

# INVOLVEMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITY IN THE EDUCATION OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

## SUMMARY

*The article presents the results of a research conducted with the persons with disability included in the teaching process at the Department of Social Work in Zagreb. The participants of the research were persons with disability who, for a number of years, have been participating as exterior collaborators in the education process of social work students as lecturers from the practice or field instructors in associations in which the students complete their placements. The aim of the research was to gain insight into the perception and the experience of participation of the persons with disability in the teaching process in the field of social work. The data were gathered during conversations in the focus group. The analysis of participants' statements reveal four categories related to different themes of user involvement in the education process: (1) Experience of user participation in the teaching process; (2) Importance of personal user experience which the users wish to convey to the students; (3) User review of the quality of teaching; (4) Recommendations for a better involvement of users in the teaching process.*

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Džombić, 4<sup>th</sup> year social work student, e-mail: anita.dzombic@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> Associated professor Kristina Urbanc, Ph.D., social worker, e-mail: kristina.urbanc@zg.htnet.hr.

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Anita Džombić<sup>1</sup>  
Kristina Urbanc<sup>2</sup>  
Faculty of Law  
University of Zagreb  
Department of Social Work

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## INTRODUCTION

Being included means having an equal position of negotiating, agreeing and intervening as well as an equal position of analysing from one's own perspective (Beresford, 2005.; Lowes and Hullat, 2005.; Oliver, 1996.). The inclusion of service users in the research or the education process of social workers only because this is one of the modern requirements of good practice, but without significant changes in the ways of thinking and decision-making represents tokenism<sup>3</sup>, and not inclusion. The inclusion requires the whole system to be adapted in order to »prepare« the field for new participants, in this case the service users. As far as the social work practice is concerned, if the users have already been involved, this preparation process often takes place subconsciously, which does not necessarily mean that it moves in the right direction, especially when we talk about the inclusion of users pertaining to vulnerable or marginalized groups. Therefore, it is important that the future social workers have the possibility to develop an additional sensitivity for the approach of participation and empowerment to service users and their ideas in the direction of the social work practice development which would better reflect the user needs and initiatives, i.e. the practice which would be tailored to the user.

On the other hand, the inclusion of users from different user associations as active participants in the teaching process represents a long-term investment into the development of so called »field teaching bases« whose participants have insight into the content and the process of education of social workers and on the basis of the informed consent participate in the planning phase of the teaching process; they participate directly by intervening in the content and the modalities of course teaching and field placement implementation and indirectly in giving feedback on the efficiency of the education process in relation to the competencies of social workers, as a final outcome of this process.

Considering the issues related to user inclusion and analysing the experience acquired on the subject so far, mostly in Anglo-Saxon countries (Beresford, 2005.; Lowes and Hullat, 2005.), the term »user involvement« seems now problematic due to several reasons. First, the idea that someone can include or exclude another person implies that the »includer« and the »excluder« has the power over someone, which further implies the question whether the faculties and the academic community possess the power of inclusion or exclusion.

This power is to a great extent adopted from traditionally hierarchical relations in different systems (social, health, and education) and based on modernist paradigms of helping professions, where the power of professional paradigm is the only perspective which is seriously considered in finding solutions. The power can be oriented toward a positive change

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<sup>3</sup> *Tokenism refers to the practice or politics where minimum efforts are made in order to offer the minorities equal opportunities to those of the majority population (according to Williamson, 2001.).*

(whereby the question of criteria of what is considered to be a positive change is raised) and the final outcome of possessing the power can be the fact that it is distributed in a more equal way in relationships, but it can favour the development of tokenism as well.

