

SELF-PERCEPTION OF THE POSITION OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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Abstract: *Procedures for creating methods and measures of support for children with developmental disabilities in the Republic of Srpska. This includes the introduction of a role called assistant for students in the regular department. The assistant's role, tasks and competencies have been determined, as well as the procedure for his engagement. The minimum requirement for performing such a demanding role is to have completed high school, with no additional education required. Our research shows that many assistants are younger people, students, from different educational structures, with strong motivation and empathy towards children and the upcoming job. Since the most numerous assistants are students of Special Education and Social Rehabilitation (NUBL), for this qualitative research, a structured interview and focus group were used, in order to seek answers about the position of assistants in teaching, the expectations placed before them, as well as the obstacles they face in their engagement.*

Keywords: *assistant, children with disabilities, inclusion*

INTRODUCTION

The tasks set before all of us by the system of upbringing and education are becoming more and more complex and more responsible, special needs are numerous and different, and it is expected that a truly inclusive school should “read” them all. (Ianes D. 2005:15) ². By understanding inclusion in this context, society's inevitable obligation to assess, define, develop, monitor and evaluate the effects of meeting

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² See: Ianes D. (2005): DIDATTICA SPECIALE PER L'INTEGRAZIONE. Un teaching sensibile alle differenze, Secoda edizione completamente rinnovata, Erickson; “A student with special educational needs may have severe brain damage or Down's syndrome, mild brain or perceptual dysfunction, severely disturbed relationships in the family, or diversity, i.e. lack of a certain sociological or cultural background, disturbed emotional relationships and/or behavioral disorder, etc. .

the real “need” for additional resources (support measures) is accepted. Creating a system that responds to students’ diversity, that creates and implements an inclusive culture, policy and practice (Booth, Ainscow, Black – Hawkins, Vaughan, Shaw, 2000)³, in which there is continuous pedagogical and organizational improvement, is the basic concept of inclusive education. If we agree that “inclusive education is directed towards the identification and minimization of obstacles in the learning and participation of all children, it also means increasing participation in teaching, not only for students with special needs, but also for those without special needs.” (Vukajlović B. 2004:20).⁴

The term inclusion is most often used in educational circles, especially in the field of developmental disabilities (special needs), although it is also used by politicians, people in charge of system reforms, and minority groups, in short, inclusion is not only a matter of special needs. In education, in a general sense, it refers to the process and practice of educating students with developmental disabilities, who are included in regular classes (“schools that they will attend normally as if they have no special need,” (Alvesson, 2000, according to Vukajlović, 2004: 23).

ASSISTANT AS A SUPPORT FOR INCLUSION

School *assistant* is a form of support for students with developmental disabilities who are involved in the so-called regular system of upbringing and education. Numerous studies (including Igrić, Kobetić, Lisak, 2008; Marinić, Matejčić, Igrić, 2019; Ribić, 2020)⁵ on teaching assistants/pedagogical assistants as a model of support for the educational inclusion

3 See: Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, Shaw (2000). Index for inclusion. created in collaboration with: the Center for the Study of Inclusive Education (CSIE) from Bristol, the Center for Educational Needs from Manchester, Center for Educational Research from Canterbury (presents a set of materials to help schools in the process of developing an inclusive school. The materials talk about building a school community that supports and encourages the best results for all students. The very process of using the Index is designed to contribute to the inclusive development of the school. It encourages staff to share and build on existing knowledge and helps them to examine in detail opportunities for better learning and participation of all their students. The Index includes a process of school self-examination in three dimensions each related to the school’s inclusive culture, policy, and practice).

4 B.Vukajlović B. (2004). Inkluzivno obrazovanje. Banja Luka: IP GRAFID

5 See: Igrić, Kobetić, Lisak (2008). Evaluation of some forms of support for the educational inclusion of students with special needs. A child in society. Year 10, No. 1/2.; Marinić, Matejčić, Igrić (2019). The quality of cooperation between teachers and teaching assistants from the perspective of teachers and teaching assistants. In: Life and School - magazine for the theory and practice of upbringing and education. Vol. LXV No. 1-2, s. 261-279. Ribić K. (2020). The role and importance of teaching assistants in elementary schools in the area of Sarajevo Canton. Master thesis University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of Social Work.

of children with developmental disabilities indicate the importance of this model, both its advantages and disadvantages. In the narrowest sense, this model provides direct support to a child with developmental disabilities, primarily to provide technical support to a student with developmental disabilities to the greatest extent necessary to encourage his independence within the remaining possibilities. This, first of all, includes helping the student with movement, maintaining personal hygiene, dressing and feeding, but also help in school activities such as writing down material, copying from the blackboard, making practical works, etc.

