modern upbringing and education for all, which emphasizes the right of every child to education in accordance with their own capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Whenever possible, inclusion takes place within regular educational institutions, whereby children with special needs are included in regular educational groups or classes. Unfortunately, this is not always achievable due to the complexity of individual diagnoses and needs, which nevertheless makes special educational institutions necessary precisely for the humane reason of meeting individual needs with the support of experts profiled to work with such groups of children, youth and adults.

Moving away from the context of regular education, inclusion implies the improvement of the living conditions of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and strives to enable people with developmental disabilities to live in the community in order to become accepted, valued, respected,

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<sup>1</sup> Lj. Igrić i sur., *Osnove edukacijskog uključivanja: škola po mjeri svakog djeteta je moguća*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb 2015.

<sup>2</sup> M. Karamatić Brčić, *Svrha i cilj inkluzivnog obrazovanja*, "Acta Iadertina" 8 (2011), pp. 39–47, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/280119> (13.07.2023).

included and to be in a position to use the same life opportunities as others.<sup>3</sup> When it is estimated that inclusion in the regular part of the educational system is not the most favorable option for an individual, attending a kindergarten or school as a special educational institution is a better option. In such cases, the advantage of separating children is manifested in pedagogical, health, social and other activities with children who have the same or similar developmental difficulties, whereby the educational program is maximally adapted to them. Thus, inclusive efforts can be successfully implemented not only in regular institutions but also in special institutions with cooperation with the narrower and wider social community, as we will see in the research results presented in the rest of the paper.

## **2. The benefit of inclusion in the context of upbringing and education**

The two basic anthropological and axiological assumptions on which the model of optimal inclusion is based are human dignity and the relationship between people. Dignity refers to respect for a person's independence and individual autonomy, as well as the principle of dependence and reliance on others, which includes adequate inclusive ethics. Inclusive principles include respect for the human subject and his condition, respect for the diversity of the human community, responsibility for the inclusion of marginalized persons, and prosocial behavior and social justice.<sup>4</sup> The importance of inclusion for the entire society can be clearly seen through the appreciation and acceptance of diversity within the social community, because each individual has his own specificity that should be accepted in society. At the level of preschool upbringing and education, the following principles are emphasized, which ensure respect for all the child's interests, possibilities and needs: flexibility of the educational process in kindergarten,

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<sup>3</sup> E. Švraka, *Inkluzija, osnovno mjerilo kvaliteta života obitelji djece s intelektualnim i razvojnim onesposobljenjima*, Fakultet zdravstvenih studija Univerziteta u Sarajevu, Sarajevo 2011, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266445449\\_INKLUZIJA\\_OSNOVNO\\_MJERILO\\_KVALITETA\\_ZIVOTA\\_OBITELJI\\_DJECE\\_S\\_INTELEKTUALNIM\\_I\\_RAZVOJNIM\\_ONESPOSOBLJENJIMA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266445449_INKLUZIJA_OSNOVNO_MJERILO_KVALITETA_ZIVOTA_OBITELJI_DJECE_S_INTELEKTUALNIM_I_RAZVOJNIM_ONESPOSOBLJENJIMA) (13.07.2023).

<sup>4</sup> *Inkluzija, različitost i jednakost u radu s mladima. Načela i pristupi. Ride project*, eds. S. Bullock, M. Brestovanský, P. Lenčo, online edition 2015, <https://rideproject.eu/media/ride-the-principles-approaches-hr.pdf> (13.07.2023).

partnership of kindergartens with parents and the wider community, ensuring continuity in upbringing and education, openness to continuous learning and willingness to develop practices and values that improve the intellectual, social, moral, spiritual and motor development of children. The values of knowledge, identity, humanism and tolerance, responsibility, autonomy and creativity are particularly emphasized (Decision on the Adoption of the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education<sup>5</sup>).

Each of the mentioned dimensions of social inclusion in the context of the educational process can be considered educational inclusion in the narrower sense,<sup>6</sup> we consider educational inclusion to be an unavoidable, perhaps fundamental, aspect of wider social inclusion.

## 2.1. Classification of difficulties in regular and special educational institutions

The term children with special educational needs means children with developmental difficulties and gifted children. Focusing on the segment of children with developmental disabilities, according to the Ordinance on elementary and secondary education of students with developmental disabilities in the Republic of Croatia,<sup>7</sup> a student with developmental disabilities is “a student whose abilities in interaction with factors from the environment limit his full, effective and equal participation in the educational process with other students, resulting from physical, mental, intellectual, sensory impairments and dysfunctions, as well as a combination of several types of impairments and disorders” (Article 2 of the Regulations).

According to the orientation list of types and degrees of developmental disabilities, the types of developmental disabilities are: visual impairments, hearing impairments, speech-voice communication disorders and specific learning disabilities, physical disability, mental retardation, behavioral disorders due to organic factors or a progressive psychopathological condition, autism and the existence of several types and degrees of difficulties in psychophysical

<sup>5</sup> Decision on the Adoption of the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education, Narodne novine 95, Zagreb, 2015, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015\\_01\\_5\\_95.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015_01_5_95.html)

<sup>6</sup> D. Bouillet, *Izazovi integrativnog odgoja i obrazovanja*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Rulebook on elementary and secondary education of students with developmental disabilities, Narodne novine 510, Zagreb, 2015, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015\\_03\\_24\\_510.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015_03_24_510.html)

development (Regulations on elementary education and education of students with developmental disabilities,<sup>8</sup> Appendix 1). Students with major developmental disabilities include students at the level of mild mental retardation with significant developmental disabilities, students at the level of moderate and severe mental retardation, students with visual impairments and significant developmental disabilities, students with hearing impairments and significant developmental disabilities, students with physical disabilities and developmental disabilities, students with organic behavioral disorders and developmental disabilities, and autistic students with influential developmental difficulties (Art. 12 of the Ordinance). At the same time, influential difficulties refer to difficulties that significantly reduce the child's ability to master the educational program of a regular primary school.