In the context of post-modern paradigm, the focus of theoretical concepts of helping is placed on the relationship of participants (the user and the professional) based on communication, agreement, research and respect of individual experience of participants (O'Hanlon, 1993., in Čačinovič Vogrinčič et al. 2007.). Due to the fact that we deal with participation in the teaching, and not the helping process, the concepts of the strengths perspective and ethics of participation are particularly important. The essence of the ethics of participation lies in the fact that the former »objectivity of experts« is replaced by the participation in which no one has the final word, it is an on-going conversation, and the ethics of participation, which is added to the ethics of social work, has a key importance for user involvement in the common research of what knowledge and actions users consider important (Hoffman, 1994, in Čačinovič Vogrinčič et al. 2007.). Acting from a strength orientation perspective, according to Saleebey (1997., in Čačinovič Vogrinčič et al. 2007.), in the context of creation and implementation of the teaching process with social work students means a respectful exploration and inclusion of user resources in the education of future social workers.

It seems that the topic of service user involvement in the teaching process should be approached from various perspectives (and not only from the point of view of the academic community, i.e. the faculty), since the users themselves are »involved« in personal difficulties and crises from their beginning, and the experts are, actually, the newcomers in their everyday life, and they seized the power and the right not only to »be involved«, but also frequently to be the only ones to decide on the modalities and sorts of help, possible solutions, subjects which will be researched, contents in which we will educate new experts etc.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to initiate the reflection on the challenges and prerequisites needed for quality involvement of service users (in this case the persons with disability) in the process of education of social workers.

The persons with disability are in the focus of this paper since, according to the authors' experience, they represent the group of users which has the longest permanent collaboration with the Department of Social Work. The collaboration had been initiated in the beginning of 1990s by the involvement of several associations of persons with disability in the field placement programme of second-year students within the course Social Work with an Individual. During the last fifteen years, the collaboration with the users – persons with disability, who are coordinators and members of different associations, has spread to other forms and contents of the teaching process aimed at social work students. Since persons with disability have been participating in the teaching process for a long time, we were interested to discover what their perception of this experience of involvement is.

## QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO RESEARCH AND THE USER PERSPECTIVE

For the purpose of this article we have chosen the qualitative approach, since the goal of the research was to gain detailed insight into the experience of individuals with disabilities in the social work teaching process as well as into their perception of participation. The following are some basic features of the qualitative approach: it is applied in natural life situations in order to gain a complete insight into the analysed environment. The aim of such an approach is to explore in detail the perception of the participants in the research and purposive samples, i.e. informed persons, are preferred in the choice of participants. The qualitative methods include the analysis of the corpus based on personal experience, life stories, individual or group interviews, observations and other documents describing both usual and exceptional moments in the life of an individual (Milas, 2005.).

The research based on qualitative approach and the perspective of user involvement are rare in Croatia and there are only a few of them in the context of helping professions (Koller-Trbović and Žižak, 2005.; Koller-Trbović and Žižak, 2006.; Ajduković, Sladović Franz and Kregar, 2005.a; Kletečki Radović and Kregar Orešković 2005.; Ajduković, Sladović Franz and Kregar, 2005.b; Sladović Franz, Kregar Orešković and Vejmelka 2007.). Although the mentioned articles focus on children, young people and foster parents and they are not relevant to our paper from the point of view of the content, we have enumerated these references due to their importance for promotion of the user perspective and because they advocate a new way of consideration and approach in the practice and research in the field of helping professions. One of the main features of this approach is to respect individual experience of social service users and to use this experience as a resource in the helping process, but in the process of educating future professionals as well. In this context, the literature on social work mentions the term »experience experts« used by some authors as the synonym for »service users« (Preston-Shoot, 2005.).

In this sense, modern education standards of helping professions impose an even more articulate need for taking into account the user experience and opinions in the needs analysis, definition and implementation of helping activities and their evaluation as well as in the process of redefining the existing measures and modalities of help provision from the user perspective (Beresford, 2005.; Ajduković, Kregar Orešković and Sladović Franz, 2008.).

In an effort for the researcher to enter deeper in the subject, to decide with the participants of the research what it is that needs to be explored in the natural social environment of users and to develop a cooperative relationship at different levels (Čačinović Vogrinčić et al, 2007.; Hasler, 2004.) in both the helping and the research context, the qualitative approach with all its benefits, i.e. a low number of cases, creating hypotheses during the research process itself, construction of definitions and theories contained in the data itself (Mesec, 1998.), gains in importance in the current conception of social work and other helping disciplines.

