

## ASSESSMENTS OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES ON INCLUSION IN PRE-SCHOOL INSTITUTIONS

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**Abstract.** In an inclusive context, all children learn and play in kindergartens according to their abilities and interests. Educators, professional associates and parents, as equal participants in the educational process, apply a series of procedures that encourage children's development. The aim of this research is to identify the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities and inclusive education and education in preschool institutions in general. The research was conducted in September 2023 on a sample of 58 educators and 48 parents of children with developmental disabilities who attended regular kindergartens in the Kikinda area (Serbia). Educators' and parents' assessments were examined using a combined instrument (Scaler – IPE) ( $\alpha = .915$ ) constructed for the purposes of this research. The results of the research show that educators have more positive assessments of general issues related to inclusion and the effects of inclusive education on children's development, while parents have slightly more positive assessments than educators regarding the procedures applied in regular kindergartens to improve inclusive education. This confirms the general assumption from which the research started, indicating significant differences in the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities about inclusion in preschool institutions. It is concluded that the inclusive culture has not yet sufficiently taken root in preschool institutions yet, which indicates the need to include educators and parents as actors in preschool education and training in joint training programs for effective action in inclusive preschool education.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; children with developmental disabilities; teacher's opinion; parents' opinion; kindergarten

## **Introduction**

Inclusive upbringing and education as a multidimensional process, in the focus of which, in addition to children with developmental disabilities, peers, educators, parents and experts from additional support institutions are also included. To be successful in this process homeostasis among the basic inclusion entities is necessary. In this work, the key entities are educators and parents. In order for the process of inclusive upbringing and education to be as high-quality as possible, there is a need for educators to strengthen their professional competences<sup>1</sup>. This is not just a rhetorical question, because educators, both through advisory work and through the involvement of parents in direct educational activities, would instruct parents in basic pedagogical knowledge, which would positively reflect on their parenting competences (Vasiljevic, Prodanovic, Krneta & Markov 2023). Pointing out to parents the importance of inclusion for children of different developmental statuses would contribute to improving the beliefs of a larger percentage of family members whether they have children with or without disabilities. Parents should be sensitized to the arrival of a child and be shown the importance of influencing their children to accept a peer with developmental disabilities.

In Serbia, inclusive upbringing and education have been developing for more than a decade<sup>2</sup>. After a relatively short period of time, and based on the research results, the progress of this primarily humanistic process can be seen. The beliefs and attitudes of educators and parents are mostly positive, as the research results show, but there are barriers that prevent inclusion in upbringing and education from being even better for all its actors, that is, the whole society. Parents of children of the mass population express positive attitudes in relation to the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in the regular system, especially when it comes to children with sensory disabilities (Tomic & Nikolic 2021). One study indicates that parents of children both with and without developmental disabilities believe that inclusion in upbringing and education has a positive effect on the development of social skills and the socialization of all children (Hilbert 2014), so we can say that there is a consensus on the issue of well-being for all children.

The results of the study indicate that there is a need for support from the preschool institution's professional service and strengthening of partnership with parents, which is identified as a significant factor in the success of inclusion in upbringing and education (Stanisavljevic, Petrovic & Stanic 2013; Boric & Tomic 2012). Organizing joint activities of all inclusion participants outside the institution would contribute to strengthening the inclusive discourse between all actors of this process (Japundza-Milisavljevic et al. 2022). It is believed that the participation of special education teachers would contribute to the improvement of attitudes towards inclusion in education and education among educators and parents (Japundza-Milisavljevic, Djuric & Milanovic Dobrota 2022; Kojic, Markov & Kojic Grandic 2019). In support of this is the fact that in Serbia since 2010 there have been additional

educational support institutions where special education teachers and speech therapists provide counseling services to parents/families and educators<sup>3</sup>. The scope of work of educators and special education teachers overlap, because they are experts with different types of competence. Special educators carry out educational work with children with developmental disabilities, and educators are experts in working with children of the general population. It is the inclusive context that provides a wide range for these experts to use their knowledge and experience to provide all children with optimal conditions for development through play and activities. Educators show a greater willingness to accept children with developmental disabilities compared to teachers. Examples from practice show that long before the official implementation of inclusive education in preschool institutions, educators very successfully included children with developmental disabilities in regular groups. The specifics of the educational profession contribute to the fact that in this vocation, it is very difficult to create an emotional distance between the actors of the educational process.

