# Some Aspects of Collaboration in Inclusive Education – Teachers' Experiences

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∽    The main aim of the present article is to analyse some aspects of collaboration in inclusive educational practice in Croatian schools by analysing teachers' experiences. Special attention is devoted to the professional support resources available to teachers, as well as to teachers' views on the content and usefulness of the professional support they utilise. The article presents partial results of a larger research project regarding various components of inclusive practice in Croatian primary schools, organised at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb. A total of 69 primary school teachers were interviewed regarding the elements of inclusive practices in their own schools. Each teacher also completed a short questionnaire about their opinions on elements that weaken inclusive practices in their school, as well as on some general data about schools. The data obtained were analysed on both the qualitative and the quantitative levels. The results suggest that, at the present time, collaboration in Croatian schools is not well organised and defined. It is shown that only a relatively small number of various professionals who could support teachers and students in inclusive processes work in schools. Furthermore, it is established that schools do not compensate for this problem with stronger collaboration between schools and professionals in local communities. Teachers would like to receive more specific advice, as well as more concrete assistance in the education of students with disabilities. The author concludes that a better conceptualisation of collaboration between schools and local communities is needed (especially a higher level of team work). This would certainly contribute to improving the quality of inclusive education in Croatian schools.

**Keywords:** Collaboration; Inclusive education; Teachers' experiences; Professional support

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# Izbrani vidiki sodelovanja v inkluzivnem izobraževanju – izkušnje učiteljev

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V prispevku so na podlagi analize izkušenj učiteljev predstavljeni izbrani vidiki sodelovanja v inkluzivnem izobraževanju v hrvaških šolah. Posebna pozornost je namenjena virom strokovne podpore, ki je na voljo učiteljem, ter njihovim mnenjem glede vsebine in uporabnosti obstoječih oblik podpore. Prispevek predstavi delne izsledke širšega raziskovalnega projekta o različnih komponentah inkluzivne prakse v hrvaških osnovnih šolah, ki ga je izvedla Pedagoška fakulteta v Zagrebu. O elementih inkluzivne prakse na šoli je bilo intervjuvanih 69 učiteljev. Vsak je izpolnil tudi kratek vprašalnik o lastnem pogledu na elemente, ki negativno vplivajo na inkluzivno prakso njihove šole, ter o šoli podal nekaj osnovnih podatkov. Izvedeni sta bili kvantitativna in kvalitativna analiza vseh podatkov. Na podlagi izsledkov lahko sklepamo, da trenutno sodelovanje pri inkluzivnem delu v hrvaških šolah ni dovolj dobro organizirano in definirano. V šolah je prisotnih le malo strokovnjakov, ki bi lahko učiteljem in učencem nudili podporo pri inkluziji. Ugotovimo tudi, da šole za nadomeščanje tega primanjkljaja ne sodelujejo s strokovnjaki v lokalnih skupnostih. Učitelji bi želeli bolj specifične nasvete in konkretnejšo pomoč pri izobraževanju otrok s posebnimi potrebami. Avtorica ugotavlja, da je potrebna boljša konceptualizacija sodelovanja med šolami in lokalnimi skupnostmi (še posebej višja raven timskega dela), kar bi prispevalo k izboljšanju kakovosti inkluzivnega izobraževanja v hrvaških šolah.

**Ključne besede:** sodelovanje; inkluzivno izobraževanje; izkušnje učiteljev; strokovna podpora

## Introduction

It is well known that, over the last three decades, school populations have become increasingly diverse, with students coming from a broad range of cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, language environments and family structures, as well as having a wide range of abilities (Meadan & Konda-Amaya, 2008). Providing a quality education for all students in an inclusive setting is therefore acknowledged as the most challenging issue in education today (Amer et al., 2009). Although the principle of inclusion has received a good degree of consensual support in society as a whole, there has been much less agreement about whether this principle can be realised in practice (Farrell et al., 2007).

Providing adequate care and education for children with disabilities in an inclusive context is a complex issue. Each child confronts health and education professionals with a diversity of individual problems in the physical, psychological, social and educational domains (Nijhuis et al., 2007, p. 196). Teachers and other education professionals support students in acquiring academic skills, as well as in developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students need to become caring and compassionate citizens.

It is obvious that inclusive education requires a high quality of service, well-trained teachers, support personnel and material resources. Moreover, collaborative schools are at the heart of inclusive education. Such schools promote cooperative relationships, not only in school but also between school and the whole community. Authors agree that "the essence of inclusive education is a joint vision producing the necessary changes, transformations, improvements and new directions, guidelines as well as the outcomes representing the benefit for all the subjects involved and the entire society, as well. It is a process that brings together people, ideas, systems, communications, technologies..." (Pavlović & Šarić, 2012, p. 511).

As is stressed in *Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education* (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2009, p. 22), support structures that impact upon inclusive education are diverse and often involve a range of various service professionals, approaches and working methods. At the same time, support structures that promote inclusive education are coordinated both within and between various sectors (education, health, social services, etc.) and teams of support personnel. In addition, considering students' needs holistically, such support structures should promote an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the knowledge and perspectives of various areas of professional expertise.

An important role in supporting inclusive education is therefore played by teamwork, exchange of experiences, partnership in schools and developing positive relationships between all educational actors (Mărgărițoiu, 2010). Berlin (2010, p. 1315) explains that, in executing tasks, teams are regarded as being more focused than groups. This means that "all team members need to know what should be achieved jointly, and be given clear information on what can be solved collectively. The task should be clear so that all team members understand their own initiative." However, researchers have highlighted various obstacles – both structural and cultural in nature – to collaboration between professionals from different sectors of society. In a review of the relevant literature, Widmark et al. (2011, p. 2) stressed that "the structural barriers include differences in the regulatory, financial, and administrative boundaries, and the cultural impediments consist of the various ways that the needs of individuals are considered, which are often a product of educational and organisational cultures." Rose (2011) has identified problematic power dynamics, poor communication patterns, and a poor understanding of roles and responsibilities as obstacles to successful interprofessional collaboration, resulting in boundary infringements and conflict due to differences in approaches.