The qualitative approach, especially as far as vulnerable groups of users, which have been or still are deprived and with no power, are concerned, with its focus on the user and his interpretation of the problem situation, becomes important not only in the research context but in the creation and implementation of user perspective in the teaching process as well. Knowing, understanding and describing the service user perspective becomes an integral part of project and educational goals, unavoidable in the field of education, practice and research in helping professions (Lowe and Hullat, 2005.; Koller-Trbović and Žižak, 2008.).

Here is what one of the social workers who believes that the changes should start »from the top« says about the use of qualitative approach: »The government must move away from quantitative measures of social work to qualitative ones. The tick-box culture is destroying social work. If social work is about helping people through transitions in life, people need time to articulate their needs and time to make decisions. And when you are working in crises, time isn't there and people are being left without time for choices« (Cree and Davis, 2007.:125).

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The objective of the research was to gain insight into the experience of inclusion of social service users – persons with disability in the teaching process at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, and into their views on the process of educating social workers and the possibilities of enhancing the quality of their education.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to gain insight into the experience of persons with disability in the teaching process and into their views on the process of educating social workers, we have organized a focus group. The focus group is an interview with a small number of participants on particular subjects, with the purpose of gathering high-quality data in the environment where the participants can exchange experience, i.e. in order to get a better insight in the personal experience on certain issues (Milas, 2005.).

The preparation of the pattern for the focus group was preceded by informing the potential participants of the research – persons with disability with experience in the participation in the teaching process at the faculty, on the process and the content of the social work education at the undergraduate and graduate level and the individual conversation of the researcher with each potential participant. Based on the insight in the undergraduate and graduate study programmes, the potential participants of the research could have approached the researchers with questions and articulate the themes, i.e. the questions which they considered that they needed to be discussed. During individual conversations with potential users, the following discussions subjects for the focus group were defined:

1. User personal comments concerning their experience of involvement in the teaching process
2. Issues that the users consider important to transfer to the students from their user experience
3. User recommendations for enhancing the teaching quality
4. Issues that relate to the user perspective on their better preparedness and involvement in the teaching process

The experience of some Anglo-Saxon countries (Beresford et al., 2006.; Steel, 2005.; Lowes and Hullat, 2005.) has revealed that the social care users frequently get involved in the research, without previous preparation on the content, which results in the lack of basic information on the subject. Thus, they consider themselves incompetent for the conversation in the focus group. After the end of individual preparatory talks, the participants were asked if they perceive themselves to be competent to talk about the issue of education of social workers and each individual participant thought he was competent to discuss the issue of the teaching programme at the faculty.

The focus group took place in the premises of the Home for the Elderly and Infirm in Zagreb in the duration of 90 minutes. The conversation was recorded, after the previous consent of each individual participant of the research.

## *RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS*

We have sent a letter of invitation to participate in the research and the necessary documentation to six users with several years of experience in different forms of teaching of social work students who have participated in teaching within various courses. Four users participated in the focus group and two users excused themselves due to personal obligations.

The participants of the research were users with ten or more years of experience in different forms of teaching of social work students and they have participated in different courses (Social Work with an Individual, Social Work with Persons with Disability and Field Placement for the students of the second and the fourth year of study). The following were the criteria for the choice of participants: their motivation for participation and their years-long experience of participation in the teaching process. Having in mind the research objective, we assumed that such users would present "information-rich cases". It is a purposive sample which consisted of four participants, members of different associations of the persons with disability operating in Zagreb:

- a) One participant from the association "Touch" - Croatian Association for the Deafblind Persons
- b) Two participants from the Croatian Paraplegic and Tetraplegic Association
- c) One participant from the Association of Persons with Physical Disabilities.

However, it is necessary to take into account the methodological constrains brought by the involvement of persons with disability as participants in the research. Analysing the results, we had in mind that they cannot be interpreted only from the perspective of service users in general, but only from the perspective of users with the experience of disability<sup>4</sup>.