Certain data (Habuš, 2019) ⁶ indicate that teachers who cooperate with a teaching assistant are much more satisfied than those who do not cooperate with an assistant, they are certainly encouraging, but differences are still visible (Devecchi and Rouse, 2010) ⁷ from school to school, considering how much the importance of the assistant's support is recognized, and how and how much he is respected as a hard worker. The change in the assistant's role (Werts, French, Chopra, according to Tews, Lupart, 2008, and according to Krampač-Grljušić, Žic-Ralić, Lisak, 2010) ⁸ from administrative to direct support for the student with developmental disabilities, also influenced the increase in the assistant's level of responsibility. There are still a number of open questions between the participation of teachers (we will use the same term for both teacher and educator) and assistants and this paper will offer some answers to the existing questions.

We indicate the more precise role(s) of assistants in teaching by citing the results of the research of the National Center for Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (USA) in 1995. According to the obtained results, four main approaches to collaborative teaching were determined: supportive, parallel, complementary and team (National Center for Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995, according to Igrić, 2015, according to Marinić, Matejčić, Igrić, 2019).⁹

6 See: Habuš I. (2019). Effectiveness of assistants in primary education. University of Zagreb. Faculty of Teachers in Čakovec. thesis <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/228341444.pdf>, 17.5.2023.

7 Devecchi, C. and Rouse, M. (2010). An Exploration of the Features of Effective Collaboration Between Teachers and Teaching Assistants in Secondary Schools. *British Journal of Learning Support*, 25 (2), 91 – 99

8 See: Werts, French, Chopra, according to Tews, Lupart, 2008, and according to Krampač-Grljušić, Žic-Ralić, Lisak (2010). What do children with disabilities think about the support of teaching assistants. 8th congress with international participation - Involvement and support of the community: proceedings/ Đurek V., editor. Zagreb: School book, p. 181-194.

9 National Center for Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995, according to Igrić, 2015, according to Marinić, Matejčić, Igrić (2019). The quality of cooperation between teachers and teaching assistants from the perspective of teachers and teaching assistants. In: *Life and school - magazine for the theory and practice of upbringing and education*. Vol. LXV No. 1-2, s. 261-279.

It is the teacher who directs the course of teaching.

In the supportive approach, the teacher has a leading role in teaching, and another person (teaching assistant) provides support to the students in the class, monitors the work of the students, and provides individual support.

b) The parallel approach implies simultaneous teaching of a different group of students in different parts of the classroom. In such an approach, it is allowed to take turns in working with an individual group, and sometimes one group of students can work independently.

c) Complementary approach to teaching in the teaching itself implies the provision of an associate (teaching assistant) support to the teacher. For example, the assistant can write down important parts of the lecture on the blackboard, practice with a group of students before the lesson the skills they will need during the lesson, and during the lesson observe how the students use what they have learned.

d) In addition to the above, it is necessary to keep in mind the importance of teachers' and assistants' reflection on their work, which is why it is mandatory to put the model of reflective teamwork in the center of attention.

The formation of mobile teams to support children with developmental disabilities, who are in regular (mass) classes, and approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the RS, was an attempt to find a temporary solution and provide support for the children and the school.

In accordance with our topic, we mention the particularly important project "Help for children with special needs in Bosnia and Herzegovina" for the reason of providing direct professional defectological support to teachers who do not have appropriate special education (supported by UNICEF, Medecins du Monde; Doctors of the World, French humanitarian organization and ministries of education from both entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The most significant part of the assistance was the continuous two-year support of supervision-mentor pairs (oligophrenic pedagogue and speech therapist) who become part of the professional team in 16 regular elementary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result of this and similar projects, the Ordinance on the upbringing and education of children with special educational needs in primary and secondary schools was adopted¹⁰, when for the first time the special education teacher officially became a member of the professional team.

¹⁰ Rulebook on the upbringing and education of children with special educational needs in primary and secondary schools, Number: 6-01-4519/04 dated 15.9.2004.

