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## **Support needs in working with students with developmental disabilities - teachers ' perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the study was to determine type and intensity of support that teachers consider necessary for working with students who have developmental disabilities. The sample consisted of 108 teachers, aged 24 to 61 ( $M=40.77$ ;  $SD=9.97$ ). The Needs Questionnaire (Rodríguez et al., 2012) was used to collect data on the required support. The results indicate a relatively high level of support needs in all four areas covered by the questionnaire, with the highest need expressed for social support, followed by the need for information and the need for additional resources, while the lowest level of support is needed in communicating about the child with developmental disability with others. The overall level of support needed by teachers from our sample does not differ statistically significantly between male and female teachers ( $t=0.640$ ;  $p=0.524$ ), nor between teachers employed in public and private schools ( $t=0.180$ ;  $p=0.857$ ). No statistically significant correlation was found between the need for support and age ( $r=-0.002$ ;  $p=0.981$ ) or years of work experience of the respondents ( $r=0.056$ ;  $p=0.564$ ). The obtained results provide an insight into the intensity and structure of teachers' needs for support in working with students with developmental disabilities and can represent a starting point for providing support aligned with the expressed needs, with the aim of increasing the quality of the teaching process.

*Keywords:* developmental disabilities, teachers, teaching, support

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## **Introduction**

With the development of inclusive education as a process that focuses on building the ability to continuously and flexibly provide education that suits each student, supporting teachers in this process is an extremely important factor. If we understand inclusive education as including all students in schools where the majority population consists of students without disabilities, it remains unclear how to adequately support teachers who work with children with disabilities, taking into account the characteristics and specifics of working with this population (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). One of the key factors that would encourage this type of education is intersectoral cooperation between teachers and special education teachers who are trained to work with the population of children with developmental disabilities is highlighted (Bray & Russell's, 2018). The purpose of cooperation is to facilitate the coordination and connection of activities in the process of education of children in the interest of their development, as well as providing help and support to the family in the realization of the educational role (Kovačić, 2017). In addition to this, some authors cite financial reasons as key that can contribute to making schools more accessible for all children, taking into account the importance of adapting the school environment to each child (Humphrey & Symes 2013; Lindsay et al., 2014). Requirements for teachers to master specific competencies for working with students with developmental disabilities imply adequate support, in order to more clearly understand their key role in the implementation of inclusive education. A significant factor is the teacher's perception of their own competencies, responsibilities and professional roles during this process (Jordan et al., 2009). The support that teachers have in this process can be extremely important for a more adequate and comprehensive understanding of the inclusive education process from the teacher's point of view. Although this process is legally defined in the Republic of Serbia, it is extremely important to look critically at possible barriers that teachers see as crucial, and work to reduce them with adequate professional support of all those involved in this process.

The aim of the work is to determine the type and intensity of support that teachers consider necessary for working with students who have developmental disabilities.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 108 teachers, aged from 24 to 61 years ( $M=40.77$ ;  $SD=9.97$ ) and with years of experience ranging from one to 38 years ( $M=14.19$ ;  $SD=10.26$ ). The structure of the sample is shown in Table 1.

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Table 1

*Structure of the sample*

Variable	Categories	N	%
Gender	Male	14	13.0
	Female	94	87.0
Type of school	Public	81	75.0
	Private	27	25.0

*Instrument*

The Needs Questionnaire (Rodríguez et al., 2012) was used to collect data on the necessary support in working with a child with developmental disabilities. The questionnaire consists of 22 items, divided into four areas: need for information (6 items), need for social support (6 items), help in explaining the child to others (4 items) and need for additional resources (6 items). Each item describes one of the forms of support that the respondent may need. The respondent declares himself in relation to each offered form of support on a Likert-type scale, where the answers range from "I don't need it at all" (value 1) to "I always need it" (value 5). The sum of all values indicates the intensity of the need for support in a certain area and on the questionnaire as a whole. Data on gender, age, years of service of respondents and the type of school they work in were obtained using a general questionnaire constructed for the purposes of the research.

*Procedure*

The research was conducted during 2023 in primary schools in Serbia. Respondents filled out a general questionnaire and a questionnaire on needs in paper form. The research was anonymous, and the respondents were informed that the data would be used exclusively for research purposes. Filling in both questionnaires took about 15 minutes.

*Statistical data processing*

Collected data were presented using descriptive statistical measures (minimum, maximum, arithmetic mean and standard deviation) and processed using the T test for independent samples and the Pearson correlation. The SPSS Statistics for Windows 22.0 program was used for data processing.

**Results**

The research results indicate a relatively high level of support needs in all four areas covered by the questionnaire, with the highest need expressed for social support (M=3.88), followed by the need for information (M=3.79) and the need for additional resources (AS =3.36), while the lowest level of help is needed to help communicate about a child with developmental disabilities with others (M=3.11).