## DATA ANALYSIS

In data analysis we have performed the open-coding process which consisted of the following steps (Mesec, 1998.):

1. Assigning notions to the empirical data
2. Grouping of notions into categories
3. Analysis of meanings of notions and categories.

The following example illustrates the organization of gathered data according to the mentioned steps, whereby the numbers in brackets refer to the participants of the focus group.

**Table 1.**  
Assigning notions to the empirical data and grouping of notions into categories according to the level of abstraction (Steps 1 and 2)

Level of abstraction (I)	II	III
Statements on the possibilities of better user involvement in the education of social workers	Notions	Categories
I think that, if we want a better transfer of knowledge from persons with disability to the students, it would be good to organize a training for us lecturers at least once a year or once every two years to teach us how to teach. (2)	User training for the role of the lecturer	Recommendations for better involvement of users in the teaching process of social work students
The users appreciate to have a time framework, some preliminary dates in advance when the lecture will take place... (2)	Time framework of the lectures	
Since we are not in the education system, it can be called an informal cooperation. However, if the relationship was different, we would change our way, our attitude toward that. I can't say that we are not serious, but we would have a more serious attitude toward the work. I agree with that, for me it was a high stake for the future. The users should be more closely connected, as collaborators, by a contract... (1)	Formalized collaboration of the faculty and the user	

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<sup>4</sup> In order not to burden the text by mentioning that we are dealing with the narrow group of service users – the persons with disability, further in the text the participants are called (service) users, i.e. users-lecturers.

Table 1. continue.

<p>Simply, I would say that what we are doing now should be more organized. (4)</p>	<p>Organization of the cooperation</p>	
<p>That we have more palpable results after the end of one academic year... (4)</p>	<p>More concrete results</p>	
<p>We (persons with disability) should be more in contact among ourselves, but I don't know how we can get to know each other. It would be good to know each other so that we learn how to transfer the knowledge from one category of persons with disability and how to communicate our needs to the students. (2)</p>	<p>To get acquainted with other users-lecturers</p>	
<p>It is a complement; they are complementing each other (the faculty and the associations). I think that both are necessary and that we should find a way to improve it, the beginning was good. Now it wouldn't be good if it faded away... (3)</p>	<p>Mutual complementing of the faculty and associations in the teaching process</p>	
<p>I think the access, so we can go there... (4)</p>		
<p>The faculties are public spaces and I think it is necessary that a ramp is constructed, that is why I said that a toilette should be reconstructed there because if someone wants to work there, he should be able to be there the whole day and not only temporarily and for a short period of time. (3)</p>	<p>Better accessibility to the faculty</p>	
<p>This is not the message to persons with disability that when we come to the faculty they have to carry us up to lecture rooms. We are not in the equal position and we feel less valuable if a student or someone else needs to carry you. I don't know how to call it... it's sick for me. Someone feels important at the expense of that person. Someone is important and they deliberately put other people in a subordinate position. Consciously or unconsciously, whatever, unconsciously or consciously, whatever. (4)</p>	<p>The user associations and the faculty should create common projects</p>	
<p>Well, maybe to organize common projects. When the plans are being made, when they are dealing with education, higher education, to include the persons with disability who completed university programmes and who know what the problems during the study are, what was missing ... there are student associations of the persons with disability. People who studied when there was no access and today there is one, and maybe someone would find a job as a lecturer. (4)</p>	<p>Possibility of hiring persons with disabilities as lecturers</p>	