On the other hand, evidence also suggests that diversity in teamwork promotes innovation, which has multiple positive effects, such as a higher level of creativity in problem solving (Voutsas, 2011). "Through collaboration, ideas can be shared, new and better strategies can be developed, problems can be solved, students' progresses can be better monitored, and their outcomes are evaluated effectively." (Lee, http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu). Thus Widmark et al. (2011) point out that collaboration should be seen as a tool for achieving users' objectives. This is, however, impossible if managers and personnel do not have a clear understanding of the factors that impede or promote collaboration, and if the professionals involved lack motivation, mutual trust and common interests. Collaborative, interprofessional cooperation can be defined as "a process which includes communication and decision-making, enabling a synergistic influence of grouped knowledge and skills." (Bridges et al., 2011, p. 2). The same group of authors point out the following elements of collaborative practice: (1) responsibility, (2) accountability, (3) coordination, (4) communication, (5) cooperation, (6) assertiveness, (7) autonomy and (8) mutual trust and respect. This means that true collaboration is demonstrated only in teams in which the goal is clearly established, decision making is shared, and all of the members feel that they are respected and that their contributions are valued.

Salisbury (1994, by Atta et al., 2009, p. 281) suggested that "collaborative problem solving to promote inclusive education is typically carried out

between teachers and other support professionals who get together to solve specific problems, usually concerning a student or group of students, focusing on classroom-based interventions increases the students' chances for success." Assistance might involve interactions between classroom teachers and speech and language specialists, school psychologists, specialists in visual and auditory impairment, special education specialists, or other professionals (pedagogues, social pedagogues, etc.). This is the case in Croatia, where around 3% of all students in primary schools have some developmental difficulties (Croatian Bureau of Statistic, 2011).

### Inclusive education in Croatia

In Croatia, new inclusive policy was introduced within the legislative framework in the form of the new Law on Education in Primary and Secondary School (Official Gazette, 87/08, 86/09, 92/10, 105/10, 90/11, 5/12, 16/12). Compared with earlier legal solutions, this legislation introduces numerous improvements in the educational process of children with special educational needs (hereinafter: SEN). According to the new Law, all schools are obliged to care for the basic needs of all students, to develop conditions for their healthy psychological and physical development as well as social wellbeing, to prevent behavioural disorders in students, to care for the safety and success of every student, etc.

The intention of the legislator is to ensure that the educational needs of all children in primary and secondary schools are satisfied. An attempt is made to ensure the necessary assumptions for the adaptation of didactic and methodical ways of teaching students with SEN. For example, students with SEN have the right to delayed school attendance, to individualised and adapted programmes, to additional courses, to rehabilitation, to professional interventions, to teaching at home or in hospital, etc. Furthermore, the Law promotes collaboration between all participants of the educational process (including parents), as well as collaboration between schools and local medical and social institutions, especially regarding the rehabilitation of children with SEN. School counsellors in schools are pedagogues, psychologists, experts in the field of special education and rehabilitation (rehabilitators, speech therapists or social pedagogues) and librarians. Every school with 16 or more classes must have a pedagogue, a psychologist and a librarian in full-time employment. Given that there is an average of 30 students per class, one additional school counsellor can be employed for each 500 students. In smaller schools, either the relevant professionals are employed on a part-time basis or the services of mobile teams based in larger schools are sought. A rehabilitator, social pedagogue, speech therapist or other professional can be employed according to the needs

of the school, especially taking into account the number of students with SEN. Although the Law does not specify the obligations of counsellors in detail, it is stressed at a general level that they are responsible for educational work with students, as well as for coordination and professional developmental activities.

National Pedagogical Standards for Elementary Education (Official Gazette, 63/2008, 90/2010) have also been adopted. These standards reduce the number of students in classes that include students with SEN, as well as establishing a maximum three students with SEN per class. Generally, the number of students in each class is reduced by two students for each student with SEN included in the class. The Standards also foresee new actors in the inclusive education process, such as mobile teams, teaching assistants, sign language interpreters, etc. Mobile teams are made up of professionals of various profiles. They are active on the local level and are established where the need for such a team exists, subject to approval from the Ministry of Education. Teaching assistants are professionals who are qualified to work with children with SEN, including students with behavioural disorders and other minority students. A school with more than 20 students with SEN in regular classrooms can either employ an assistant or obtain the assistance of professionals from the local community. The assistant can be a person who has only completed secondary education, on the condition that he or she has attended a special educational programme for working with students with SEN. The role of the assistant is to provide individual help to students according to the instructions of teachers or school counsellors. In practice, assistants are employed if the local community is able to finance them.

As is evident, the Law respects the contemporary approach to students in inclusive educational situations by promoting conditions that ensure that children with SEN can attain the required standards of knowledge, abilities and skills. This approach also includes various kinds of collaborative work on the part of school counsellors and professionals from local communities.