As we can see, depending on the type and degree of difficulties and the absence/existence of influential difficulties, it is necessary to adjust the educational process in accordance with the child's abilities to enable him, with adequate access to appropriate didactic materials and methods of upbringing and education, for continuous development according to his capabilities. Sometimes this type of inclusion can be achieved through regular educational institutions, and sometimes it is necessary to include children in special educational institutions.

## 2.2. Competences of educators, teachers and professional associates and the use of an individualized approach in work as a prerequisite for success

The complexity of the concept of competence is manifested through different definitions that try to explain the mentioned concept. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development<sup>9</sup> defines competence as a complex construct of different abilities from 4 basic areas: cognitive competence, the use of theories and concepts and informal knowledge developed through practice; functional competence, the ability to perform work within a specific area; personal competence, the ability to choose and model adequate behavior depending on the

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<sup>8</sup> Rulebook on elementary education and education of students with developmental disabilities, Narodne novine 697, Zagreb, 1991, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1991\\_05\\_23\\_697.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1991_05_23_697.html)

<sup>9</sup> OECD, *Education and Training Policy: Qualifications Systems. Bridges to lifelong learning*, OECD, Paris 2007.

situation in which a person finds himself; and ethical competence, the ability to act morally adequately based on developed personal and professional skills.

The complex construct of competences is based on productive general and specific knowledge with which a person successfully operates and applies them outside the educational context in everyday and professional life. In addition to the necessary knowledge and abilities related to the performance of a specific job, developed competencies also include adequately modeled values and moral behavior of the individual in a narrower and broader social and material context.<sup>10</sup> The term competence encompasses a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivation and personal characteristics that enable an individual to act actively and effectively in a given situation.<sup>11</sup> In view of the above, competences also refer to the ability to act consciously, appropriately and responsibly, and influence overall changes in the social environment, which includes adequate and effective methods acquired through upbringing and education, i.e. lifelong learning.<sup>12</sup>

Within the educational discourse, there are three types of general (generic) competences: instrumental competences that include cognitive, methodological, technical and linguistic abilities, interpersonal competences that include individual abilities such as social skills, i.e. the ability to establish social interaction and cooperation, and systemic competences that refer to the combination of understanding, sensitivity and knowledge, and imply the prior acquisition of the first two listed competencies (Tuning project<sup>13</sup>). It is relevant to create a positive atmosphere within the educational institution, which can only be done by a competent educator, teacher or professional associate who develops a sense of security, respect and support for the child as an individual, which leads to success in meeting the needs of each specific child.

<sup>10</sup> J. Vrkić Dimić, *Kompetencije učenika i nastavnika za 21. stoljeće*, "Acta Iadertina" 10 (2013) no. 1, pp. 49–60, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/280163> (15.07.2023).

<sup>11</sup> N. Hrvatić, E. Piršl, *Kurikulum pedagoške izobrazbe učitelja*, in: *Kurikulum: teorije, metodologija, sadržaj, struktura*, ed. V. Previšić, Zavod za pedagogiju Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu i Školska knjiga, Zagreb 2007, pp. 385–412.

<sup>12</sup> E. Piršl, *(Re)definicija pojma kompetencije i interkulturnalne kompetencije*, in: *Interkulturno obrazovanje i europske vrijednosti*, ed. N. Hrvatić, Odsjek za pedagogiju Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu & Visoka škola za menadžment u turizmu i informatici u Virovitici, Zagreb & Virovitica 2014, pp. 47–67.

<sup>13</sup> Tuning project, Introduction to the Harmonization of Educational Structures in Europe project, 2006. Available at: <https://dokumen.tips/documents/uskalidivanje-obrazovnih-struktura-u-europi.html?page=1>

The processes of upbringing and education are challenging tasks that require a lot of effort, understanding and guidance, and the competences of educators and teachers necessarily overlap, that is, they are connected. Every competent educator and teacher, that is, a reflective practitioner, has at its center the child with his specific needs and possibilities. Therefore, as relevant participants in the educational process with their knowledge, skills and attitudes, they focus on the whole child, emphasizing the student as an individual. Necessary competencies of educators for working with children with developmental disabilities are as follows: understanding of the child's social and emotional development, understanding of individual differences in the learning process, knowledge of techniques for quality leadership of an educational group, communication skills, knowledge of the specifics of certain developmental disabilities and difficulties in children's social integration, knowledge of the didactic-methodical approach and planning of the adapted curriculum, as well as adequate means and aids, including information technology, as well as the readiness of educators for teamwork and cooperation, etc.<sup>14</sup> The educator's ability to ensure routine, structure and predictability, to adjust his voice and speech with a look, touch or hug, to assess the optimal time for activities in educational work with children with disabilities, and to cooperate with parents and other experts is extremely important. The approach to the child should be friendly and radiate openness, honesty, and enthusiasm, encouraging motivation and self-esteem in a child with developmental disabilities. The socialization and development of social competences in such children is extremely important, which contributes to their confident inclusion in the community. Optimism and affinity for educational work with children with developmental disabilities, along with lifelong learning and permanent professional development, enable the creation of trust between the educator, the child and his family, which has a positive effect on meeting the child's needs.