An interesting question for research would certainly be the question why special education teachers failed to get the attention they deserved in our schools, because even today they can be “counted on the fingers” in the so-called regular (mass) schools. One of the reasons is certainly the insufficient number of them (for decades there were none on the labor market/Employment Bureau), but also the limitation of the number of employed professional associates, because pedagogues and psychologists were already engaged in all schools.

Research (Ljevar-Lučić, 2007)¹¹ on professional team support (mobile teams) for students with developmental disabilities included in regular primary schools, indicates that the existence of mobile teams is not enough for inclusion in the process called inclusion, but many other things need to be achieved. »Such and similar attempts should be accepted as a transitional phase, with a clear plan for exiting that phase, which currently does not exist,« Vukajlović B. (2010:21). Parents are satisfied with the possibility of inclusion of their children with special needs in regular elementary schools and the support they receive. In this case, probably the fact that a system of support and professional help exists, for the parents themselves (at least for now) is more important than the actual level of cooperation with the experts of the professional team and the support they receive.

It is important to consider the potential limitations of mobile teams as a solution for implementing inclusive education. Policymakers in the education system should be aware of this issue to prevent the implementation of inclusive education from heading in an unintended direction.

Positioning of assistants in the legislation of the Republic of Srpska

The Law on Basic Education¹² defines that an assistant to a student with disabilities can be a person with at least a high school diploma¹³, (Article 95, Paragraph 7 of the Law). Rulebook on education of children with developmental disabilities, Article 17 regulates:

11 Ljevar-Lučić S.(2007):Stručno timaska podrška u razvijanju individualizovanih programa vaspitno-obrazovnog rada sa učenicima posebnih potreba uključenim u redovne osnovne škole, Master thess, Faculty of philosophy, Banja Luka

12 Law on Basic Education (“Official Gazette of the Republic of Srpska, no. 44/17, 31/18, 84/19, 35/20 and 63/20, /22)

13 Rulebook on the upbringing and education of children with developmental disabilities (“Official Gazette” of the Republic of Srpska, June 2020)

(3) The general duties of the assistant are to:

1) picks up/hands over a student with developmental disabilities from parents/guardians when arriving at and leaving school, helps him maintain personal hygiene and take off and put on clothes, during snack time, when moving around the school building and yard;

2) encourages the learning of students with developmental disabilities and helps them during classes:

1. recording the material,
2. copying from the board,
3. when making practical works,
4. when using school supplies and assistive technology,
5. physical education classes,
6. art classes.

(4) More precise assistant duties are determined by the school's expert team in accordance with the needs and capabilities of students with developmental disabilities and are an integral part of the individual program.

Law on preschool education and education¹⁴, article 55 states:

(1) An educational group attended by a child with developmental disabilities may have an associate as an educator.

(2) The assistant for the educator provides technical assistance to the educator and the child with developmental disabilities, whose particularities are pointed out by the parent or guardian.

(3) Technical assistance from paragraph 2 of this article includes providing support to the child when performing personal hygiene, assistance to the child when using the toilet, support in the child's movement and support during eating and dressing.

(4) Associates for educators can be performed by persons with at least a four-year high school diploma or students of the Faculty of Education of Pedagogical Staff and Faculty of Medicine, as part of a student internship or as a volunteer.

We have noticed that the terms "assistant" and "associate" are used to refer to educators. We believe that these terms are used to monitor various indicators¹⁵ more effectively, which can help improve both theory and practice when working with children with developmental disabilities. Although the job requirements, competencies, and expectations are the

14 "Službeni glasnik" Republike Srpske, br. 79/2015, 63/2020 i 64/2022)

15 Significant research data on the number of children with developmental disabilities in different institutions, kindergartens or schools, on the basis of which it is possible to monitor the child's development, progress, but also possible recommendations for corrections of certain support measures.

same for both positions, we won't be analyzing the role of an associate for an educator in our research since we haven't encountered any such positions yet.

RESEARCH CONCEPT

The goal of our research is the self-perception of the assistant's position in the school, and in order to offer additional information in order to strengthen and more precisely determine the assistant's role in supporting children with developmental disabilities in the Republic of Srpska.

An interview was used and a focus group was formed in Banja Luka, where the most numerous assistants (17 of them) who participated voluntarily. Confidentiality of personal data is guaranteed by the researcher.