A question arises, however, regarding the level at which the Law is implemented in educational practice, due to the fact that it is unknown whether the conditions for its proper implementation exist in all schools. Earlier research conducted in Croatia provides an insight into the quality of inclusive education in Croatia. For example, Stančić et al. (2011) emphasise that the main obstacles in inclusive education in Croatia are inadequate material conditions and lack of professional support to teachers (school counsellors, assistants etc.), as well as insufficient education of teachers to work in inclusive conditions. Ljubić and Kiš-Glavaš (2003) indicate that attitudes of teachers in Croatian schools towards inclusive practice need to be improved. Other research shows that although teachers have positive attitudes towards the process of inclusion,

they are less positive about the conditions of work and the implementation of educational inclusion (Dulčić & Bakota, 2008).

Conditions for inclusive education in Croatian schools vary considerably between schools, due to the fact that the statutory provisions have not yet been specified by relevant regulations. Thus, the number and quality of school counsellors in the inclusive education process depend on the willingness and ability of local communities to support the work of the various professionals. If the required number of experts does not exist in a particular school, school staff use the services of professionals in the local community, typically employees of social welfare centres, health centres or other public institutions. Although their collaboration is regulated by various laws, it depends primarily on the practices of the particular local community.

With this point of departure in mind, the main goal of the present article is to analyse certain aspects of collaboration in inclusive educational practice in Croatian schools by analysing teachers' experiences. Special attention is devoted to the professional support resources available to teachers, as well as to teachers' views regarding the content and usefulness of the professional support that they utilise. This goal is achieved by: (1) investigation of the availability of various professionals; (2) analysis of the types of professional support available to teachers; (3) analysis of the satisfactory and unsatisfactory aspects of collaboration in inclusive practice (according to the experiences of teachers); and (4) analysis of teachers' attitudes to inclusive education regarding the various characteristics of teachers and classes/schools. The article presents the partial results of a larger research project regarding the various components of inclusive practice in primary schools in Croatia, organised at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb.

## Methodology Description

### Participants

The participants of the research were 69 teachers in primary schools in Zagreb and Zagrebačka County. Teachers were selected on the basis of their consent to participate in the research. In order to protect the anonymity of participants of the research, original data about the schools are only available from the author.

Of the 69 participating teachers, 10 teach in the first grade, 15 in the second, 23 in the third, 17 in the fourth and 4 in combined classes. The schools in which they teach differ considerably in a number of ways: in terms of their size, the number of students in classes and the number of integrated students with SEN, as well as in terms of the level of cooperation developed among school staff. The average number of classes per school for the first four grades is 12.04,

with a high standard deviation (5.560) due to the fact that the smallest school has only 3 such classes, while the largest has 24. Accordingly, the research sample was drawn from schools with an average of 248.06 students aged 6–10 years. Here the standard deviation is even greater (128.792), due to the fact that only 31 students attend the smallest school, while 504 students attend the largest school. The number of students per class varies from 6 to 34, with an average value of 20.10 (standard deviation = 5.399). Teachers also vary considerably in terms of their professional experience. The youngest teacher has only 1 year of experience, while the oldest has taught for 39 years (mean = 20.45, standard deviation = 5.399).

Most of the teachers have one student with SEN in their classes (37 teachers), while 9 teachers have two such students. Unfortunately, 9 of the teachers have 3 or more students with SEN in their classes, while there are 14 teachers who do not currently teach children with SEN. It is, however, important to note that all of teachers who participated in the research have experience in the education of students with SEN.

### Instruments

For the purposes of the present research, a protocol for interviewing teachers and a questionnaire were constructed. Both instruments were developed in collaboration with students of the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb and the professor of Inclusive Pedagogy,[2] based on the McGill Inclusive Questionnaire.[3] The protocol contains general data about schools and teachers, about the experiences and competencies of teachers in the field of inclusive education, about the types of professional support available to teachers, and about teachers' opinions and assessments of the quality of inclusive educational practice. The analysis included questions related to the availability of various professionals to teachers (a pedagogue, a psychologist, a rehabilitator – special education teacher, a speech therapist, a social pedagogue, a special nongovernmental organisation – NGO), as well as about access to types of professional support that teachers receive in their everyday work. Teachers' responses describing their attitudes towards inclusion were also used.

After the interview, each teacher completed a short questionnaire about their opinion on elements that weaken inclusive practice in their school. The questionnaire contains 19 variables describing circumstances that can weaken the quality of inclusive practice in schools, according to the opinions of students.

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2    The professor is author of the present article.
3    http://www.learnquebec.ca/export/sites/learn/en/content/pedagogy/insight/documents/bl_questionnaire.pdf

Each variable had four possible answers: "not at all", "partially", "mainly yes" and "fully yes". Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the Questionnaire is .815. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy for factor analysis of the questionnaire is .651. Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant at the level of .000 (Chi-Square is 413.759). Principal Component Analysis of the questionnaire with varimax rotation extracts 7 interpretative components that explain 70.717% common variance. The rotated component matrix of the factor analysis is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Rotated component matrix of the Questionnaire on the Weaknesses of Inclusive Education*

| Variables | Components | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Lack of understanding of students' SEN by the school administration. | .79 | | | | | | |
| Lack of understanding of students' SEN by legislators. | .84 | | | | | | |
| Insufficient number of teachers with regard to the number of students with special needs in the school. | .42 | | | | | | |
| Inadequate physical conditions in schools. | | .81 | | | | | |
| Large number of students in classes. | | .61 | | | .55 | | |
| Unavailability of adapted didactic resources. | | .60 | .45 | | | | |
| Unavailability of professional support to teachers. | | | .78 | | | | |
| Inability to include students in the required intervention. | | | .69 | | | | |
| Lack of teacher competence to work with students with SEN. | | | .57 | | | | |
| Complexity of the procedure for determining difficulties. | | | .45 | | | .45 | |
| Negative attitudes of school staff towards inclusion. | | | | .75 | | | |
| Negative attitudes of regularly developed students towards students with SEN. | | | | .84 | | | |
| Inadequate financial compensation for the efforts of teachers. | | | | | | .81 | |
| Excessive expectations of legislators regarding teachers. | | .47 | | | | .55 | |
| Low socialisation skills of students with SEN. | | | | | .81 | | |
| Unwillingness of parents to accept teachers' advice. | .47 | | | | .61 | | |
| Inability to work with students with disabilities and other students simultaneously. | | | | | .45 | | .68 |
| Negative attitudes of parents of regularly developed students towards students with SEN. | | | | .48 | | | .62 |
| Lack of understanding of SEN of students in the community. | .44 | | | | | | .61 |