Turning to the necessary competencies of teachers, according to the National Framework Curriculum for preschool education and general compulsory and secondary education,<sup>15</sup> the competencies of teachers for working with children with developmental disabilities are: knowledge of the basic knowledge and skills

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<sup>14</sup> D. Bouillet, *Izazovi integrativnog odgoja i obrazovanja*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb 2010.

<sup>15</sup> National framework curriculum for preschool education and general compulsory and secondary education, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Zagreb, 2011. Available at: [http://mzos.hr/datoteke/Nacionalni\\_okvirni\\_kurikulum.pdf](http://mzos.hr/datoteke/Nacionalni_okvirni_kurikulum.pdf)

required for working with children with developmental disabilities, knowledge of different teaching strategies and creativity, empathy, motivation, positive attitude, permanent professional development and practicing teamwork. Similar to a teacher in a preschool institution, a teacher should create a positive school atmosphere that will enable respect, appreciation and safety of children with developmental disabilities with the application of adequate work methods. The importance of social competence means emotional support for the child in the process of inclusion and successful response to social demands in accordance with specific possibilities.

The contribution of professional associates is based on professional competencies built through initial education and subsequent professional development, which, together with informal influences, lead to the professional development of professional associates during their entire working life. The competences of the educational rehabilitator are reflected in providing support to teachers in planning and evaluating the individualized curriculum of students with intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, motor disorders, visual impairment, and multiple disabilities, as well as conducting an expert assessment of the level and quality of student functioning. with developmental disabilities with the preparation of opinions and expert findings (Guidelines for working with students with disabilities<sup>16</sup>). A speech therapist, who is competent to assess difficulties using clinical measuring instruments, provides support to children in the domain of communication disorders, language and speech disorders, voice disorders, disorders of written language and mathematical abilities, specific learning difficulties and hearing impairment. A competent pedagogue is the most widely profiled expert who assesses the educational needs of children with various types and forms of disabilities by analyzing pedagogical documentation with the aim of finding adequate methodical and didactic solutions and monitors the professional development of educators and teachers related to working with children with developmental disabilities. The psychologist's competencies are reflected in the use of psychodiagnostic tools and techniques to assess the psychomotor, cognitive, and socioemotional development and adaptive behavior of students. He is also trained to provide support to children, students, educators, teachers, and

<sup>16</sup> Guidelines for working with students with disabilities, Ministry of Science and Education, 2021. Available at: <https://mzo.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Obrazovanje/Smjernice%20za%20rad%20s%20ucenicima%20s%20teskocama.pdf>

parents using different strategies and techniques with the aim of encouraging the development of self-regulation of thinking, emotions, motivation and behavior of children and students. The competences of the social pedagogue are manifested in encouraging the positive development of students, helping in cases of risky behavior and implementing and evaluating the needs for implementing individual and group interventions with children and students.<sup>17</sup>

The competence profile of an ideal pedagogue, which can be applied to other professional associates, includes the following key competences: personal (sincerity, diligence, consistency, accessibility, communicative), developmental (rationality and innovation in organizing the educational process and use of technology), professional (understanding the principles of the organization of the educational process and quality planning of educational work), interpersonal (participation in conflict resolution and acting in accordance with interpersonal relations), and action (creating conditions and removing obstacles in educational work and coordinating the work of the entire professional staff of the institution).<sup>18</sup>

Thus, together with educators and teachers, competent professional associates enable children and students to develop harmoniously, considering the difficulties they have. In addition to professional competences, personal competences that include sensitivity, love for children, optimism, etc. stand out. These enable quality educational work and adequate support for children and students with developmental disabilities to develop their personality in accordance with their own capabilities.

Meeting the individual needs of each child is a challenge in the educational system; therefore, it is relevant to act correctly in finding optimal conditions for the adequate development of each child and student, which will help them in their social inclusion in the everyday life of the community. The aim of the observation is to get to know the child with developmental disabilities as best as possible through the recognition of his potential, abilities, and limitations to enable the child's optimal development and inclusion in the community

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<sup>17</sup> Guidelines for working with students with disabilities, Ministry of Science and Education, 2021. Available at: <https://mzo.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Obrazovanje/Smjernice%20za%20rad%20s%20ucenicima%20s%20teskocama.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> J. Ledić, Staničić, M. Turk, *Kompetencije školskih pedagoga*, Filozofski fakultet u Rijeci, Rijeka 2013, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267471019\\_Kompetencije\\_skolskih\\_pedagoga](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267471019_Kompetencije_skolskih_pedagoga) (13.07.2023).

through an individualized approach modeled through an individualized educational program.<sup>19</sup>

According to Bouillet,<sup>20</sup> various elements are used to achieve the desired quality in educational work with children and students with developmental disabilities, namely, the selection of educational content and the achievement and verification of learning results, the use of visual didactic tools (photos, drawings, symbols, visual presentations, etc.) and auditory didactic tools (conversations, audio books, picture books, software that converts text into words, etc.), the use of kinesthetic didactic methods (touching objects, pictures, objects, models, frequent movements, etc.) and different forms of expression (art, drama, music), with competent educational workers as primary creators and bearers of the educational process.

### 3. Research methodology

Inclusion is not always possible within regular educational groups or classes, given the severity and complexity of developmental difficulties that individual children and students have. Therefore, it is necessary to include them in the process of inclusion within special educational institutions. All children have the right to education and integral development, so children with developmental disabilities should not be neglected, but their specific needs must be met within their individual capabilities and the personality of each child should be respected by respecting diversity.

#### 3.1. The aim of the research

The goal of the research is to identify and analyze the programmatic, organizational and personnel assumptions of inclusion in special educational institutions, as well as their cooperation with key external stakeholders, in order to examine the adequacy of the inclusion of children and students with developmental disabilities in upbringing, education and the social environment. i.e. community life.