Instruments and methods of data processing

For this study, we used a qualitative approach to gather data, as interviews and focus groups were the best fit for our needs Mesec, 1998).¹⁶ Our findings can be beneficial to the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republika Srpska, as they examine the factors that influence the position and role of teaching assistants and, consequently, the quality of service offered to children/students with developmental disabilities. We hope this research will encourage other researchers to create the necessary conditions for the development of policies, practice, and culture that promote inclusion.

INTERPRETACIJA REZULTATA ISTRAŽIVANJA SA DISKUSIJOM

By structuring and summarizing the obtained data, several topics were singled out:

1. Method of engagement - how they got the assistant job;
2. To what extent do the jobs defined by legal regulations coincide with the jobs they perform as assistants;
3. Cooperation with the school administration, teachers, and other staff at the school;

¹⁶ Mesec (1998). Uvod u kvalitativno raziskovanje v socialnom delu. Ljubljana: Visoka škola za socialno delo.

4. Cooperation with parents;
5. Recommendations for improving the assistant's daily practice;
6. Other recommendations;

ad 1) Method of engagement - how they got the assistant job

In all cases, the job of an assistant to a student was contracted by the parent, who provided the consent of the school, and further in the procedure of the competent Ministry. The only difference is the way in which the cooperation was established. With the opening of the Faculty of Special Education and Social Rehabilitation in Banja Luka, there were frequent calls from parents (2017/18), who expressed interest in our students being assistants to their children. The next way is for parents to look for assistants through social networks and Viber groups, by specifying the child's basic characteristics and contact phone number.

To our satisfaction, this research shows that it is the recommendations of other parents that is dominant, which indicates trust in special education teachers (special educators and rehabilitators) as professionals in whom they have the greatest confidence.

ad 2) To what extent do the jobs defined by legal regulations coincide with the jobs they perform as assistants;

When the assistants were asked if they were familiar with the duties/jobs of the assistant in detail, as defined by the valid legal acts, the most numerous were those who did not pay enough attention to that part of the duty. Although the contracts with the employer (Ministry) define the duties and tasks of assistants, the situation is significantly different in practice. In this sense, we are talking about an assistant *de facto* and *de jure*¹⁷.

Example 1:

I take care of a little girl at school. My responsibilities include:

- Taking her from the stroller to her school chair.
- Accompanying her to the bathroom when needed.
- Helping her put her jacket on after class and taking her outside.
- Assisting her with eating snacks, as she is unable to do so on her own.
- Holding her during dance time, as she requires support to stand.

(“In truth, I cannot leave her alone for even a few minutes because she tends to disobey the teacher and make a mess, such as spilling food.”)

¹⁷ Kad se govori o nekoj pravnoj situaciji, “*de jure*” označava ono što kaže zakon, a “*de facto*” označava ono što se događa u praksi (i što može i ne mora biti zakonito). <https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

Example 2:

“At school, I perform the following tasks: I help a person who cannot move independently move, I do graphomotor exercises, visual perception, fine and gross motor skills, exclusively at my insistence. Then, I practice reading, writing, calculation operations (addition and subtraction), precision exercises, writing numbers and letters to order, speech exercises (for a person whose speech is very poorly developed), and all activities that come down to self-care. As far as schools are concerned, I received minimal instructions (as an assistant). In schools, I work according to a plan and program adapted and approved by the Teachers’ Council, along with my ideas, which I implement at my own discretion and assessment. The contents and topics from the plan and program are often repeated, it is uniform, and I introduce many new items independently (I expand the topics, set goals myself, create an individual plan myself)”.

Example 3:

“Teachers work with us (students and assistants) only as much as they have to, they don’t prepare any program for them (students), resources that would make it easier for us, instructions for the implementation of some teaching unit, make it easier to explain, do, etc. I brought material from my house for that student’s needs for a certain teaching unit. I do everything myself. I myself create an individual plan in accordance with the program implemented in the class of “my” student”.

Example 4.

“As a teaching assistant in Banja Luka, I have been hired for the third time, that is, for the third school year in a row. All three years I worked with different children and different families. Therefore, the difficulties these children had were different. I am currently employed as an assistant to a girl with cerebral palsy in an elementary school. The girl I work with is mobile, has impaired motor skills, well-developed speech, intellectually preserved. She has mastered the correct holding of a pencil very well and is very good at writing, drawing and coloring. Considering that she is a completely intellectually preserved child, she has no problem in learning and following the lessons, and I serve her as “technical help”, I put on a hoodie or jacket, put on a cap, gloves, go get her food, take her to the toilet, during which she I help her with dressing, and help her move (especially down the stairs), turn on water, occasionally carry a bag, help with writing, coloring, drawing, reading... My current job as an assistant is the easiest and simplest for me. In previous engagements, I was very burdened with the preparations for the class, I myself chose

the way of support, methods, means, aids, in a word, EVERYTHING. A lot of work and an extremely big responsibility”.