### **Analysis of meanings of notions and categories (Step 3)**

According to the participants' statements, the recommendations for quality enhancements of their inclusion in the teaching process with the social work students are numerous and encouraging. For example, the users suggest the introduction of training for them as lecturers as well as planning of a time framework of the lectures. Although a prepared executive plan for each course exists with specific dates and themes, we assume that the users coming to teach the classes often do not have an insight into the whole teaching process i.e. what contents have the students studied when and in which context. A more detailed insight into the process and the content of the individual course and the study year would enable users-lecturers to have a global perspective in which they could have a more active participation in creating the contents of collaboration and concrete results, and so the offer to students by different user associations and the faculty would mutually be better complemented. All these suggestions indicate that there is a need for a more formal collaboration, not just at the level of planning and inclusion in the teaching process but also at the level of creation of joint projects. An important suggestion by users-lecturers relates to the fact that the faculty building should be more accessible to persons who have difficulty with the mobility and better adapted to their independent mobility within the faculty, which has not been realized so far (however, the adaptation of a part of the building as well as the toilettes for persons with disability is underway). Therefore, we can say that the suggestions of users-lecturers have encompassed all the prerequisites which are the basis for the development of a different collaborative relationship between the faculty and user associations. Accepting these suggestions, or at least opening a dialogue between the faculty and the users-lecturers would mean a step forward toward a partnership which would be reflected in common planning of the time framework and the contents, collaboration through projects of mutual interest as well as long-term planning of education and employment of persons with disability as lecturers at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb. The need of users-lecturers to receive education in order to be more prepared for their role as lecturers as well as the need to get to know each other and "create a network" indicates their active and critical approach to this collaboration as well as their motivation for involvement in the teaching process of the social work student.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

The analysis of participants' statements according to the previously described procedure revealed four thematic categories:

- a) Experience of user participation in the teaching process
- b) Aspects of personal user experience which users wish to transfer to the students
- c) User comments on the quality of teaching
- d) User recommendations for their better inclusion in the teaching process

**a) Experience of user participation in the teaching process**

The users characterize their participation in the education process of social work students as a collaboration which has lasted for several years and became more complex and extended collaboration: We have collaborated with the Department of Social Work for many years now. I think that this collaboration is very good since it expanded to several segments (1).

The complexity of the collaboration is reflected in the fact that the beginning of the collaboration between the faculty and the users started as demonstration lectures of users, and expanded over the years to several segments (seminars, exercises, lectures, field placements, publishing of professional papers): First, it was just one demonstration lecture for the students...the students contacted us afterwards and four, five, six of them came to visit the deafblind persons...we also had one practical part which lasted longer, everything in the form of seminars... then they expanded the collaboration, for example they asked me to write a professional paper... (2).

The users perceive the quality of the collaboration in a very specific approach of the Department of Social Work to the collaboration with users, described in the following way: I think that your faculty is perhaps the only one in Zagreb to have such collaboration with associations, as opposed to other faculties. I think that the highest level of collaboration is attained with the Department of Social Work (1).

The participants recognise the high level of quality in the collaboration in relation to the competence of social workers which are employed in user associations after having completed their studies. According to the participants, the students have acquired the competencies based on experiential learning during field placements: The association received students who later had a job there, which was great, they came and they already knew the issues and they could handle existential and other problems more easily... (4).

On the other hand, the participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that the faculty building is inaccessible for people with disability. The adapted access to the faculty building for persons with disability would enable them to independently move through the faculty, whether they come to study, work or they are just visiting the premises. The message on mobility and accessibility of higher education buildings is also important for social work students: This is not the message to persons with disability that when we come to the faculty they have to carry us up to lecture rooms. We are not in the equal position and we feel less valuable if a student or someone else needs to carry you (3).

**b) Aspects of personal user experience which users wish to transfer to the students**

One of the messages that the participants considered important to pass to the students is the value of personal example in the social work which, according to one participant, is

reflected through discovering the everyday life of a user and the possibility for the user to present himself through this personal story: ...express what the students lack, from my life, from the practice, what life brings, by personal example, and show them and find ways to go through it in the best possible way... (1).

One of the aspects of the personal experience that the users consider important to be transferred to the students is respecting the individual approach, regardless of the similarities of certain impairments and common diagnosis: ...within the population of the deafblind people the situation is very complex and every one of us is different, has different needs, problems, different ways of communication, different living conditions, education etc. (2).

The participants also underline the importance of a personal contact and experience, practical segment in the transfer of knowledge to students, as well as getting to know the users in their usual environment: ...they need a broader segment, a practical part of introducing students to deafblind persons, an informal meeting where the deafblind people socialize or a visit to their homes is much more valuable than the theory through the lectures, which is necessary, but it is always important to have a practical part of an exercise (2).