In this sense, the preschool teacher is the first educational worker who implements educational work with preschool children in that system. Before that, children have no experience related to institutional educational work. For their further development and advancement, it is very important that the first experiences are positive. A child with developmental disabilities should be included in the community as soon as possible and enabled to participate in all aspects of social life (Jablan et al. 2014). Research conducted in Serbia shows different results in relation to the acceptance of inclusion by educators. More than 50 percent of the surveyed educators believe that children with developmental disabilities should be in developmental groups at regular kindergartens, and the results of some other researches show that opinions, experiences, beliefs and attitudes in relation to the majority of educators and teachers generally view inclusion as positive (Stancic & Stanisavljevic Petrovic 2013; Boric & Tomic 2012). The attitudes of educators in relation to teachers, and especially to subject teachers in primary basic schools, are statistically significantly more positive. These are significant results when we talk about inclusion in preschool education and education, because the positive attitude of educators towards the inclusive process is one of the most important factors of inclusion.

In each case, the views of parents of children with developmental disabilities and educators on the outcomes of inclusive education are also a significant factor (Stancic & Stanisavljevic Petrovic 2013). Practice shows that parents enroll their children with developmental disabilities in regular kindergartens, because inclusive educational groups provide a number of opportunities for the development of these children.

### **Methodological aspect of the research**

Inclusive upbringing and education in a preschool institution is a complex but also current problem in all aspects, especially in terms of the actions of all factors of preschool education and education in working with children with developmental disabilities and obstacles in upbringing and education. In this sense, there is a need for the joint action of all elements of preschool upbringing and education (children, educators, professional partners and management of preschool institutions, parents of children and other family members, the local environment and the wider social community), with the aim of helping children with developmental disabilities to become more fully involved in all activities in the preschool institution because of realizing all their potential and values in the development of a complete personality, and effective preparation for school. The research problem arose from a broader educational platform based on long-term scientific research and studies by groups of authors (Trbojevic et al. 2023; Jeremic, Milenovic & Markov 2023; Jeremic et al. 2022; Jeremic & Milenovic 2021; Kojic, Kojic Grandic & Markov 2020; Kojic, Kojic Grandic & Markov 2018). In this sense, a more comprehensive and in-depth study of the contribution of certain aspects of inclusion in preschool education and education, viewed simultaneously from the perspective of educators and parents, is particularly interesting. Based on this, the goal of the research can be defined, according to which it is necessary to identify the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities about inclusion in preschool institutions. The research started from the general assumption that it will be established that there are statistically significant differences in the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities about inclusion in upbringing and education in preschool institutions. Based on the defined research objective and the general research hypothesis, three basic research tasks were set: 1) Determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities on general issues related to inclusion; 2) Determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities about the effects of inclusive education on children's development; and 3) To determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the assessments of educators and parents of children and their concerns about the procedures applied in regular kindergartens for the improvement of inclusive upbringing and education.

#### *Research method*

In order to determine this, the research presented in this paper was conducted in the area of the city of Kikinda (Serbia) in September 2023. Descriptive and transferal methods were employed, utilizing surveying and scaling techniques.

#### *Research instrument*

The data were collected using a combined instrument – the *Scaler of Inclusion in Preschool Institutions (IPE)*. It consists of introductory questions related to respon-

dents and a three-level scale of intensity of agreement divided into three parts. These parts refer to general issues of inclusion in upbringing and education (GQIEE) – comprising 6 items; effects of inclusive upbringing and education on children’s development (EIEEDC) – comprising 8 items; and procedures applied in regular kindergartens for the improvement of inclusive upbringing and education (PIEE) – comprising 6 items. The instrument was specifically constructed for the purposes of this research. During the research itself, some metric characteristics of the scaler were examined.

**Table 1.** KMO test and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity

|                               |                |          |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------|
| KMO                           |                | .830     |
| Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity | c <sup>2</sup> | 2824.415 |
|                               | df             | 190      |
|                               | p              | .000     |

The KMO test showed a very good value (KMO = .830. Bartlett’s sphericity test reached statistical significance at the level of  $p < .001$  ( $p = .000$ ) (Table 1).