Example 5

“The 3 of us (she refers to three other colleagues, who are assistants in other schools in Banja Luka) pick up the child/student from the parents in the morning, we do everything at school, from helping with personal needs, to preparing and implementing all teaching content, materials ourselves we prepare (only if something is needed, for example paints, plasticine, etc., we ask the parents to buy it). It is very tiring, responsible and I don’t know how long I will be able to endure it all. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to have at least someone listen to me!”

ad3) Cooperation with the school administration, teachers and other staff at the school;

1. “Since I work with a girl with cerebral palsy, I get maximum physical help from the teacher as well as from other school workers, when the student needs to go to the toilet or move from a wheelchair to a chair. I have meetings about her progress with the professional team at least once a week, and sometimes more often.”

2. “From time to time during the teaching work there is a misunderstanding of senior professional associates, considering that I am a student and I have not passed the professional exam. I think they should have more support from teachers”.

3. “I have been working as a teaching assistant for two and a half years. During that period of time, I worked in three schools. I only met the administration, everything was formal, I signed a contract, no one ever invited me to any school for talks, meetings or the like, nor did they direct me to further work. The feeling is as if my children and I were thrown from the sky, I don’t know how best to describe my feeling. Each school, each administration, each teacher has its own work system and attitude towards assistants. Of course, I had both negative and positive experiences. In one school, the teacher rudely kicked me and the boy out of the classroom, claiming that according to the schedule we were not supposed to be there. I immediately resolved it with the administration, his behavior was not repeated, but it was clear that he did not want to have contact with the child, he simply rejected him. I worked both in subject and classroom teaching. The difference is visible. Until the fifth grade of elementary school, the children are happy, the teachers are wonderful to me and to the children I work with, the children in the class accept them. I don’t blame them that much either, because they don’t know how, they aren’t trained, nor instructed properly, unfortunately”.

4. "I believe that the staff at the school is not sufficiently educated to work with children with disabilities, and for that reason they go "pass my worries on to someone else", and that's exactly what the assistants are for.

What happens when the assistant is someone who is not a special education teacher, how is he supposed to know what and how to do, how to make it easier for that child and properly approach the parent? No one in schools, and not even in kindergartens, receives instructions or additional help for working with children with developmental disabilities, mostly everything comes down to the support of assistants, then the teacher. We are left to ourselves".

5. "During the first and every subsequent contact with the school management, I encountered exceptional kindness and a good attitude towards the assistants. After signing the contract, I had the first meeting with the school psychologist, by chance, not arranged, with a lady who talked to me for some time about the situation of the child I work with, the way I cope, whether I need any help, whether we the child and I managed in a new environment, does the child adapt and socialize, etc.?"

Unfortunately, there were no more meetings on this topic this school year. Until now, no assistant has had a meeting with the expert team, nor has anyone attended the class, to see what and how we are doing, whether the student is making progress, what it is that we are learning, etc.".

Ad4) Cooperation with parents

1. "Parents have too high expectations from me and from the teacher, and the little girl is basically only worked with for those 3 hours while she is at school. My opinion is that the professional team at the school should provide more support to parents and explain to them that small steps lead to success. For example, the child has made a lot of progress in 3 months, but the parents expect even more".

2. "I have good cooperation with my parents. They accept my suggestions and appreciate what I do for their child. So far I have had several experiences and they are all positive.

3. "I never had a problem with my parents, they are approachable and cooperative."

4. "Parents are often canceled by assistants, precisely because of overload and very low compensation. Then the parents are looking for a new assistant, who again needs a certain amount of time to establish adequate contact and cooperation with the child".