<sup>19</sup> S. Zrilić, *Uloga pedagoga u integriranom odgoju i obrazovanju*, "Magistra Iadertina" 7 (2012) no. 1, pp. 89–100, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/147094> (16.07.2023).

<sup>20</sup> D. Bouillet, *Inkluzivno obrazovanje, odabrane teme*, Učiteljski fakultet, Zagreb 2019.

### 3.2. Research tasks

Based on the aforementioned goal, using the semi-structured interview method conducted with educators, educational rehabilitators-educators, teachers and professional associates in special educational institutions, 4 research tasks were set:

- (1) identify program assumptions for the inclusion of children and students with developmental disabilities,
- (2) identify the organizational assumptions for the inclusion of children and students with developmental disabilities,
- (3) analyze the personnel assumptions for the inclusion of children and students with developmental disabilities,
- (4) analyze the models and ways of cooperation of special educational institutions with external stakeholders with the aim of implementing the inclusion of children and students with developmental disabilities.

### 3.3. Research method and instrument

Regarding the goal and tasks of the research, a qualitative method of interviewing was used in data collection using a semi-structured interview instrument created exclusively for the purposes of this research. Conducting a semi-structured interview was chosen as the best and most appropriate methodological scientific approach to collecting relevant information, as it allows a detailed and in-depth insight into the research topic. It is a targeted conversation in which the examiner, in addition to obtaining basic information related to the research tasks, encourages respondents to express their opinions and feelings about a certain topic while maintaining flexibility in the conversation, achieving completeness of data with the possibility of clarifying questions and asking sub-questions.

The semi-structured interview included the following 4 thematic categories: program assumptions of inclusion, organizational assumptions of inclusion, personnel assumptions of inclusion and cooperation with external stakeholders in the inclusion process. According to the mentioned categories, there were specially grouped questions for programmatic and organizational assumptions of inclusion for educators, educational rehabilitators-educators and teachers on the one hand, and for professional associates (pedagogue, psychologist, speech therapist) on the other hand, considering the specifics of their jobs. For the categories of personnel assumptions of inclusion and cooperation with

external stakeholders in the inclusion process, the questions were the same for all respondents.

### 3.4. Participants and research location

In the research, a non-probabilistic purposive sample was used by selecting participants with the required characteristics. Part of the population of employees of two special educational institutions was targeted, taking into account the spectrum of different jobs of experts engaged in working with children with developmental disabilities. The sample consisted of 3 teachers, 3 educational rehabilitators-educators, a psychologist and a speech therapist at the Latica Kindergarten and 6 teachers, pedagogues and speech therapists at the Voštarnica Elementary School. There were a total of 16 interviewees, that is, 8 interlocutors from each special educational institution: 6 educators and 2 members of the kindergarten/school professional team.

Latica Kindergarten and Voštarnica Elementary School in Zadar are the only special educational institutions that provide specialized professional help and support to children with developmental disabilities in Zadar County, in the Republic of Croatia. Latica Kindergarten<sup>21</sup> implements special educational and rehabilitation programs in accordance with the needs, type and degree of difficulty of the child, with the application of appropriate methods for children of early and preschool age with developmental difficulties, and encourages inclusion and participates in its realization. The mission is to carry out daily activities while ensuring the conditions for a quality life of a child with developmental disabilities in the environment of their community. The vision is to ensure the conditions for encouraging communication, social, emotional, intellectual and physical development, i.e. providing professional support to children with developmental disabilities and their families for inclusion in the regular environment, new forms of learning and appropriate forms of schooling, and the Inclusive educational- rehabilitation support program. Voštarnica Elementary School<sup>22</sup> provides primary school education for students with severe developmental disabilities, where the educational work is based on special curricula and programs, adapted to the individual needs and abilities of students, who strive to acquire permanent and applicable knowledge and competencies

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<sup>21</sup> Latica, <https://www.dv-latica.hr/o-nama.html>

<sup>22</sup> Voštarnica Elementary School, <http://www.os-vostarnica-zd.skole.hr>

necessary for life. By carrying out this qualitative research in the mentioned special educational institutions, the adequacy of the involvement of children and students with developmental difficulties in educational processes and the life of the social community at the level of Zadar County, within the Republic of Croatia, is detected.

### 3.5. Method of research implementation

The research was conducted in May 2022 live with the respondents. The average duration of the interview was 35 minutes. With the prior oral consent and consent of the respondents, an audio recording was used during the semi-structured interview with guaranteed anonymity of each respondent in compliance with all ethical principles and rules for the purpose of data protection in accordance with the ethical standards of qualitative research. This made it possible to process the obtained data through 3 basic steps of qualitative analysis: categorization-reduction-arrangement.

## 4. Results and discussion

The research revealed different assumptions, forms of implementation, as well as the opinions of respondents about the inclusion of children and students with developmental disabilities in special educational institutions. The interlocutors generally emphasized a positive attitude towards inclusion, referring to the acceptance of diversity, empathy, tolerance of society and equality in all areas of society (extracurricular activities, free time, etc.). They pointed out that inclusion implies the inclusion of children with disabilities in the social community from preschool age, which is relevant for strengthening social competences and lifelong learning, meeting individual needs and enabling the optimal development of children's potential. At the same time, children and people of "typical" development learn about diversity by developing awareness towards "different" people and respecting human individuality. Thus, the inclusion model stimulates the development of the entire community by giving each of its members an important role and by being respected. This emphasizes that diversity between individuals, which manifests itself in the variety of individual strengths, abilities and needs, is socially natural and desirable. Satisfaction with one's life

and acceptance by the people we are surrounded by are key elements necessary for quality of life.<sup>23</sup>

In the continuation of the paper, the results of the research are presented, structured according to the research tasks and coordinated with the thematic categories according to which the interview was conducted.