The reliability of the instrument was tested by Cornbach’s alpha coefficient, which showed an excellent value ( $\alpha = .915$ ). The following Cronbach’s alpha coefficient values were determined for the subscales: GQIEE – very good value ( $\alpha = .821$ ); EIEEDC – very good value ( $\alpha = .817$ ); and PIEE – excellent value ( $\alpha = .989$ ).

All communality values ( $h$ ) are greater than .30 and range from the lowest value calculated for the first item of the EIEEDC subscale ( $h = .324$ ), to the highest value calculated for the fifth item of the EIEEDC subscale ( $h = .898$ ), satisfying the general Tosten criterion.

The data indicate the factorability of the matrix, the adaptability of the scaler to the research sample and the justification of the factor analysis.

#### *Sample research*

The sample consisted of 58 educators and 48 parents of children who attended regular kindergartens in September 2023. The selection of the sample was guided by the criteria that educators were chosen from among those who work with children with developmental disabilities, while parents were chosen from among those whose children were diagnosed with some of the developmental disabilities.

#### *Data processing*

The data collected by the research were processed using the statistical program IBM SPSS 24.0, employing descriptive statistics and the Mann-Whitney U test (including the calculation of Median and Eta-square). To examine the factorability of the matrix, a factor analysis with Varimax rotation was performed, and to access the reliability of the scaler and subscales, the Cronbach alpha coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) was calculated. The results of the research are presented in tables.

### Research results

The significance of the difference in the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities on general issues related to inclusion in upbringing and education (GQIEE); on the effects of inclusive upbringing and education on children's development (EIEEDC); and about the procedures applied in regular kindergartens for the improvement of inclusive upbringing and education (PIEE) was examined with the Mann-Whitney U test, with medians calculated to determine significance, while the strength of the influence was assessed based on the calculated eta-square ( $\eta$ ).

**Table 2.** Assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities about GQIEE, EIEEDC and PIEE (Mann – Whitney U test)

|                | GQIEE    | EIEEDC   | PIEE     |
|----------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Mann-Whitney U | 765.000  | 262.000  | 1015.000 |
| Wilcoxon W     | 1941.000 | 1438.000 | 2726.000 |
| z              | -4,062   | -7.263   | -2.862   |
| p              | .000     | .000     | .004     |

The Mann – Whitney U test revealed a statistically significant difference in the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities on general issues related to inclusion in upbringing and education (GQIEE) at the level of  $p < .001$  ( $p = .000$ ); as well as the effects of inclusive upbringing and education on children's development (EIEEDC) ( $p = .000$ ); Additionally, a statistically significant difference was determined in terms of the procedures applied in regular kindergartens for the improvement of inclusive upbringing and education (PIEE) at the level of  $p < .005$  ( $p = .004$ ) (Table 2).

**Table 3.** Assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities about GQIEE, EIEEDC and PIEE (Median – Md)

| Respondents |      | GQIEE         | EIEEDC        | PIEE          |
|-------------|------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| educators   | M    | 15.8103       | 20.5000       | 15.9828       |
|             | N/Md | 58 (18.0000)  | 58 (21.0000)  | 58 (18.0000)  |
| parents     | M    | 13.0417       | 14.9583       | 16.7500       |
|             | N/Md | 48 (14.0000)  | 48 (15.0000)  | 48 (18.0000)  |
| Total:      | M    | 14.5566       | 17.9906       | 16.3302       |
|             | N/Md | 106 (15.0000) | 106 (17.0000) | 106 (18.0000) |

According to the calculated medians and mean values, it is noticeable that educators have significantly more positive assessments of general issues

related to inclusion in upbringing and education (GQIEE): Md = 18.0000; M = 15.8103 compared to parents of children with developmental disabilities: Md = 14.0000; M = 13.0417; and the effects of inclusive upbringing and education on children's development (EIEEDC) – for educators: Md = 21.0000; M = 20.5000, and for parents: Md = 15.0000; M = 14.9583 (Table 3). Although in terms of the assessments of teachers and parents of children with developmental disabilities regarding the procedures applied in regular kindergartens for the improvement of inclusive upbringing and education (PIEE), a statistically significant difference was determined at the level of  $p < .005$  (Table 2), according to the data shown in Table 3 on the calculated medians and mean values, a small difference is noticeable, which is slightly higher among parents of children with developmental disabilities compared to teachers – for educators Md = 18.0000; M = 15.9828, and for parents: Md = 18.0000; M = 16.7500.