5. "I got in touch with my mother and agreed on a job through a recommendation, as well as with my family before this one. A colleague who could no longer work as an assistant recommended me to the family,

who contacted me. When they got to know each other, they concluded that I was suitable for their cooperation. To everyone's satisfaction, the cooperation is still good".

ad5) Recommendations for improving the daily practice and position of the assistant in the school

1. "I would suggest that someone who doesn't have an adequate school or who doesn't study one of the pedagogic courses can't do this job. I believe that what a teaching assistant does cannot be done by anyone with a high school diploma. I think that all teachers should undergo a certain education, because only multidisciplinary teams can meet the developmental and all other educational needs of children. Professional services in schools must invest more time and knowledge in working with children, but also with assistants and parents. There is a lack of special education teachers in the teams".

2. "My recommendation is that teaching assistants need more support, because each child is an individual for himself and there are situations when they require additional attention, which does not only apply to the teaching process (e.g. when they manifest their behavior in the form of anxiety, aggression, autoaggression, etc.). I don't think that an assistant can be someone who has only completed high school, regardless of other personality characteristics. Additional education, even for those of us studying special education, would be useful. Also, my recommendation would be to enable persons with mobility difficulties to enter the school premises smoothly and without difficulty, to take care of where the class is held, so that a student who uses a wheelchair can approach, for example chairs should have handrails for better balance and stability and the sitting position of the child, additional resources in the absence of necessary didactic materials"!

3. "Mostly, the problem is the lack of interest of the entire system for children, for whom we assistants advocate, as for brothers and sisters, while the school, which should be their second safe house, generally does not do so. Indirectly he rejects them and they are there for the sake of order (and what the laws require), and the assistants just put up with us, because we work for them. They don't respect us, they just take advantage of us. Of course, there are also wonderful people, but I am talking exclusively about the way of working and the approach to children with developmental disabilities, but also about the often incorrect attitude towards us assistants. I think that all teaching staff must go through additional training on ways to support children with developmental disabilities. Each school has a team of pedagogues and

psychologists, a few social workers, and special education teachers are the fewest, who are the primary professionals and experts in the needs and ways of supporting children with developmental disabilities.”

4. “Perhaps the assistants should also go through some kind of education and certification process like, for example, foster carers or personal assistants go through?”

And of course, a distinction should be made between personal and pedagogical assistance”!

5. “After being involved in three different schools, in my opinion the biggest problem that we assistants have is that the management, professional teams and education in general are not interested enough in our efforts and work, there is no real interest in the work and progress of the child, as well as an assistant. No one really instructs the assistant in everything he has to do, but, unfortunately, it is learned “on the fly”. It would be of great help if professional workers at the school would get involved and contribute to both socialization and the achievement of learning goals/outcomes that the child should achieve. We cannot expect successful inclusion and full acceptance of children with any type of difficulty if adults, school employees, who represent authority and someone whom children look up to, do not show their interest, their desire for all children to be an equal part of the society in which they live, regardless of whether they have a difficulty or are of harmonious development. So this is the problem that bothers me the most, neither the children nor the assistants have enough support, there are no workshops, meetings, consultations with the expert team, there is no interest on the part of the child and the assistant. I believe that a great start would be the inclusion of a special education teacher, as a mandatory professional associate in the school, as well as pedagogues and psychologists. Give the assistant the possibility of counseling, greater support, organize workshops, meetings with other teaching staff, make arrangements, share tasks related to the child/student. That alone would make it much easier for the assistant, rather than having to complete all the school duties and tasks by himself as best he knows how.”ad 6) Other recommendations

Other recommendations are mostly the same, and point to really minimal fees for assistant jobs (400 KM per month), but also the impossibility of counting that time as seniority. At the same time, there are many proposals for adaptation of school space, adaptation of classrooms, as well as sports fields and activities for children with developmental disabilities.

CONCLUSION

The need for changes in educational institutions (from preschool to higher education level), as part of the education system, especially emphasizes the roles of teachers, professional associates and all professionals, who with their professional competences should respond to the new requirements imposed by inclusive education.

There is no doubt about the very important and useful service of the assistant, both for the child/student, equally for parents, teachers, the school in general, the educational system. In theory, but also in practice, there are different levels of cooperation between teachers and assistants.

For the way we present our research on the self-perception of the assistant's role in the school, through the grouping of topics, but also by grouping experiences, citing individual experiences, we chose to evoke a great emotional charge in the assistants, while they were talking about their position.

The question of the stress faced by the assistants, performing their duties in the way they presented, was opened up.