**Table 1.** Program assumptions of inclusion

LATICA KINDERGARTEN	VOŠTARNICA PRIMARY SCHOOL
educational-rehabilitation program in the group (special programs), IERP (Inclusive educational-rehabilitation support program), <sup>24</sup> program of regular educational groups	special programs: program for students with mild intellectual disability, moderate and severe intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder (with individualized procedures in the classroom and for acquiring competences in activities of daily life and work with individualized procedures in the educational group)
9 educational-rehabilitation groups (special groups) of 3–5 children each and 3 regular educational groups of 16 children each, 57 children included in IERP	2 combined classes (6 and 3 students), 26 educational groups (13 with students who have moderate, severe and severe intellectual disabilities and 13 with students who have an autism spectrum disorder), 1 PSP (Extended professional procedure) <sup>25</sup>

In addition to the data shown in Table 1, the research showed the existence of a wide range of difficulties for children who attend the mentioned educational institutions, as well as a tendency for a significant increase in disorders from the autism spectrum. The respondents expressed their satisfaction and positive opinion about the *program assumptions of inclusion* within the special institutions where they are employed, emphasizing the adequacy of the program, the importance of group activities, the development of socialization, the education of students for auxiliary occupations, the acquisition of competences in the activities of everyday life. All interlocutors actively participate in the development of the Curriculum and Work Plan and Program of the Latica Kindergarten,

<sup>23</sup> J. Cvetko, M. Gudelj, L. Hrgovan, *Inkluzija*, "Diskrepancija" 1 (2000) no. 1, pp. 24–28, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/32356> (18.07.2023).

<sup>24</sup> Children attend regular kindergartens, but come to the Latica Kindergarten for separate therapies (rehabilitation treatments).

<sup>25</sup> According to the State Pedagogical Standard of the Elementary School Education System (Available at: [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008\\_06\\_63\\_2129.htm](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008_06_63_2129.htm)), extended professional procedure as a professional assistance program for students with special educational needs includes help in mastering educational content and rehabilitation programs, i.e. health procedures and treatments for children with developmental disabilities.

as well as the School Curriculum and the Outline and Implementation Curriculum for the educational group/class department based on the prescribed Curriculum and Programs at Voštarnica Elementary School. They participate in designing daily activities for each child as well as weekly, monthly and annual work plans and programs, and emphasize the relevance of an individualized approach to each child because with adaptation to the child's individual needs and capabilities, he will show his maximum (through a sense of achievement, satisfaction in work, encouraging self-confidence and motivation). However, they note that the Voštarnica Elementary School lacks a basic program for students with severe and multiple disabilities to adequately approach them inclusively in educational work. Thus, they have developed an awareness of the importance of adequate inclusive action towards all children and students, regardless of what and how complex the difficulty in development is. In this way, they show personal sensitivity and affinity towards educational work with students with difficulties, which, as we emphasized in the theoretical part, are some of the basic assumptions of quality work with this group of children and students.

According to the State Pedagogical Standard of Preschool Education,<sup>26</sup> work programs for children with disabilities are conducted with children aged six months until starting school, by including children in educational groups with a regular program, educational groups with a special program or in special institutes. According to the National Pedagogical Standard of the Primary School Education System,<sup>27</sup> special educational institutions work according to special curricula and are organized for compulsory primary schooling of children with disabilities and may have a smaller number of classes, i.e. they may organize combined class departments. Based on the data presented in Table 1 and those presented in the following analysis, we can conclude that the work of the Latica Kindergarten, as well as the Voštarnica Elementary School, complies with the legal standards related to the basic program organization of work prescribed at the national level.

Continuing on the program assumptions of inclusion, *organizational assumptions of inclusion* include specific roles and tasks of educational workers, material equipment of special educational institutions, didactic materials, methods, and forms of work. The contribution of the members of the institution's professional

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<sup>26</sup> State Pedagogical Standard of Preschool Education, Narodne novine 2128, Zagreb, 2008, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008\\_06\\_63\\_2128.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008_06_63_2128.html)

<sup>27</sup> State Pedagogical Standard of the Primary School Education System, Narodne novine 2129, Zagreb, 2008, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008\\_06\\_63\\_2129.htm](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008_06_63_2129.htm)

team is indispensable. Research has shown that the psychologist's role is manifested in observation when enrolling a child in kindergarten, monitoring the child's psychophysical development, helping educators and advising parents. The role of the speech therapist is reflected in the observation and follow-up of the child with difficulties, preparation and reporting to the educator about the child's speech-language and communication difficulties, finding adequate ways of the child's communication in the immediate and wider social community (due to incorrect pronunciation, difficult communication or lack of speech at all), providing professional support, counseling and participate in the creation of Individual educational programs. The pedagogue has the role of supporting teachers and students, individual work with students, systematic observation of work in educational groups, participation in planning and organization of activities, communication with parents, cooperation with other institutions. All professional associates emphasized the importance of conducting workshops with parents, which also act as support groups. They noted that the workshops were limited in one period due to the pandemic working conditions. Concrete examples of workshops are: How to read stories to children?, How to encourage the development of speech and graphomotor skills?, UNICEF's Let's grow together program, Workshop on emotions, and Conflicts in friendship. Speech therapy workshops are intended to familiarize parents with children's speech and language development, the use of games to encourage the development of pre-skills in reading and writing using a digital speech therapy exercise book. As the basic obstacles in educational work, the interviewees pointed out work with parents, in some cases. Namely, there are parents who have a hard time coping with the difficulty of their child and who give up very quickly, etc. The next difficulty is the lack of time to implement everything that is considered useful and not only necessary.