If we look at individual items, it can be seen that teachers mostly express the need for information about the student's disability (M=4.37), talking to someone in the school where they

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work about a student with disability (M=4.01), more regular conversations with experts (M=3.98) and time to talk with other teachers and staff about this student (M=3.96). The lowest needs for support were expressed by teachers in relation to physical space to work with a student with a developmental disability (M=3.00), help in describing the student's progress to his parents (M=3.01), help in explaining the student's needs to other employees (M= 3.05) and help when they have to leave the classroom (M=3.09) (Table 2).

Table 2

*Descriptive results on the Needs Questionnaire*

	Items of the Needs Questionnaire	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Need for information	I need information about the child's disability	1.00	5.00	4.37	0.85
	...About how to teach him/her to relate to others	1.00	5.00	3.66	1.00
	...About how to teach language abilities	1.00	5.00	3.81	1.05
	...About how to teach academic skills	1.00	5.00	3.69	1.03
	...About how to interact and communicate with him/her	1.00	5.00	3.47	1.25
	...About how to reduce behavioral problems	1.00	5.00	3.72	1.17
Need for social support	I need someone in my school with whom I could talk to about this child	1.00	5.00	4.01	1.05
	I need opportunities to speak to the parents of this pupil	1.00	5.00	3.76	1.05
	I need time to talk to other teachers and staff about this child	1.00	5.00	3.79	1.02
	I would like to speak to experts more regularly	1.00	5.00	3.98	0.99
	I need to read more documentation about this disability	1.00	5.00	3.77	1.02
	I would like to talk to teachers with pupils like mine	1.00	5.00	3.96	1.00
Help to explain to others	Help in explaining the needs of this pupil to the other children	1.00	5.00	3.10	1.10
	Help in explaining the child's progress to the parents	1.00	5.00	3.01	1.23
	Help in advising the child's parents	1.00	5.00	3.29	1.16
	Help in explaining this child's needs to other staff	1.00	5.00	3.05	1.20
Need for added resources	I need help for the occasions in which I must leave the classroom	1.00	5.00	3.09	1.19
	I need someone to provide individual support for the child outside the classroom	1.00	5.00	3.55	1.14
	I need someone to provide individual support for the child in the classroom	1.00	5.00	3.28	1.16
	I need more physical space to work with this pupil	1.00	5.00	3.00	1.22
	I need more curricular materials to work with this pupil	1.00	5.00	3.71	1.11
	I need greater flexibility in my schedule to be able to attend to this child	1.00	5.00	3.54	1.18

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By comparing the support needs of respondents of different genders, it was determined that the level of support needed by teachers from our sample does not differ statistically significantly between male and female teachers (Table 3).

Table 3

*Comparison of the level of support needs in relation to gender*

Domain	Gender	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Need for information	Male	14	22.57	4.89	-.106	106	.916
	Female	94	22.73	5.42			
Need for social support	Male	14	23.29	4.07	.014	106	.989
	Female	94	23.27	5.15			
Help to explain to others	Male	14	13.79	3.56	1.310	106	.193
	Female	94	12.24	4.18			
Need for added resources	Male	14	21.50	4.72	.976	106	.331
	Female	94	19.97	5.58			
Ukupan nivo potrebe za podrškom	Male	14	81.14	14.35	.640	106	.524
	Female	94	78.21	16.21			

Examining the differences between the support needs of respondents working in public and private schools, we found that there is no statistically significant difference in the level of support expressed by respondents from public and private schools (Table 4).

Table 4

*Comparison of the level of support needs in relation to the type of school*

Domain	Type of school	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Need for information	Public	81	22.84	5.06	.425	106	.672
	Private	27	22.33	6.19			
Need for social support	Public	81	23.63	4.60	1.303	106	.195
	Private	27	22.19	6.03			
Help to explain to others	Public	81	12.11	3.95	-1.464	106	.146
	Private	27	13.44	4.52			
Need for added resources	Public	81	20.17	5.50	.020	106	.984
	Private	27	20.15	5.53			
Overall level of need for support	Public	81	78.75	14.734	.180	106	.857
	Private	27	78.11	19.43			

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Using the Pearson correlation coefficient, the connection between the respondents' needs for support, their age and length of service (N=108) was tested. The results showed that there is no statistically significant correlation between the stated needs for support of our respondents and their age and years of service (Table 5).

Table 5.