Based on the data presented in Table 1, it is possible to conclude that the Questionnaire on the Weaknesses of Inclusive Education covers the following areas: administrative obstacles (1st factor), organisational and technical obstacles (2nd factor), obstacles related to professional support to teachers and students (3rd factor), negative attitudes towards students with SEN in school (4th factor), lack of teachers' external motivation (5th factor), difficulties associated with the characteristics of students (6th factor), and negative attitudes towards students with SEN in the local community (7th factor).

Generally, the data collected in the research relate to the impressions of teachers on the quality of collaboration in inclusive education in their schools. Thus the data do not present objective reality, but rather the subjective perception of elements of collaborative and inclusive practice in Croatian schools.

*Procedure*

The analysis uses data from research regarding various components of inclusive practice in primary schools in Croatia. This research was organised at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, within the framework of the subject "Inclusive Pedagogy". The purpose of the research was to analyse circumstances that affect the quality of inclusive education in primary schools. The interviewers were third year teacher education students of the Faculty of Teacher Education of the University of Zagreb. Following the aforementioned protocol, each student was assigned the task of interviewing one teacher from one primary school about his/her experiences regarding inclusive practices in his/her school. After the interview, which lasted approximately 45 minutes, the students had to make an accurate written record of their conversation. They were trained to conduct interviews within the framework of the subject Inclusive Pedagogy. Data were collected in the winter of 2012, with a total of 77 interviews being conducted. Some of the interviews were excluded from the analysis due to their low quality. These were interviews with missing data, with questions that were not foreseen in the research protocol, with answers that were not comprehensible, etc. A total of 69 interviews (90%) were included in the final analysis.

The collected data were analysed on the qualitative and quantitative levels. Firstly, certain quantitative data regarding the availability of various experts and expert's NGOs are presented, followed by the results of qualitative analysis of the interviews. Teachers' opinions on elements that weaken inclusive education practice are presented on the manifested level, through the averages of their answers. Linear regressions of the impact of different characteristics of teachers and classes/schools on the teachers' attitudes were performed on

the previously extracted factors of the questionnaire. These characteristics are: teachers' work experience, number of classes and students in school, number of students and students with SEN in classes, numbers of professionals employed in school, and teachers' attitudes regarding inclusive education.

The process of qualitative analysis in the research includes the following steps: (1) transcribing of the interviews, (2) determining units of coding, (3) compression, (4) assignment of related concepts of the categories, and (5) analysis and interpretation of the meanings of the defined categories. Some examples of this procedure are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Examples of editing concepts to the level of abstraction*

| Statements of the Participants – Units of Coding | Compression | Categories |
|---|---|---|
| "The pedagogue calls the student at least once a week. The student stays there for one hour. There *they practice some educational theme* and he talks to the pedagogue so he can discover *which kind of methods are appropriate for this student*. This means that he tries to discover ways that will *help the student to develop his abilities as well as to satisfy his needs*." | educational conversation with student support of student | work with students with SEN |
| He also *organises workshops for students* and he tries to *teach them how to help* a student with disabilities." … "The social pedagogue and I work together on *devising workshops for adopting better behaviour*. Together, we create flyers and posters for nonviolent conflict resolution." | support of peers education of students | workshops with students |
| "We collaborate in *the initial assessment of students*. In this processes, we define the *abilities, skills, interests and problems of a student* with SEN. He also helps me to *develop and implement an individual educational plan*. I can count on the pedagogue to help me if I have some difficulties in teaching some students."; | assessment of students with SEN developing individual educational plan (IEP) implementation of IEP | identification of students with SEN realisation of IEP |
| "My opinion is that *we do not collaborate enough*. I do not like the fact that experts are available to us *only if we request them*. They should educate our assistants because they are not able to do a quality job." | lack of collaboration | dissatisfaction with collaboration |
| "I think that *we should employ a social pedagogue*, due to the fact that we have more and more children with behavioural problems. These students cause a lot of problems for the whole school, especially for other students." | unavailability of social pedagogue in school | unavailability of professional help |

Following the model described above, 9 categories of types of support offered to teachers by school counsellors were formed, along with 5 categories of satisfactory and 3 categories of unsatisfactory aspects of collaboration in inclusive

practice, as well as 3 categories of teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. All of the defined categories are discussed in the next section of the present article.

## Results

### Collaboration with professionals (school counsellors)

The main task of teachers in inclusive education is to educate students with SEN, as well as to help them with social integration in the school environment. The successful realisation of this task implies the availability of the professional support of various experts for teachers, parents and students, thus ensuring a range of support and services that provide all students with genuine access to general education. Table 3 presents data on the availability of such support to the teachers who participated in our research.