The interlocutors emphasized their general satisfaction with the material equipment of special educational institutions with the aim of meeting the child's needs. In addition to the above, they show a marked aspiration towards permanently better and higher quality material equipment through the effort to follow trends and modern standards of appropriate material equipment of specific institutions. In their work, for example, they use adapted assistive technology, an interactive wall, means for assisted communication, a sensory room (equipped with a diffuser with essential oils, different lamps, etc. with the aim of relaxing or achieving the necessary sensory stimulus), a kinesiotherapy hall, as well as an outdoor playground (equipped with various devices for various purposes, polygons, etc.). They also emphasized their satisfaction with the

specific didactic tools and aids available and their quality. Specialized audiovisual and manipulative didactic tools and aids, specific applications on a computer, tablet or smart board, certain materials of the Montessori program, wooden inserts, puzzles, toys that simulate the operation of household appliances and devices (e.g. mixer and coffee machine, mini kitchen, etc.), picture books, sports props, musical props, sound communicators, social cards, sound balls, balls and balance aids and coordination of movements, with tactile discs, sleeping bags, different mirrors for monitoring facial motility, balls of different sizes, weights and structures, etc. Educators, educational rehabilitators-educators and teachers themselves make additional materials from cardboard, crepe paper, wood, corks, Velcro, make sensory bottles, shapes for *Lego* blocks, number blocks, tactile letters, letters on tiles, small books, communication thumbnails, etc.

**Table 2.** Methods of working with children with developmental disabilities

<b>TEACCH</b>	organization of space intended for structured learning; room divided into different zones, e.g. small oval tables for individual work and a larger table for group activities, game corner, quiet corner, etc.
<b>Marte Meo</b>	carrying out unstructured activities through free children's play with the intention of supporting children's initiatives and wishes
<b>Floortime</b>	intended for children with autism; acquiring new skills on the ground in order to communicate with the child at his level
<b>ABA method</b>	application of behavior analysis, intended for learning new skills (can be broken down into simpler steps, and can also be used in group work with adjustments); application in the case of crisis situations with expressed undesirable forms of behavior with the aim of suppressing them
<b>PECS</b>	communication through images; communication books; for "non-verbal" children

The results of the research showed that the methods of educational work are adapted to the individual needs of each child. Their selection is based on educational recommendations resulting from professional observation and set goals, depending on the type and degree of difficulties, but also on further assessment of the student's abilities, needs and interests of the specific child, his age, behavior, results of interviews with parents, etc. The basic methods used in working with children with developmental disabilities are shown in Table 2. Individual work is represented here, although, whenever possible, the child tries to be included in group work in order to additionally work on the development of his social skills. Given the fact that special institutions use different teaching strategies for children and students with developmental disabilities compared to those

in regular classes, each child and student with developmental disabilities needs an individualized approach, so the selection of didactic methods and work tools is focused on helping specific children and students in successfully acquiring the necessary knowledge and abilities (Radenović, Smiljanić, 2007). This means that the methods and means of work are continuously adjusted depending on the needs of the specific child. Consequently, didactic tools and aids must meet the tasks to fulfill the needs of children, and the criteria for procurement, determined by pedagogical standards at the preschool and elementary school levels, are: developmental appropriateness, durability, ease of use, technological modernity, adaptability to students with developmental disabilities, attractiveness etc. (State Pedagogical Standard of Preschool Education;<sup>28</sup> State Pedagogical Standard of Primary School System of Education<sup>29</sup>). The results of the presented research showed that the standards of quality work in this matter were satisfied, as well as the effort of their permanent modernization.

Regarding the *personnel assumptions of inclusion*, the research showed that the educational staff places great emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning, permanent and professional development, exchange of examples of good practice and the importance of work experience, professional reflection, group support, supervision, education, workshops, seminars, webinars and learning through direct work with children and students. We must bear in mind that each new generation of children brings with it novelties, as well as the need for new work methods, which requires permanent professional development of professional staff in accordance with changes in science, but also the wider social and material context. The interlocutors pointed out that conferences, county expert councils, congresses, expert symposia, etc. contribute to the improvement of their competences. and to attend at least two to a maximum of ten different forms of professional training per year. During the pandemic, trainings took place in an online environment (webinars) via the *Zoom* application and similar. In the Latica Kindergarten, part of the respondents expressed the disadvantage of holding workshops and educations in an online environment due to the pandemic working conditions, while in the Voštarnica Elementary School, all the respondents expressed satisfaction with the educations conducted online,

<sup>28</sup> State Pedagogical Standard of Preschool Education, *Narodne novine* 2128, Zagreb, 2008, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008\\_06\\_63\\_2128.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008_06_63_2128.html)