**Table 4.** Assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities about GQIEE, EIEEDC and PIEE (Eta square –  $\eta$ )

|                      | $\eta$ |
|----------------------|--------|
| GQIEE * Respondents  | .447   |
| EIEEDC * Respondents | .679   |
| PIEE * Respondents   | .136   |

The data show (Table 4) that according to the calculated eta square according to Cohen's criterion in terms of the evaluations of teachers and parents of children with developmental disabilities in terms of general issues related to inclusion in upbringing and education (GQIEE), a medium impact was determined ( $h = .447$ ); on the effects of inclusive upbringing and education on children's development (EIEEDC), a large impact was determined ( $h = .679$ ); while in terms of the procedures applied in regular kindergartens for the improvement of inclusive upbringing and education (PIEE), a small impact was determined ( $h = .136$ ).

Based on the presented research results, it can be claimed that all the special research hypotheses were confirmed, according to which it was assumed that the research would establish that there are significant differences in the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities regarding general issues related to inclusion in education and education (GQIEE); on the effects of inclusive upbringing and education on children's development (EIEEDC); and about the procedures applied in regular kindergartens for the improvement of inclusive upbringing and education (PIEE). It is also concluded that the general assumption from which

the research started, that there are statistically significant differences in the assessments of teachers and parents of children about inclusion in upbringing and education, has been confirmed.

### **Discussions**

The presented research results highlight that inclusion in upbringing and education in preschool institutions is a significant factor in the successful realization of educational work. There are fewer segregation systems of educational work, that is, a parallel system of regular and special educational work, which were characteristic in the initial years of inclusive theory and practice in preschool institutions. Inclusion in upbringing and education in preschool institutions has become a component of educational work in all kindergartens. All the actors of preschool education and education are aware of this. A significant contribution to the development of an inclusive culture in preschool institutions is made by the local environment and the entire social community, which are also factors in preschool upbringing and education.

This understanding is supported by numerous researches conducted worldwide. They have examined various problems of inclusive theory and practice at all levels of schooling. Research results demonstrate that including all children in regular educational groups provides them with the opportunity to develop their full potential and values (Sunko & Kaselj Tomic 2020). This was not possible in the segregation systems of upbringing and education to a sufficient extent, because children in special educational and school groups were limited to a certain extent by the program of educational work and teaching that was adapted to their capabilities (Muttabakani & Callinan 2020). In today's circumstances, at the time of the migrant crisis facing the world, especially Europe, that problem is even more pronounced (Schmidt 2010). This kind of practice was cleared up a long time ago and inclusive upbringing and education has generally taken root in all countries with developed education systems. The importance of inclusive upbringing and education in preschool institutions is underscored by the results of this conducted research.

At the same time, this does not mean that problems do not still exist. One of the key points revealed in the results of this research is related to the insufficient willingness of parents to accept the reality that their child needs a different (inclusive) approach. This is supported by findings from research into inclusive theory and practice conducted worldwide (Ragnarsdóttir 2019). Additionally, there is still insufficient training of parents for effective cooperation with educators and more effective cooperation with education. Therefore, there is a highlighted need for training parents to collaborate with educators on all matters related to educational work in preschool institutions, especially cooperation with educators (Kupzyk, LaBrot & Collins 2023).

Firstly, this research established that there is a difference in the assessments of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities on general issues

of inclusion in upbringing and education in preschool institutions, with significantly more positive assessments identified among educators. Such results were anticipated. Educators are professionals who, during initial education (which is especially characteristic of new study programs), have acquired a certain education for working in inclusive kindergartens. They also engage in training programs as part of their professional development, in addition to practicing the teaching profession, which is considered the right and duty of educators (Danniels & Pyle 2023). On the other hand, the parents of children with developmental disabilities included in this research have different educations and perform different professions. Many of them lack the basic knowledge required to work in an inclusive kindergarten and to effectively support their children, as evidenced by numerous studies (Kalsudd 2023; Oppenheim Shachar & Berent 2023). For these reasons, parents of children with developmental disabilities have different attitudes towards educational work in preschool institutions. Some may not even be familiar with the fundamental principles of inclusive theory and practice in education, or they may misunderstand them. Therefore, it is crucial for educators, professional colleagues, preschool management, in collaboration with the local community and broader society, to assist parents in acquiring the necessary pedagogical competences to work in inclusive kindergartens and support their children effectively.

