

Chapter XXXI

TEACHER COMPETENCIES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND RESOURCES FOR THEIR IMPROVEMENT

Daliborka R. Popović

*University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Science
State University of Novi Pazar, Serbia*

Jelena D. Đurđević Nikolić*

University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Science, Serbia

Vera M. Divac

University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Science, Serbia

Abstract: Knowing the importance of teachers' competencies for inclusive education and the fact that the vast majority of them have not had the opportunity to develop them in the initial [undergraduate] education, the aim of this work is to determine the competencies of teachers for inclusive education and to examine the possibilities for their improvement. For research requirements a questionnaire was created. The study was carried out in January 2018 and encompassed 70 teachers of primary and secondary schools in Kragujevac. The general findings that teachers have assessed their competencies for inclusive education as low and that they mapped the difficulties they face in inclusive practice, point to a conclusion about the generally developed awareness of the importance of competencies for inclusive education, the need for their improvement and the efforts made by them in that direction. Through suggestions of activities that represent significant resources for inclusive education empowerment, teachers emphasize the importance of exchanging experiences with colleagues and the occasional involvement of mentors in immediate school practice, while the greatest help in school is expected from professional associates. In this regard, the obtained findings, although on a small sample of teachers, which can be considered as a limitation of the research, suggest the importance of creating various programs of school support and developing the competencies of teachers for inclusive education that would be realized, both in the school context and in the wider community.

Keywords: *inclusive education, teacher competencies, inclusive education support programs.*

Introduction

The teacher as the most valuable asset of the school (Day 1999) and the bearer of changes aimed at improving the teaching process is also responsible for the outcomes of each student's education. Some authors (Anderson 2004) point to a strong connection between the personality of teachers and the educational achievements of students, and during times of accelerated social changes and the speed of obsolescence of knowledge, the continuous viewing of the knowledge and skill of teachers, expressed through measurable characteristics and behaviors, has become necessary (Radulović et al. 2010). In order to find an adequate answer to questions about the knowledge and skills that teachers should possess in order to answer the system tasks that are before him, the need for high competence and readiness for dealing with modern social requirements is emphasized, which on the one hand are reflected in the development of the school, and on the other, set requirements for ensuring social development and progress. The analysis of teachers' competences is therefore essentially related to improving the quality of work in the direction of providing education tailored to each student.

Teachers are expected to be flexible, to have a creative approach, directed to learning at school and through individualization of teaching and learning to enable personal development and emancipation of students, to develop competencies and to be trained for self-regulated lifelong learning, instead of transferring it to finished knowledge (Kostović 2008). In this sense, the importance of reviewing competencies and attitudes for the professional performance of everyday tasks is emphasized in order to improve the overall educational process (Fajdetić, Šnidarić 2012).

In a document defining teacher competences, they are defined as "the capacity of an individual shown in performing complex activities in educational work" (*Standards of competences for the profession of teachers and their professional development* 2011: 2). Although the determination of measurable indicators of teacher competencies is significant, some authors (Eliot 2006) show a critical approach towards them. Namely, the author mentioned points out that determining the quality of educational outcomes should be based on values rather than on measurable indicators, which is supported by Lidija Radulović (Radulović et al. 2010), emphasizing that the quality of interactions and transactions between teachers and pupils is most important, which cannot be reduced to measures and indicators. According to this critical understanding, "a competent teacher is the one who is able to recognize educational values in transactions with students" (Radulović et al. 2010: 162), which is particularly important from the aspect of inclusive education. Irrespective of the existence of measurable indicators, the teacher must be open to acceptance and influencing changes, and motivated about lifelong learning and continuous

professional development. Therefore self-assessment and self-regulation of professional development is a necessary condition for attaining the required teaching competencies, lifelong continuous learning and reflective practices in order to achieve the desired learning outcomes in students. In the context of perceiving the competencies of teachers, analysis of those that are in line with the individual approach to each student in order to achieve the planned educational outcomes, not usually measurable with predetermined indicators, is particularly important. These claims further emphasize the importance of self-evaluation of teacher competencies and, accordingly, the planning of professional development in order to empower the teacher for competent action in educational practice, which is an inseparable part of his/her professional development (Jermakov 2011).