The assistants indicate a lack of cooperation between them and the teacher, more precisely, they indicate the absence of a specific time frame for an agreement before the lesson, but also a problem of communication in general. It takes place mostly sporadically, with the exception of a really small number of examples of adequate cooperation. Most of the assistants manage in their own way, which can, with the best desire and intention to help the student, go to the other extreme. We suggest consulting research that provides a better insight into the benefits of the assistant's support for students with disabilities, but also the possible negative effects, if the support is not adequate. For this reason, it would be good if the teacher and the assistant jointly agreed on the basic guidelines for joint work before the beginning of the assistant's work, and it is suggested to determine the time for preparations and agreements.

The indicators of the self-perception of the assistant's position in relation to the parents are encouraging, which is expected. The fact that children with developmental disabilities only recently got the chance (and thus their parents) to have the right to an assistant, favors parents' satisfaction with the assistant's service, which greatly eases their position and reduces pressure and obligations, as well as the family's. The assistant has become a "permanent member" of the family, an extended hand to the parent, and a safe companion to the child. It is precisely this role that is "assigned" to the assistant, which requires extraordinary effort and

great responsibility, but also a feeling of acceptance and appreciation of their role.

Working with children with developmental disabilities requires not only love for them, which is the most important thing, but also knowledge and different skills in solving multiple tasks, more or less demanding, but each one should be solved in an adequate and useful and appropriate way for the child. Not only the so-called simply moving a child with cerebral palsy from a wheelchair to a school chair, going to the physical education class of a child with autism, positioning a text for a child with impaired vision, etc., are not activities and jobs that do not require any professional knowledge and knowledge of the child's functional characteristics. The so-called special needs are many and very special. Isn't it logical to expect the assistants to be "special" as well? Unfortunately, the fact is that we have made confusion out of inclusion, but by introducing teaching assistants, in the manner presented in this research, the educational system in the Republic of Srpska will also "fall asleep". The competences of assistants, defined by legal regulations in the Republic of Srpska, cannot meet very complex and diverse needs. Not knowing how to transfer from a wheelchair to a school chair can lead to an unwanted injury. What will we do then? In practice, assistants do ALL the work of teachers. How competent they are, whether they do it in a valid way, how much effort they put in, how much their work is valued, and there are many more open questions. Our research on the self-perception of the position of teaching assistants in the Republic of Srpska indicates that assistants are very burdened, that the expectations of them are high, that they do not have adequate cooperation with the professional team, that they feel that they are being taken advantage of, and at the same time, they are often insufficiently respected by the teaching staff. Staff, that they lack education, and professional support (although they are mostly students of special education and teaching faculties). In the further application of this support model, we suggest paying attention to a clearer definition of the role of assistants, as well as to improving cooperation between assistants, parents and professional associates of the school. The evaluation of this type of support needs to be done periodically, both for the reason of strengthening the competencies of all associates, but also for the occasional evaluation of the satisfaction of all participants in the process of upbringing and education (students, parents, teachers, professional associates, and assistants).

SAMOPERCEPCIJA POLOŽAJA ASISTENTA U NASTAVI

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Apstrakt: Postupci kreiranja načina i mjera podrške u vaspitno-obrazovnom procesu djeci sa smetnjama u razvoju u Republici Srpskoj, a radi obezbjeđenja im jednakih mogućnosti tokom školovanja, napredovanja, osamostaljivanja i razvoja, rezultirali su uvođenjem uloge *asistenta* za učenika uključenog u tzv. redovno odjeljenje. Određeni su uloga, poslovi i kompetencije *asistenta*, te dijelom i procedura njegovog angažmana. Minimalan uslov za obavljanje ovako zahtjevnog uloge je završena (bilo koja) srednja škola, bez obavezne bilo kakve dodatne edukacije. Naše istraživanje pokazuje da je značajan broj *asistenata* mlađa osoba, student/ica, iz različitih obrazovnih struktura, sa izraženom motivacijom i empatijom prema djeci i predstojećem poslu. Kako su najbrojniji *asistenti* studenti Specijalne edukacije i socijalne rehabilitacije (NUBL), za ovo kvalitativno istraživanje korišćeni su strukturisani intervju i fokus grupa, radi traženja odgovora o položaju *asistenta* u nastavi, očekivanjima koja se postavljaju pred njih, kao i preprekama sa kojima se suočavaju u svom angažmanu.

Ključne riječi: *asistent, djeca sa smetnjama u razvoju, inkluzija*

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