**Table 3.** *Availability of various professionals to teachers (n = 69)*

| Source of professional support | Not at all | Just in school | Just in local community | In school, as well as in local community |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pedagogue | 8 | 56 | 0 | 5 |
| Psychologist | 32 | 28 | 5 | 4 |
| Rehabilitator (special education teacher) | 37 | 24 | 8 | 0 |
| Speech therapist | 28 | 16 | 20 | 5 |
| Social pedagogue | 53 | 10 | 5 | 1 |
| Special NGO | 52 | 1 | 8 | 8 |

Based on the data presented in Table 3, it is possible to conclude that one pedagogue works in almost every school. Only schools in small communities lack a pedagogue, and these schools are connected with main schools in larger communities (so-called "regional schools"). All other professionals are less present in schools. In this regard, it is important to note that the relatively small number of special education teachers, psychologists and social pedagogues employed in schools is not adequately compensated for by a higher level of cooperation with such specialists in local communities. Teachers collaborate slightly more only with speech therapists who work in the local community. There is also a relatively small number of schools in which certain specialised programmes of non-governmental organisations are implemented. Moreover, 27 teachers stated that they would like to have the help of an assistant, while only 17 teachers reported having the support of assistants in teaching.

Table 4 shows information about types of support that teachers receive from school counsellors, especially in the process of education of students with SEN. Due to the fact that many professionals help teachers in various ways, the sum of possible responses is greater than the number of teachers participating in the research.

**Table 4.** *Categories of types of support of school counsellors*

| Categories | Pedagogue (n = 61) | Psychologist (n = 37) | Rehabilitator (n = 32) | Speech therapist (n = 41) | Social pedagogue (n = 16) | Special NGO (n = 17) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Work with students with SEN | 23 | 14 | 15 | 21 | 7 | 9 |
| Work with parents | 23 | 10 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 5 |
| Consulting of teachers | 22 | 18 | 13 | 5 | 5 | 3 |
| Realisation of IEP | 17 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Workshops with students | 16 | 14 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 1 |
| Education of teachers | 10 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 5 |
| Collaboration with the local community | 6 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Identification of students with SEN | 7 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Dissatisfaction with the collaboration | 6 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 |

An analysis of the responses of the teachers interviewed shows that teachers have very different experiences of collaboration with *pedagogues*. Most teachers say that pedagogues help them through individual work with parents and students, as well as through consulting, support and conversations with teachers. Another important role of pedagogues is holding pedagogical workshops in classes. Significantly fewer teachers said that pedagogues educate them. Collaboration with the local community is recognised just in 6 cases. Unfortunately, some teachers said that the pedagogue does not help them at all, while other teachers report that pedagogues have just a supervisory role in school.

Many of the teachers interviewed think that a *psychologist* helps them through consulting and support, as well as through concrete assistance in their everyday work. Most teachers recognise the psychologist's role in the processes of identification of students with various difficulties. A relatively large number of teachers also recognise that the individual work of the psychologist with students and parents is helpful, while education of teachers is less present. Some

teachers state that it is helpful when the psychologist presents workshops in their classes and participates in the assessment of students with SEN. Only a few responses reveal aspects of the collaboration of psychologists with the local community, as well as aspects of the collaboration of teachers with psychologists in the local community. There are also some teachers who are not at all satisfied with the level of collaboration with the psychologist.

The main aspects of collaboration between teachers and *special educator teachers* (*rehabilitators*) are individual work with students and concrete assistance to teachers. Some teachers also stressed that rehabilitators help them when they work with parents of students with SEN, and in the development of individual educational curricula. Other aspects of collaboration (education of teachers, collaboration with the local community and direct work with whole classes) are rarely present in the teachers' responses. Three teachers also stressed that special educator teachers help them by working in special classes with students with SEN.

The main type of support of *speech therapists* is individual work with students. All others aspects of collaboration are less present. Interestingly, some teachers enjoy good collaboration with speech therapists from the local community, while other teachers initiate collaboration between parents, students and the speech therapist. Speech therapists also support teachers by giving them advice. However, some teachers believe that speech therapists do not collaborate enough.

The attention of *social pedagogues* who work in schools is also mostly directed towards individual work with students, but they are also involved in working with parents, teachers, and entire classes. A similar situation is evident regarding the activities of *special NGOs* that implement their programmes in schools. These organisations are also very active in individual work with students, as well as in work with parents, in the education of teachers, and in providing direct assistance to teachers. The aforementioned analysis is illustrated by the quotes presented in Table 5.

Generally, based on the data presented in the above analysis, it is possible to conclude that professional support to teachers by various professionals depends primarily on the availability and breadth of the expert team in the particular school. Professionals are therefore often called upon to undertake a job that does not normally fall within their area of expertise, especially if there is no rehabilitator (special education teacher) in the school. Furthermore, it is evident that most professionals spend the majority of their working time in direct contact with children, while significantly less energy is directed towards educating teachers.