In the first part of this paper, the importance of an individual approach for each student and the competencies of teachers for achieving such an approach were considered. Then, further in the manuscript, an analysis of the results of the research relating to the requirements and difficulties arising from them was performed. The research approach was oriented to discovering the perceptions of respondents about factors that could function to empower teachers' competencies for an inclusive approach, in accordance with the nature and specifics of the professional roles they occupy in school. In that sense, the conclusion defines some possibilities for empowering teachers for an inclusive approach in educational work.

Support of the individual needs of children / students in development and learning

Traditional teaching was largely exposed to criticism because it was directed at all students, ignoring the developmental differences and specificities among them that implied the need for different approaches in teaching. The role of teaching was oriented towards providing the same approach in relation to each student, although they have different interests, and ability to perceive, remember, think, learn, and so on. Different ways of meeting students' needs are conditioned by the general and special abilities of students, preferences and interests, different needs, different individual experiences, levels of previous knowledge, the stage of individual progression, the mode of reaction and learning styles, as well as the different possibilities of motivation, which is evident through their physical properties, mental abilities, learning process, and pro-social behavior (Đukić 1995, Jerotijević, Mrše 2010).

Individual differences also implicate different needs for support in pupils' development and learning, which is the imperative of modern school. This has resulted in requests for individualization of overall educational work, that is,

for adapting teaching and extracurricular activities to the abilities and specific characteristics of students in order to achieve their holistic development. A teacher oriented towards an inclusive approach to education contributes to better social and educational achievements, which affects the development of autonomy and creativity among pupils (Jerotijević, Mrše 2010). The principle of individualization is one of the basic pedagogical principles in the planning, realization and evaluation of educational work with pupils. In school practice, however, it often happened that it was neglected, so pupils were integrated into schools, trying to adapt to their demands, which had negative consequences on their development and educational achievements. For this reason, legal provisions were introduced that indicate the obligation to respect the individual abilities of each student, as well as to provide support according to his or her abilities.

In order to meet the educational needs of every child, regardless of developmental specifics, the concept of inclusive education was introduced to the world about two decades ago. The competencies of teachers that are very important for the implementation of inclusive education are embedded in a group of competencies related to their professional roles, and are mostly described through a group of competencies for the development of a student's personality, communication and cooperation. The competencies of teachers for inclusive education are based on their belief that all student teachers can: learn, respect the students as individuals, respect the dignity of each student, and persist in helping each child achieve success in accordance with his/her potential. In addition, it is important to have knowledge in the field of specific characteristics of students, as well as developed methodological competencies for equality in approach to all students, irrespective of socio-emotional status, race, intellectual, or some other specificity. Also student teachers need to know the importance of inclusion, especially for children with disabilities, in regular education, which promotes the reduction of discrimination and prejudice.

The goal of inclusive education is aimed at providing quality education for all students through a process that takes place through the introduction of changes in access to teaching, and the modification or enrichment of educational content depending on the individual needs of students for additional support. The definitions of inclusion by UNESCO (conference in Salamanca, 1994) emphasize that inclusion is a movement that is directly related to the improvement of the education system as a whole: "Inclusion is the process of solving and responding to the diversity of the needs of all students through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and less and less exclusion within and beyond education. It includes modifications and changes in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a shared vision that includes all children of the appropriate age and with the conviction that a regular education system is responsible for the education of all children" (UNESCO:

according to: http://narip.cep.edu.rs/biblioteka/literatura_na_srpskom_jeziku/prirucnik_za_planiranje_i_pisanje_iop-a.pdf). The competencies of teachers in this regard should be based on beliefs that all children can learn, have the right to education, and learn best in a natural peer group. The most important factor that promotes positive behavior and good support for adjustment of children in school is a good relationship between adults and children. A good relationship involves a high level of closeness and understanding, with warm communication, which ensures creating a supportive climate and developing emotional security for students. Children then feel confident and supportive, interact easier with peers, participate more in school activities, and achieve better learning success. Positive attitudes towards inclusive education and changes in circumstances and programs in regular schools enable the creation of an atmosphere in which any child can be developed regardless of his/her uniqueness. Research on the attitudes of teachers in Serbia (Macura-Milovanić, Vujisić-Živković 2011) shows that students enter professional practice with negative attitudes towards inclusive education and consider that pupils with disabilities should be educated in special schools. Đević (2009) points out that 10% of teachers in the school have the same opinion. The results of the same study show that teachers think that students with disabilities can only attend some classes in regular classes, 80% of teachers support the initiative for inclusion in education, 60% that inclusion of children in need of additional support should be selected selectively depending on the type and degree of disability, while 40% of teachers think that a special school would be a better form of education for children with disabilities. The given data implies the need to develop teachers' awareness of the importance of inclusive education for student achievement through initial [undergraduate] education and professional training of teachers, and on the other hand it is necessary to increase social commitment to this problem, so that the tendency for inclusive education will not only remain at the integration of pupils into regular schools.

Although inclusive practice in the world has been present in various forms for more than twenty years, in Serbia greater attention has only been paid to inclusive education since 2009, through the Law on the Foundations of the System of Education and Upbringing, and in the current Law (Law on the Foundations of the System of Education and upbringing, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 88/2017), in which inclusive education is expressed as a general principle of education and upbringing and an area to which special attention has to be paid. The concept of inclusive education is also abstracted through defined goals and outcomes of education in the Law. The Law prescribes an obligation to draw up an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for students requiring additional educational support, promoting equality and access to exercising rights to education based on social justice and the principle of equal opportunities without discrimination. In every educational institution it is mandatory

that a Team for Inclusive Education is formed to undertake activities for ensuring and improving the quality of inclusive education, which involves analyzing the competencies of teachers as well as the difficulties they face. The continuing task of teachers is to ensure that with their competencies they achieve the goals of education and upbringing and standards of achievement, taking into account the principles of education and upbringing, pre-knowledge, needs, interests, and special opportunities of pupils. Inclusive education is understood as a principle, not emphasizing the inclusion of special categories of students, but it implies equality, and the planning of support to pupils according to needs is done through the School Development Plan, the Annual Work Plan of the School, and the School Program, or individual educational plans that are an integral part.

“IEP is a written document of the institution, which plans additional support in the education and upbringing of the child or pupil, if the previous adjustment and elimination of physical and communication barriers did not lead to the realization of general outcomes of education and upbringing, that is, the meeting the educational needs of pupils with exceptional abilities “ (Rulebook on Detailed Instructions for Determining the Right to an Individual Education Plan, Its Application and Evaluation, *Official Gazette of RS* 76/10). A child/pupil who has difficulty in learning, development or has a disability, lives in a socially unstimulative environment, or has exceptional abilities, has the right to IEP. The didactic values of individually planned teaching are reflected in the development of the ability to work independently and apply critical thinking; stimulating students to work according to their own pace to achieve a defined learning goal; encouraging independence; giving feedback on the progress and acquired new knowledge of students, which has the function of encouraging students to participate in independent research and creative work (Đukić 1995a).

In the process of achieving the goals of inclusive education, it is important to emphasize the importance of school partnerships with the local community and the continuous cooperation with the family in order to achieve a unique action by engaging all available resources to contribute to adequate support for students. It is a component that ensures the quality of education and upbringing of every child. The purpose of cooperation with the school is to enable the harmonization and linking of activities in the process of education and upbringing of children in their development, as well as providing assistance and support to the family in order to provide functional education (Zuković, Popović 2011). Also, the director, the pedagogical-psychological service of the school, the school teams in the area of student support, as well as support from peers, make a significant contribution to the process of individualization. Since teachers are mostly instructed to work with students directly, their role can be said to be most significant, as they participate in the process of guiding, directing

and supporting each individual pupil in the learning and development process. In order to examine the main difficulties experienced by teachers and to see the possibilities of their being overcome, research was conducted, whose results are presented and discussed in the next part of this paper.