Additionally, significantly more positive evaluations from educators compared to parents of children with developmental disabilities were identified regarding the effects of inclusive upbringing and education on children's development. Such assessments are informed by previous analyses. Educators, as professionals in their field, understand the outcomes of raising and educating children with developmental disabilities, which may not always be the case for parents (Knauf, 2016). This is particularly relevant for parents whose children exhibit symptoms indicative of developmental disabilities but who may not be ready to accept this reality, which can disrupt efforts to work effectively with these children. In more developed systems of preschool upbringing and education, parents have a significantly more positive approach to inclusive theory and practice in preschool institutions. This trend is also supported by numerous studies (Leowalu & Hendiks 2023). Some studies even suggest that parents are the initiators of special accommodations for their children in preschool institutions (Simón et al. 2023), setting examples for inclusive education practices in Serbian preschool institutions.

Particularly interesting research results emerged from the third research task, where parents of children with developmental disabilities showed slightly more positive assessments than educators regarding the procedures applied in regular kindergartens to improve inclusive upbringing and education. However, these results do not necessarily suggest that educators lack understanding of the procedures implemented in regular kindergartens to improve inclusive education. The slightly higher ratings from parents compared to educators regarding these procedures indicate that parents of children with developmental disabilities are highly interested

in the specific measures taken in working with their children in a preschool setting, which is understandable. Parents who may not possess sufficient knowledge about inclusive kindergarten practices and working with their children often face barriers in engaging with kindergarten activities and participating in relevant training programs (Fyssa, Tsakiri & Mouroutsou, 2023). These findings should guide educators, professional colleagues, and preschool management on how to engage effectively with parents of children with developmental disabilities, encouraging their participation and motivation to undergo training for working in inclusive kindergartens and supporting their children effectively.

### **Conclusion**

Despite all the difficulties that our society is facing, it can be concluded that there are positive developments in terms of inclusive upbringing and education in preschool institutions. In addition to social responsibility and social maturity for the process of inclusion, educators demonstrate high professionalism and readiness for change. In the context of the new legal acts, educators foster an inclusive ethics with respect for all children's education through inclusive practices in kindergarten<sup>4</sup>. In the research, it was not expected that parents would show somewhat more positive assessments regarding the improvement of inclusive upbringing and education in relation to educators. It is a fact that in recent years, educators are in the phase of applying new procedures in working with preschool children where the focus is on children's self-activities, on research and connecting experience and knowledge with projects that are implemented in kindergarten. In this context, parents are informed about their children's activities every day directly or through modern technologies. Photos, padlets and other means allowing parents to follow the development of their children, to observe how they behave in a group, how they learn and participate in the development of a real program. The obtained research results are expected. Parents of children, in addition to mitigating and suppressing prejudices, believe that a preschool institution can provide much more for their child's progress. This is quite natural, because parents and family members are often biased towards their member, especially towards the child. Designing activities in the kindergarten where parents and family members would have the opportunity to participate in the activities, to relax, to feel the atmosphere of the kindergarten would contribute to: a) notice the engagement of the teacher to pay attention to all actors; b) understand the complexity of the educational call and the need for quick response whenever necessary, etc. Parents and family members would probably be more lenient in the following assessments regarding inclusion in upbringing and education, because they would understand how much effort and love, in addition to professionalism, is necessary for children to feel comfortable in kindergarten. One would come to the conclusion that the modern educator "burns out" at work and that for this vocation permanent lifelong learning of a formal or informal type is necessary. It is concluded that it is necessary to conduct a more complex research in the near future, which would include

a larger number of educational workers from preschool to secondary education. It is necessary to determine the implementation of Individual education the program (IEP) and in this context to check the assessments not only of educators, but also of parents of children with and without developmental disabilities, professional associates, speech therapists and special educator from institutions of additional educational support and to implement a series of other planned actions before conducting the research, so it would come to elementary barriers that disrupt the process of inclusion in upbringing and education, but at the same time highlight all those elements that contributed to children in preschool institutions feeling good and safe while learning and playing.

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### **NOTES**

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