*Correlation between the need for support, age and work experience*

Domain		Age	Years of service
Need for information	r	-.045	.014
	P	.646	.883
Need for social support	r	-.018	.054
	P	.852	.581
Help to explain to others	r	.058	.066
	P	.551	.495
Need for added resources	r	.010	.050
	P	.920	.605
Overall level of need for support	r	-.002	.056
	P	.981	.564

## Discussion

By looking at teachers' opinions about the need for support, we found that teaching students with developmental disabilities within inclusive classes is mostly a challenge for teachers, which is why they need different forms of support in their work. The highest level of needed help was expressed by teachers in the domain of social support, through the need to cooperate more intensively and exchange experiences with other experts, colleagues and parents of students. Foreign (Paulsrud, & Nilholm, 2023; Pettersson & Ström, 2019) and domestic research (Ilić-Stošović and Nikolić, 2012; Japundža-Milisavljević et al., 2022) point to the importance of mutual cooperation between teachers and other experts, especially special education teachers, while the cooperation of teachers and parents is seen as one of the priorities

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and a source of support for the education of students with disabilities (Budnyk et al., 2024; Wahyudi & Rugaiyah, 2019).

Teachers from our sample expressed a relatively high level of need for help in the form of information about the student's disability and information on how to work with the student on acquiring academic skills, improving speech and language skills, overcoming behavioral problems, etc. Our results are in agreement with the findings of other authors that teachers have a low assessment of their abilities for individualization in teaching students, evaluation and development of an individual educational plan (Skočić Mihić, 2017). Bearing in mind that the perception of one's own competence is one of the main factors in the formation of teachers' attitudes towards working with students with developmental disabilities (Starčević, Macura and Topalović, 2018), it is necessary to provide teachers with adequate training and sources of information, so that they feel safer when teaching students with disabilities. Specialized experts are also an important source of information about the difficulties the student has, and the need for intensifying communication and cooperation with other experts was recognized and assessed by our respondents as an area of high need for support.

The need for additional resources was also expressed by our respondents, who recognized that they lack materials to work with, flexible time management to work with a student with a developmental disability, and a person who would work individually with this student in or out of the classroom. In other studies, teachers also express the need to engage special education teachers (Ilić-Stošović & Nikolić, 2012) and teaching assistants (Milošević & Maksimović, 2022) in working with students with developmental disabilities who attend inclusive classes, while the availability of appropriate resources in classrooms as an important factor in the realization of teaching with these students (Goldan & Schwab, 2020). The teachers in our sample needed the least support in explaining the needs and progress of students with disabilities to parents, colleagues, and other students. We assume that this result is an expression of dedicated acquaintance of the students by the teacher.

In our research, the gender of the respondents and the type of school did not prove to be relevant for the level of support that the respondents needed to teach students with developmental disabilities. Also, the correlation between the need for support and the age and length of service of the respondents has not been established. In the context of previous research, we can assume that the characteristics of younger teachers, such as a more positive attitude towards teaching students with disabilities, changes in the educational process and professional development (Japundža-Milisavljević et al., 2022; Nikčević-Milković and Jurković, 2017) and the richer work and teaching experience of older teachers, resulted in a similar level of needed support across all ages and points in the career of teachers in our sample. The results obtained in our research suggest that other factors, which were not included in this research, determine the level of necessary help of teachers in our environment. Considering the available literature, potential factors could include the training of respondents (Ilić-Stošović and Nikolić, 2012; Knežević Florić et al., 2018), availability of resources (Vujačić et al., 2018), support of the school management (Nikčević-Milković & Jurković, 2017; Valeo, 2008), the number of students with developmental disabilities in the class (Kranjčec Mlinarić et al., 2016) or the type of developmental disability the student has (Kahn & Lewis, 2014), which needs to be examined in future research.

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## Conclusion

Despite the existence of a legal framework that clearly defines inclusive education for many years, there is still a great need for a clear designation of the roles of everyone who implements the educational process. Taking into account the characteristics and specifics of the education of students with developmental disabilities, the support of experts in the field of special education and rehabilitation is extremely important for teachers. The highest level of needed help was expressed by teachers in the domain of social support, through the need to cooperate more intensively and exchange experiences with other experts, colleagues and parents of students. Teachers from our sample expressed a relatively high level of need for help in the form of information about the student's disability and information on how to work with the student on acquiring academic skills, but also an adequate approach to work taking into account the student's disability. The need for additional resources was also expressed by our respondents, who recognized that they lack didactic material, flexible time allocation to work with a student with a developmental disability, and a person who would work individually with this student in or out of the classroom. Teachers in our sample needed the least support in explaining the needs and progress of students with disabilities to parents, colleagues, and other students.

Gender and the type of school where teachers work did not prove to be statistically significant when it comes to the level of support needed. No statistically significant correlation was found between the age and length of service of teachers and the support needed for teaching students with disabilities. A limitation of this research could be considered a relatively small number of respondents, so conducting a similar research on a larger sample is desirable in the future. Although certain determinants that can affect the level of support needed by teachers have been taken into account, in future research it would be extremely important to analyze the level of support needed from the perspective of others as well. When it comes to practical implications, the results obtained from this research can serve as guidelines for further improvement and a clearer understanding of inclusive education.

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