**Table 5.** *Illustrative quotes regarding types of support of school counsellors*

| Categories | Quote |
|---|---|
| Work with students with SEN | "The rehabilitator helps me a great deal to work with students with developmental difficulties; he gives me advice, and he works individually with these students because, unfortunately, I do not have enough time for them."<br><br>*Teacher with 30 years of work experience ( 3rd grade, 25 students, one student has ADHD)* |
| Work with parents | "I find collaboration with an NGO to be the most useful. The members of the NGO work with students and parents individually, according to their specific needs."<br><br>*Teacher with 20 years of work experience (3rd grade, 20 students, one student has cerebral palsy)* |
| Consulting of teachers | "He helps me through conversation, with advice, as well as through professional intervention."<br><br>*Teacher with 21 years of work experience (4th grade, 26 students, one student has dyslexia and dysgraphia, and another student has ADHD)* |
| Realisation of IEP | "The rehabilitator helps me to work with a student who has visual impairment. He prepares educational materials for the student in Braille, and he controls the student's work in Braille."<br><br>*Teacher with 20 years of work experience ( 3rd grade, 20 students, one student is blind)* |
| Workshops with students | "Members of an NGO have come to school with guide dogs several times. They have also educated our students about the life of people with visual impairment. Then the children wrote greeting cards for them in Braille."<br><br>*Teacher with 17 years of work experience (2nd grade, 14 students, one student has dyslexia and dysgraphia)* |
| Education of teachers | "The social pedagogue consults us and intervenes in the case of violent behaviour by some students."<br><br>*Teacher with 38 years of work experience (2nd grade, 25 students, one student has Down Syndrome)* |
| Collaboration with the local community | "... He also collaborates with professionals from the local community when they have to observe our students due to the special treatment that some students need. The pedagogue is often our guest in the class and he helps me a lot."<br><br>*Teacher with 30 years of work experience (1st grade, 25 students, one student has intellectual difficulties)* |
| Identification of students with SEN | "The psychologist participates in the identification and diagnosis of difficulties and plans interventions for such problems."<br><br>*Teacher with 15 years of work experience (1st grade, 22 students, one student has multiple developmental disorders)* |
| Dissatisfaction with collaboration | "I do not feel that the pedagogue helps me or other teachers. He does not have time and he only cares about his job."<br><br>*Teacher with 9 years of work experience (1st grade, 14 students, one has dyslexia and dysgraphia)* |

The categories of satisfactory and unsatisfactory aspects of collaboration, in the opinion of teachers, are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.** *Categories of satisfactory and unsatisfactory aspects of collaboration*

| Categories of satisfactory aspects of collaboration | Number of responses from teachers (n = 67) |
| --- | --- |
| Individual help to students | 31 |
| Team work (advising, exchanging information, consulting) | 15 |
| Availability of school counsellors | 14 |
| Help in collaboration with parents | 7 |
| Education of teachers | 6 |
| Categories of unsatisfactory aspects of collaboration | Number of responses from teachers (n = 67) |
| Unavailability of experts in school | 34 |
| Low level of activity of school counsellors | 23 |
| Low level of communication between teachers and school counsellors | 22 |

As is evident from Table 6, teachers find that direct work with students is the best aspect of their collaboration with school counsellors. A significant number of teachers also recognise the value of team work involving teachers and various professionals. At the same time, some participants in the research stated that only one expert worked at their school, and were unable to elaborate a specific area of their collaboration. On the other hand, there are teachers who emphasise the importance of mutual respect and supplementing the competencies of teachers and other professionals. The following examples illustrate teachers' opinions (Table 7).

When teachers were asked about aspects of collaboration that they would like to improve, the responses were predominantly directed towards the lack of availability of professional support. Teachers also mentioned that they would like to receive more concrete help in working with students with SEN, to get more information about students' SEN, and to have a greater degree of collaboration with their school counsellors. Examples of teachers' responses are presented in Table 8.

**Table 7.** *Illustrative quotes regarding satisfactory aspects of collaboration*

| Category | Quote |
|---|---|
| Individual help to student | "I think that the rehabilitator does the best job, because he works with students individually and helps those students learn throughout the school year."<br><br>*Teacher with 20 years of work experience (2nd grade, 23 students, one student has ADHD, one has behavioural disorders, and one has visual impairment)* |
| Team work | "I enjoy collaborating with the speech therapist and psychologist because we exchange information about students and their difficulties and together try to find the best way to help them."<br><br>*Teacher with 20 years of work experience (1st grade, 28 students, one student has ADHD, and another has behavioural disorders)* |
| Availability of school counsellors | "Only a pedagogue works in our school. Therefore, it is the only support that I can receive."<br><br>*Teacher with 26 years of work experience (1st grade, 27 students, one student has intellectual difficulties)* |
| Help in collaboration with parents | "We collaborate with parents better if we are prepared and have a common attitude regarding some problems."<br><br>*Teacher with 20 years of work experience (1st grade, 28 students, one student has language difficulties, and one has Asperger's Syndrome)* |
| Education of teachers | "I would single out the collaboration with a pedagogue who gives me advice about appropriate didactic approaches to students with SEN."<br><br>*Teacher with 29 years of work experience (4th grade, 22 students)* |

**Table 8.** *Illustrative quotes regarding unsatisfactory aspects of collaboration*

| Category | Quote |
|---|---|
| Unavailability of experts in school | "I would like to have more specialists in our school, such as psychologists, because we have a lot of students with psychological difficulties. It does not seem feasible for some other expert to work with them."<br><br>*Teacher with 20 years of work experience (3rd grade, 18 students, one student has ADHD)* |
| Low level of activities of school counsellors | "It would be best for experts to work individually every day with a student with SEN. This would allow the teacher to work more with other students. Nowadays, without an expert's help, the teacher has to give more attention to the student with SEN, while others are ignored."<br><br>*Teacher with 18 years of work experience (4th grade, 19 students, one student has intellectual difficulties and language difficulties)* |
| Low level of communication between teachers and school counsellors | "I would like to collaborate more with the speech therapists who work in the local community with my students. Some of them are not predisposed towards collaboration because they do not know what it means to work in a classroom."<br><br>*Teacher with 20 years of work experience (3rd grade, 22 students, one student has dyslexia and dysgraphia)* |

In view of teachers' opinions, there appears to be significant room for improving collaboration in inclusive education. Firstly, it is clear that teachers would like to have more professionals in their schools. At the same time, they would like to improve the level of collaboration, both between professionals who work in schools and between professionals and teachers. Generally, our data show that teachers prefer direct work with students and concrete assistance provided to teachers, as well as concrete advice for teaching students with SEN. The analysis also shows that collaboration between schools and the local community in the field of inclusive education appears to be on a very low level. We therefore need better conceptualisation of inclusive education, as well as better conceptualisation of collaboration between the various actors in this process. This is confirmed by the attitudes of teachers on inclusive education, as shown in the next section.