Methodological framework of the research

Bearing in mind theoretical considerations, as well as the fact that there are many difficulties in supporting individual development and the learning process for children/pupils, the subject of the research is support to the individual needs of children/pupils in development and the competencies of teachers to respond to the challenges of inclusive practice. In this regard, the problem of research consists in identifying the competencies of teachers and the difficulties they face in school practice. Starting from the subject and the set research problem, the research focused on perceiving teachers' perceptions about the current state of support for individual development and learning of students in school practice and anticipating possibilities for its improvement. The established aim of the research was operationalized and hierarchically broken down through groups of research questions that focused on the following research tasks:

1. Identify the competencies of teachers for inclusive education through their self-assessment of competencies.
2. Identify disturbing factors of inclusive education and the most common difficulties teachers face in the process of inclusive education.
3. Identify factors of empowerment of teachers for inclusive education.
4. Systematize the practical implications of the obtained research results in order to identify possibilities for qualitative improvement of inclusive practice.

The survey was conducted in January 2018 on a random sample of 70 primary and secondary school teachers, during an organized panel discussion on inclusive education at the Faculty of Science and Mathematics in Kragujevac, to which teachers from all primary and secondary schools from Kragujevac were invited. The structure of the sample consisted of 62 teachers employed in elementary and 8 teachers employed in high school; 61 teachers teach the course that belongs to natural-mathematical and 8 teachers to the socio-linguistic group of subjects. In terms of years of service, 18 teachers belong to the category of up to 10 years, 35 from 10 to 20 years, 15 teachers had worked in school practice for 20–30 years and 2 teachers had worked for over 30 years. It is interesting that at the panel discussion no male teachers were present, only female. Therefore, the overall sample of research consisted only of female teachers.

In addition to the method of theoretical analysis (in the stage of the theoretical setting of the research problem), a system-structural-functional method was applied (in the stage of perceiving support for individual development and learning), a descriptive method (in the analysis stage and the interpretation of obtained data), and the causal method (in the stage of examination of the cause-and-effect relationships between measured phenomena).

In accordance with the selected methods, while managing the principle of economy, the survey technique was applied, and the data was collected using an instrument designed for research purposes – a Teacher Questionnaire (attachment). After the research, data was processed quantitatively and qualitatively, after which interpretation of the results was performed.

Results and discussion

From the total number of teachers, only four had been learning about inclusive education during initial [undergraduate] education, they belonging to the category of teachers who had worked in school practice for up to 10 years. This is understandable, given the fact that only for the last ten years has there been a legal obligation to include all children in a regular educational system. Listed data highlights the need for enhanced professional development of teachers in this field, in order to develop and continuously strengthen their competencies to provide adequate support to students who need it, especially because when assessing their competencies, respondents evaluated them quite low. On a scale of 1–5, the largest number of teachers classified their competencies for inclusive education into ranks 2 or 3, several in rank 4, while interestingly, not even one teacher considers him/herself fully competent or completely incompetent, so the rankings 1 and 5 were excluded during the self-assessment of the competencies of teachers for inclusive education.

In order to identify resources for empowering teachers' competence for inclusive education, teachers answered the question: "How do you strengthen your competencies for inclusive education?" Regardless of their socio-demographic characteristics, teachers emphasized first and foremost consultations with colleagues who have experience in working with children who need additional educational support, then consultations with departmental heads, pedagogical psychological services, and through their own experience built in situations when faced with the challenge of having students in the classroom with whom they have had to work on some type of IEP. Teachers also point out that various forms of professional training help them to improve their inclusive approach to education, but this is most often internal in-service training, because the vocational training program has very little or no resources for their realization at school.

Lack of opportunities for professional development through accredited programs is a factor that is recognized as hindering in the process of implementation of inclusive education and the difficulty in writing individual educational plans, which imposes serious systemic thinking in order to gain access to such a type of professional development. Furthermore, disturbing factors and difficulties faced by teachers are intertwined; in addition to insufficient teacher competencies, they are still relevant to a large number of students in departments, lack of necessary teaching resources, lack of time to foster devotion to students who need additional support, and the inability to engage in pedagogical and personal assistance. Further, hindering factors and difficulties that teachers face are interwoven, in addition to lack of competence of teachers, they are: a large number of students in classes, a lack of appropriate teaching materials, lack of time for better dedication to students who need additional support, and inability to engage in pedagogical and personal assistance. As aggravating circumstances, and often obstructive factors, inadequate cooperation with the family is recognized, accompanied by the subjectivity and insufficient participation of parents in the realization of activities that are in the best interests of students. On the other hand, there are great expectations from teachers and the school, although there is insufficient support for teachers being required to adequately achieve their goals regarding inclusive education. Finally, teachers assess unjustified burden of extensive pedagogical documentation, which is at the expense of greater direct devotion to students.