<sup>29</sup> Državni pedagoški standard osnovnoškolskog sustava odgoja i obrazovanja, *Narodne novine* 2129, Zagreb, 2008, [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008\\_06\\_63\\_2129.htm](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008_06_63_2129.htm)

emphasizing their better accessibility precisely because of the online way of their implementation. The respondents emphasized the extreme importance of teamwork and cooperation between professional associates (pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists) and educators/educational rehabilitators-educators/teachers due to consistency in educational work, common motivation, coordinated work on set goals and sharing experiences of good practice. In addition to formal and non-formal learning, the significance and contribution of informal forms of learning, as well as the importance of teamwork and cooperation, were highlighted. At the same time, the professional role of the pedagogue who provides support, gives advice and proposes solutions for specific situations was highlighted. The interviewees emphasized that through mutual communication and exchange of information in cooperation with experts of various profiles (including, in addition to the previously mentioned professional associates, also physiotherapists, health managers, nurses, kinesitherapists, etc.), it is possible to solve specific problems they encounter in their work (health, emotional, behavioral problems) and at the same time be additional support for children and parents. In making decisions at joint meetings, an interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary approach is emphasized. Testimonies of the respondents testify to the understanding of the basic idea and significance of the mentioned approaches, intensive mutual cooperation, high-quality implementation of teamwork, as well as adequate permanent professional development of the employees of the special institutions where the research was conducted. In support of this, the respondents, based on their experiences and opinions, highlighted the main elements of quality communication listed in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Elements of quality communication

• openness	• ability to listen	• understanding
• confidence	• constructive criticism	• joint decision-making
• flexibility	• two-way communication (dialogue)	• recognition of competence
• accepting other people's opinion	• respect	• professional reflection
• non-verbal forms of communication	• consideration	• good interpersonal relations
• tolerance	• positive attitude	• communication skills
• psychological safety of expressing opinions	• teamwork	• putting the child and parents in focus

Voštarnica Elementary School has a Quality and School Culture Team that holds communication workshops and various forms of teambuilding. Considering the increase in the number of children with developmental disabilities, the results of the research showed the need to employ more specialists in the Voštarnica Elementary School, mainly speech therapists, kinesitherapists, psychologists, and teachers-educational rehabilitators. In their absence, some teachers are employed as non-professional substitutes. In Latica Kindergarten, a part of the respondents, including the pedagogue, share the opinion about the necessity of additional employment of educational rehabilitators, physiotherapists, nurses, speech therapists, and psychologists, given the lack of such a professional profile in the said institution. Permanent learning is a new educational task articulated through a system of lifelong learning and in various forms of social cooperation, for example, between students and teachers, children and educators, and with each other and professional associates.<sup>30</sup> The results of the conducted research showed that employees within the examined special educational institutions are not only aware of this but also often and willingly participate in various forms of specialized training permanently aimed at improving existing and building new general and specific competencies, therefore, aimed at permanent professional employee development.

Regarding the *cooperation of special educational institutions with key external stakeholders with the aim of implementing educational inclusion*, the interviewees emphasized the general importance of such forms of cooperation due to the sensitization, empathy and tolerance of the public for children and students with developmental disabilities. In inclusive interaction, members of the narrow and wider public also expand their experiences and potentials, acquire new knowledge and develop new practical skills in relation to children/students with developmental disabilities, their parents and employees of special educational institutions. The interviewees emphasized the importance of cooperation with regular kindergartens and primary and secondary schools, the positive contribution of visits to cultural institutions (museums, the Zadar Puppet Theater, libraries, etc.) and public and economic institutions of the city of Zadar (e.g., fire brigades, Čistoća Zadar, etc.).

Within the framework of the analysis of the models and methods of cooperation of special educational institutions with key external stakeholders with the

<sup>30</sup> V. Previšić, *Pedagogija: prema cjeloživotnom obrazovanju i društvu znanja*, "Pedagogijska istraživanja" 4 (2007) no. 2, pp. 179–186, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/174880> (30.07.2023).

aim of implementing the inclusion of children and students with developmental disabilities, the interviewees particularly emphasized the importance of cooperation with parents as the basis of quality work, presenting the types and forms of said cooperation (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Types and forms of cooperation between educational staff and parents

COOPERATION WITH PARENTS	
TYPES OF COOPERATION	FORMS OF COOPERATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• professional support through partnership with parents</li> <li>• advisory and educational cooperation</li> <li>• informal cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• direct communication (in and outside the institution) and technologically mediated communication (telephone conversations, communication via social networks, e.g. Viber, WhatsApp): daily communication due to the consistency of work on new knowledge, skills and common development goals for the child</li> <li>• cooperation in institutions (permanent or occasional, according to needs): individual interviews, educational workshops, parent meetings, interviews, professional lectures, etc.</li> <li>• cooperation outside institutions (occasional): e.g. joint half-day trips, participation in various events, etc.</li> </ul>

The interviewees especially emphasized that their work becomes the most difficult and demanding when parents do not accept their child's difficulties, which prevents quality cooperation as well as the child's optimal progress. Fortunately, these situations are relatively rare in practice, and quality partnership is most often achieved in working with parents. The relations between parents and employees of an educational institution are determined through mutual interaction in the institution and outside it (including the family home) with the aim of achieving the well-being of the child in his development, with the division of responsibilities and the provision of professional support and assistance. The aforementioned relationships also imply cooperation with the child's narrower and wider social and material environment.

Any quality relationship that includes the triad: family—educational institution—local community, is characterized by mutual help, good interpersonal relations and quality communication, respect for ethical values etc.,<sup>31</sup> and the

<sup>31</sup> M. Ljubetić, *Od suradnje do partnerstva obitelji, odgojno obrazovne ustanove i zajednice*, Element d.o.o., Zagreb 2014.

local community encourages cooperation on regional, national and international projects.<sup>32</sup> The results of the research showed that children and students with developmental disabilities participate in various events (Zadar flower, Zadar reads, Masquerade, Valentine's Day, Days of Bread, exhibitions in the Zadar Science Library), art and drama activities, creative and dance workshops in the Duke's Palace. There are also joint cooking activities in collaboration with other schools, trips to the market, shops, pharmacies, ponyland, etc. Cooperation with Čistoca Zadar in the project of collecting corks for the procurement of medicines for people suffering from leukemia is being realized. Children with developmental disabilities participate in sports activities at the national level (e.g. sports games in Poreč), as well as in the international race World Run, which has been held continuously once a year in the city of Zadar since 2014. They are also engaged in various workshops, activities and exhibitions organized for the holidays, reading stories in the Zadar City Library together with children and employees of all other kindergartens in the city of Zadar. The pandemic period was no exception, as children with disabilities were involved in various joint activities organized online, such as reading fairy tales, virtual exhibitions, etc.