### *Opinions of teachers about inclusive education*
Teachers' responses to the question "In general, what do you think about inclusive education?" can be divided into three groups. The smallest group of teachers does not support inclusive education at all, while the groups of teachers who support inclusion conditionally or fully are equally large (Graph 1).
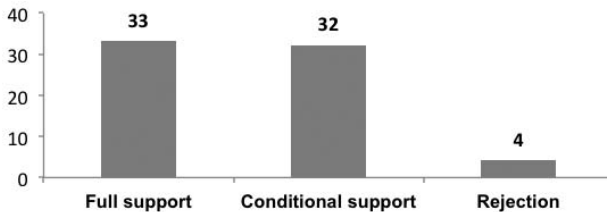


*Graph 1.* Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education

In the majority of cases, the point of departure of the teachers who support inclusive education fully is children's rights, while teachers who support inclusive education conditionally typically believe that schools are not ready for the diversity that inclusion brings to classes. Table 9 presents some examples of teachers' opinions regarding inclusive education.

**Table 9.** *Illustrative quotes of teachers' opinions regarding inclusive education*

| Category | Quote |
|---|---|
| Full support | "I think that living together is good for all of us. Gifted children, regularly developed children, as well as children with disabilities will build a future together. So, I do not see any reason for them not to be together in school. Such life and work encourages tolerance and assertive behaviour, which is the only right way towards a better future."<br><br>*Teacher with 29 years of work experience (4ᵗʰ grade, 22 students)* |
| Conditional support | "My opinion is not 'yes' or 'no'. It depends on the type of disability. We are not able to deal with some disabilities in our school because we do not have the necessary equipment, we have too many students in classes and parents have unrealistic expectations. At the same time, some difficulties require the teacher's full attention and concentration, so the other students are automatically deprived. Not to mention children who, due to their difficulties and behaviour, are dangerous for the rest of the school."<br><br>*Teacher with 24 years of work experience (3ʳᵈ grade, 18 students, one student has ADHD)* |
| Rejection | "I think that students with dyslexia and dysgraphia can attend school with others, but students with a high level of problems (like ADHD) should go to a special institution."<br><br>*Teacher with 30 years of work experience (3ʳᵈ grade, 25 students, one student has ADHD)* |

Table 10 shows the average values of teachers' opinions regarding the weaknesses of inclusive education.

**Table 10.** *Weaknesses of inclusive education, in the opinion of teachers (arithmetic means – M; standard deviations – SD)*

| Weaknesses | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Unavailability of professional support to teachers. | 3.20 | .797 |
| Large number of students in classes. | 3.00 | .924 |
| Unavailability of adapted didactic resources. | 2.96 | .812 |
| Inability to include students in the required intervention. | 2.96 | .812 |
| Lack of teacher competence to work with students with SEN. | 2.94 | .784 |
| Complexity of the procedure for determining difficulties. | 2.91 | .870 |
| Inability to work with students with disabilities and other students simultaneously. | 2.88 | .890 |
| Inadequate physical conditions in schools. | 2.75 | .976 |
| Unwillingness of parents to accept teachers' advice. | 2.74 | .869 |
| Insufficient number of teachers with regard to the number of students with SEN in the school. | 2.72 | 1.013 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Excessive expectations of legislators regarding teachers. | 2.62 | .972 |
| Inadequate financial compensation for the efforts of teachers. | 2.61 | 1.101 |
| Lack of understanding of SEN of students in the community. | 2.51 | .797 |
| Low socialisation skills of students with SEN. | 2.41 | .792 |
| Negative attitudes of school staff regarding inclusion. | 2.32 | .947 |
| Negative attitudes of regularly developed students regarding students with SEN. | 2.31 | .885 |
| Negative attitudes of parents of regularly developed students regarding students with SEN. | 2.28 | .765 |
| Lack of understanding of students' SEN by legislators. | 2.26 | .934 |
| Lack of understanding of students' SEN by the school administration. | 1.94 | .873 |

From the data shown in the Table 10, we can conclude that the factor most responsible for the relatively low level of inclusion quality, in the opinion of teachers, is "the lack of professional support to teachers". A significant number of teachers are also unhappy with the opportunities for involving students with SEN in early professional interventions, as well as with the number of students in each class, and with the lack of adapted didactic materials. The data also show that there are a considerable number of teachers who believe that they are not able to work both with students with SEN and other students at the same time. Some teachers also believe that it would be useful for there to be a larger number of employed teachers, that the space in schools is not adapted, etc.

According to the results of linear regressions, the aforementioned teachers' attitudes are statistically significantly dependent on the teachers' work experience, as well as on the number of classes and students in the school. Interestingly, they are not dependent on the numbers of students and students with SEN in classes, the number of school counsellors, or teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. Linear regressions are made on the factors of the questionnaire regarding the weaknesses of inclusive education. Table 11 presents the statistically significant results of linear regressions.