It is interesting to note teachers expect least support from the Ministry of Education and Special Schools, which should in fact be required to be centers for improving the competencies of teachers for inclusive education. They see insignificant support in professional development programs and professional literature, and rely heavily on help from colleagues with experience, then from professional associates at school. In that direction, their answers to the question: – “From whom in school do you get the most support and in what way?” were that teachers recognized the activities of departmental heads/senior colleagues as significant support in school. Regardless from whom they receive it, support is reflected in direct counseling, sharing experiences, the common perception of the pedagogical profile and, accordingly, determining students’ opportunities and activities that will be in the best interest of the students and be accomplished through IEP. Since the emphasis of support from the school in which teachers are employed is most prominent, it would be beneficial to disseminate knowledge and experience among all teachers, not only those who are working with students who need additional educational support at that moment. From the listed forms of support that would be useful in the process of inclusive education, teachers ranked them in the following way: Lectures on the specifics of working with children who need additional educational support; providing mentors to impart teachers with the necessary

help in working with children who need additional educational support; the formation of a network of teachers at the school administration level in order to exchange experiences; then visits to schools in which inclusive education is successfully implemented; and eventually training in writing IEPs. It could be concluded that teachers need essential help and support in concrete situations in providing adequate support to students. It is therefore understandable that the training for writing IOPs has been recognized as the least significant type of support, since the steps outlined in the manuals can be followed in this part, but difficulties may be encountered in the development of a pedagogical profile and in the implementation of IEP itself.

Conclusion

A responsible approach to the individualized learning of all school actors and the families of students contributes to the development of student's competencies for lifelong learning, involving and engaging in knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to each student for personal fulfillment and development, as well as involvement in social life, employment, entrepreneurship, and active realization of civic roles.

The results show that female teachers, who form a large majority in the total number of teachers in the school system, are more inclined towards additional teacher education, which may be an indication that they are important actors for changing the educational system. Despite their motivation to responsibly implement inclusive education, they also mention a large number of difficulties faced in school practice. Difficulties are most often recognized as the large number of students in classes, lack of pedagogical and personal assistants, inadequate cooperation with parents, regardless of whether they are students who need additional support or students who are with them in the classes. Given that the mentioned difficulties are of a systemic nature, under current conditions, teachers receive the greatest support in their work at the internal level – through working together with colleagues. As a significant resource for empowering competencies for inclusive education, teachers highlighted lectures on the specifics of work with children, but when faced with difficulties they do not expect this type of support from colleagues from special schools; they obtain help from colleagues who have had similar experiences in the regular educational system. The above statement can be interpreted as teachers' assumption that regular and special schools are two contexts with different working conditions, so pupils in special schools cannot be approached in the same way as children who require additional support in regular schools. In that sense, the ability to have a mentor to help them with their work with students is also recognized as a possible contribution to better achieving the goals of inclusive education. In addition, a significant resource for empowering teachers'

competencies for inclusive education could be the formation of networks of teachers that would share positive experiences and be a significant support to each other.

Due to the large number of difficulties that inhibit teachers from providing maximum support to students in meeting their individual needs in developing learning, it is also necessary to continue professional development through vocational training programs and lectures in order to implement the latest scientific knowledge on the most effective methods of work that function to provide adequate support to pupils attending regular schools, but need additional educational support. In addition to external education, continuous internal training at the level of the their educational institution, or self-education, is necessary, so that inclusive education becomes constantly present at all stages of education, in order to apply goals based on a diversity that includes all groups of students that do not belong to the dominant group. Since teachers are primary implementers of educational policies, the purpose of their role is recognized through providing learning opportunities and reviewing some aspects of the school system that reflect inequalities.

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