**Table 5.** Examples of cooperation between special educational institutions and the local community

COOPERATION WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY (AT THE CITY AND COUNTY LEVEL)	
	Examples of cooperation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Kindergarten birthday celebration</li><li>• participation in the Day of extracurricular activities in the center of the old town (Kalelarga)</li><li>• decorating the Christmas tree in the Zadar City Administration</li><li>• awarding of awards/medals from sporting events in Zadar County or in the City Theater (HNK—Croatian National Theatre)</li><li>• arrangement of a sensory park suitable for children with developmental disabilities in the Vruljica city park (Inclusive Play project)</li><li>• etc.</li></ul>	

The interviewees emphasized the importance of cooperation with the City of Zadar and Zadar County, citing examples of specific activities (Table 5), but also emphasizing their indispensable financial contribution to the work, which

<sup>32</sup> L. Štefulj, B. Kušević, *Suradnja obitelji, škole i lokalne zajednice – pedagozi u double bindu*, “Školski vjesnik” 70 (2021) no. 1, pp. 399–413, <https://doi.org/10.38003/sv.70.1.14>, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/382374> (28.07.2023).

is manifested through the provision of material support through the financing of certain educations, extracurricular activities, participation of employees in project activities, etc. In addition to the above, the research showed the involvement of special educational institutions in various projects at the national and higher levels. The Inclusive Play project is part of the Interreg—IPA CBC project, which is characterized by cross-border cooperation with the neighboring countries of the Republic of Montenegro and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Latica Kindergarten participated in the mentioned project, which was also involved in the Water project. Voštarnica Elementary School participated in a number of projects, such as: the ASIQ project to improve the availability and accessibility of health and social services (assistive technology, sensors); the ATTEND project, which enabled the acquisition of communicators for children; the S factor project in cooperation with schools from the neighboring countries of Slovenia, Hungary and Austria, as well as countries from Scandinavia, where they received the award for the best inclusive video; the LiDraNo project (within the manifestations of literary, dramatic and journalistic creativity for primary and secondary school students, which are held throughout the Republic of Croatia at the city/municipal, county and state level); STEAM project; INKAZ in Zagreb (meeting of cultural and artistic groups with developmental disabilities). In addition to the mentioned projects, they also took part in sports events, the Student Cooperative and the cooking project at the national level. All of the above shows the extremely active engagement of children from the Latica Kindergarten and the students of the Voštarnica Elementary School from Zadar, as well as their employees, in various and numerous activities, primarily at the local city and county level, but also at the national, regional and even international levels., all with the aim of active and immediate inclusion of children and students with developmental disabilities, their parents and employees of special educational institutions in the life of the wider social community, i.e. creating a common inclusive environment.

## 5. Conclusions

The cooperation of professional associates with educators and teachers provides complete support for children with developmental disabilities. The cooperation of educators and teachers with pedagogues, social pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists and educational rehabilitators enables the complete

development of each child in the educational group, as well as students in the classroom. Inclusion in a broader sense is considered to be the relationship between an individual and society and vice versa, and this type of inclusion can be called social inclusion. There are three interdependent dimensions of social inclusion: spatial (disappearance of social and economic distance), relational (feeling of belonging and acceptance, desire to participate and perform useful social roles, which includes reciprocity in treatment and positive social interactions) and functional (increasing opportunities, abilities, competence). The results of the research showed the respondents' satisfaction with the program assumptions of the implementation of inclusion within special institutions whose employees, emphasizing their adequacy, personal engagement in the creation of specific curricula, and showing personal sensitivity and affinity towards educational work with the population of children and students with pronounced developmental difficulties. In addition to the above, the research showed that within special institutions, the legal standards prescribed at the national level, which touch on the program assumptions for the realization of inclusion, are respected. The basic elements of the organizational assumptions for the implementation of quality educational inclusion are the individual approach in specific methods and ways of working adapted to the needs of each individual child, based on the results of professionally conducted observations. The methods and means of work are continuously adjusted depending on the needs of the specific child, and the work is carried out in adequately equipped spaces adapted to the needs of children with different forms and types of developmental difficulties, with an emphasized tendency towards their permanent modernization. The respondents emphasize the importance of lifelong permanent professional development for quality work performance and participate in at least 2 to 10 different forms of professional development per year. Teamwork and cooperation between professional associates and educators, along with an emphasized inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary approach, are extremely important in the implementation of educational inclusion. The results of the research show a satisfactory level of satisfaction of the personnel assumptions for the implementation of inclusion, with the need for additional employment of experts of various profiles to work with children with developmental disabilities. Identified forms of cooperation of special educational institutions, their wards and employees, including parents of children and students with developmental disabilities, with external stakeholders with the aim of achieving quality educational inclusion through its diversity, temporal dynamics and crossing local levels up to the national

level, including international ones, primarily show the respondents' developed awareness of the value and necessity of the mentioned forms of cooperation due to sensitization, empathy and the achievement of public tolerance, as well as the active involvement of special employees of educational constitutions in the life of the narrow and wider social community.

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