**Table 11.** *Weaknesses of inclusive education according to teachers' work experience and school size*

| Factors | Teachers' experience[1] | | | Number of students in school[2] | | | Number of classes in school[3] | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Beta | t | Sig. | Beta | t | Sig. | Beta | t | Sig. |
| Administrative obstacles | .086 | .741 | .462 | -.090 | -.781 | .438 | -.229 | -2.041 | .046 |
| Organisational and technical obstacles | -.135 | -1.168 | .248 | .298 | 2.568 | .013 | .195 | 1.744 | .087 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Obstacles related to professional support to teachers and students | -.189 | -1.641 | .106 | -.046 | -.396 | .693 | -.020 | -.180 | .858 |
| Negative attitudes towards students with SEN in school | -.106 | -.917 | .363 | -.237 | -2.049 | .045 | -.259 | -2.314 | .024 |
| Lack of teachers' external motivation | .004 | .037 | .971 | -.116 | -.989 | .327 | -.113 | -1.010 | .317 |
| Difficulties associated with the characteristics of students | .365 | 3.162 | .002 | .320 | 2.759 | .008 | .267 | 2.383 | .020 |
| Negative attitudes towards students with SEN in the local community | -.088 | -.759 | .451 | -.142 | -1.220 | .228 | -.163 | -1.455 | .151 |

Notes:

1    Sum of squares = 1136.72; df = 7; Mean Square = 162.388; F = 2.289; Sig. = .039

2    Sum of squares = 286180.750; df = 7; Mean Square = 40882; F = 2.255; Sig. = .011

3    Sum of squares = 564.146; df = 7; Mean Square = 80.592; F = 3.106; Sig. = .007

As is evident, teachers with more work experience are more likely to emphasise difficulties associated with the characteristics of the students. These characteristics, as well as organisational and technical obstacles, are seen as a greater problem in schools with a larger numbers of students. At the same time, administrative, organisational and technical obstacles are more evident in schools with a larger number of classes. Such results suggest that experienced teachers and smaller schools have more capacity for better inclusive education, especially regarding respect for student diversity and the organisation of the required collaboration.

## Concluding remarks

The main goal of the present article was to analyse some aspects of collaboration in inclusive educational practice in Croatian schools, according to teachers' experiences. Teachers stressed their own opinions about various aspects of collaboration that they practice in their everyday work in an inclusive setting.

The data suggest that, at the present time, collaboration in Croatian schools is neither well organised nor well defined. Firstly, it is shown that a relatively small number of school counsellors, who could support teachers and students in the process of inclusion, work in schools. Furthermore, it is established that schools do not compensate for this problem with stronger collaboration between schools and professionals in local communities. Instead, in

most schools, the professionals employed attempt to undertake all of the jobs arising from the SEN of students. It seems that collaboration between schools and the local community in the inclusive education process is based on the individual collaboration of some parents of students, especially regarding the rehabilitation required by particular students. Teachers are also sometimes involved in collaboration, but not frequently enough. The analysis also shows that nowadays in schools there is a higher level of tolerance, with significantly fewer teachers rejecting inclusion due to the students' characteristics and to unfavourable attitudes towards inclusion. However, some teachers still do not believe that all children, regardless of their ability or disability, are valued members of the school and classroom community. Earlier research also suggests that there are teachers working in Croatian schools who do not support inclusive education, and that such attitudes depend on various factors. Among them, the most important factors are attitudes towards the learning process, the quality of support that teachers receive in the inclusive process, and additional education on the needs of students with SEN (Kiš Glavaš & Wagner Jakob, 2001).

Based on the results of our study, it is possible to conclude that teachers expect more support in their work with students with SEN. They would like to receive more specific advice, as well as more concrete help in the education of students with disabilities. This stems from their evaluation of the best aspects of collaboration, as well as from an analysis of their attitudes regarding circumstances that diminish the quality of inclusive education in Croatian schools. Generally, teachers would like to participate in team work, which would benefit all of the participants in the process of inclusive education. The value of team work in inclusive education has been pointed out by other researchers; for example, research conducted by Vučković (1997, reported by Stančić & Kudek Mirošević, 2001) demonstrates that team work of school counsellors (such as rehabilitators) and teachers with parents of children with SEN has an important role in the quality of inclusive education. This team work includes thematic parent meetings, counselling for parents, instructions for working at home, etc. Unfortunately, such team work is inadequately developed and presented in Croatian schools.

At the present time, many teachers, children and parents do not have access to adequate support, nor to early psychosocial and rehabilitative interventions. Deficiencies in collaboration are recognised in other Croatian research. Lukaš and Gazibara (2010) conducted a survey on the sample of 183 parents from eight Croatian primary schools, in which more than half of the parents reported that they did not know whether a certain model of cooperation with a pedagogue was offered in the school.

It is reasonable to assume that a higher level of cooperation between schools and local communities would reduce this discrepancy. However, according to the results of our analysis, such collaboration will not arise without additional incentives and regulations.

It this sense, we agree with Anderson-Butchler et al. (2008, p. 169), who stress that "community partnerships and collaboration include formal arrangements schools can make with individuals, associations, private sector organisations, or public instructions to provide a program, service, or resource that will help support student achievement. These community partnerships are used to enhance both the programs and services offered at the school and to increase resources for both the school and the community partners." However, "collaborative cultures do not just arise by a kind of emotional spontaneous combustion; they have to be created and sustained" (Thornton, 2006, p. 193).

Of course, there are limitations to the present study, such as the appropriateness of the sample, the investigation of the subjective opinions of teachers, the lack of a control group of professionals, etc. It would, therefore, not be justified to unreservedly generalise the results. Nevertheless, the findings of our research clearly indicate that teachers expect more support in the process of inclusion, both in a qualitative and a quantitative sense. Such support is essential to teachers due to their insufficient competence to work with students with disabilities, but also because of the unified educational and rehabilitation interventions often required by these students. Improved conceptualisation of collaboration between schools and local communities would certainly contribute to the quality of inclusive education in Croatian schools, in particular the promotion of team work in every school and local community.

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