Besides the actual experience and skills, the participants underline that it is important to pass to students the level of values, influence on the change of students' perception of persons with disability and their expectations from users and to encourage them to think about the attitudes toward, for example, people with disability. This is also a common aspect that all the participants in the focus group considered important to be transferred to the students from their own user experience: So, what we are trying, also in the public sector, is that the population with disabilities is moved away from the perception of incapacity or pauperism, which can frequently be seen on the street, and to bring them closer to a meaningful life and work, together with other people, and these values are important (1).

Simply to change the perception of persons with disability as people who passively lie at home waiting for someone to do something (4).

Yes, actually, besides the passivity to which persons with disability are exposed, the bottom line is that very little is expected from them. In other words, they are always people of the second rank, aren't they? They do not have the »possibility« to decide on their own, that's what it's all about (3).

However, I think that it is wrong when someone tries to make it sound better, saying that it is not so bad to be deafblind, all the possible alternatives need to be shown because within the population of the deafblind people the situation is very complex and every one of us is different, has different needs, problems, different ways of communication, different living conditions, education (2).

### **c) User comments on the quality of teaching**

Speaking about the enhancement of the quality of teaching of social work students, the participants actually express their critiques of the existing study programme, commenting on

the changes incurred by the introduction of the Bologna process, they give recommendations for enhancement of teaching and enumerate the competencies which, according to them, the social work students should develop.

The critique of the Bologna process and the changes introduced in the teaching process are based on the experience of participants in the shortening of field placements, students who are overloaded and in their superficial attitude towards their obligations. They mention the need to analyse if such a student workload is necessary: Lately, as far as the Bologna process and shortening the field placements are concerned. It means that the students don't have the time to focus...they come to get it over with but they don't hear what you tell them, they don't understand the problem completely, all is superficial, fast, they're in some other place. It's a message to the faculty to reconsider its programme (1).

The field placements, they start in the second semester, of course there are no exams, its only March. In the beginning of March the students are really overloaded with different seminars and other things... (1).

The students today, they just can't, as you said it, they just come and want to get it over with, they don't realize what you are saying, they don't understand the whole problem, everything is just superficial, fast, they're in some other place, perhaps some other exams are on their mind, I don't know but the fact is that it's just like that (2).

...they will manage to do it, but we are talking here about the things that we consider should contribute to a certain quality and by studying superficially they will hardly be able to do their work later in practice and create with quality (2).

...during their work they simply become tough and they forget the codices and the behaviour and everything which these professions are imposing in a moral sense. Such a system which is busy, I can also say frantic and imposed to students during their education worsens the situation. So, I don't know if we don't insist on that, if we don't work on it, people will not acquire it during their field placements (1).

Besides criticizing the existing programme and workload, the participants proposed certain changes in order to enhance the quality of student field placements:

That's why we would like for people to be involved in field placements, and they are especially welcome in associations which have a certain vision...to keep field placements with the persons with disability, definitely (3).

Perhaps it would be interesting for all the students who were together involved in the field placement to meet with the users and to organize a round-table, to see the expectations, before the students go an introduction can be organized and in the end a final session so they see it all makes sense (4).

As the most important competencies that should be developed in students, the participants state the respect of the user perspective (what kind of solution is acceptable to the user and what kind is not), the direct communication with the user, individual approach

and the sensitivity to socially excluded individuals. The following statements illustrate the mentioned competencies:

I think that they should acquire certain forms of behaviour, which behaviour is acceptable and which one is not in the work with persons with disability. Unfortunately, we are still witnessing that the majority of students who later become employees of these centres for social work quite, how I should say, ignore persons with disability (2).

They should try to get the information directly from a person with disability who comes to the centre and not only from some other members... (4).

To change the perception that every person with disability necessarily needs social welfare help (3).

A certain level of sensitivity toward everyone for whom the system should provide, the elderly, infirm. To all those who are isolated in the society... (1).

#### **d) User recommendations for their better inclusion in the teaching process**

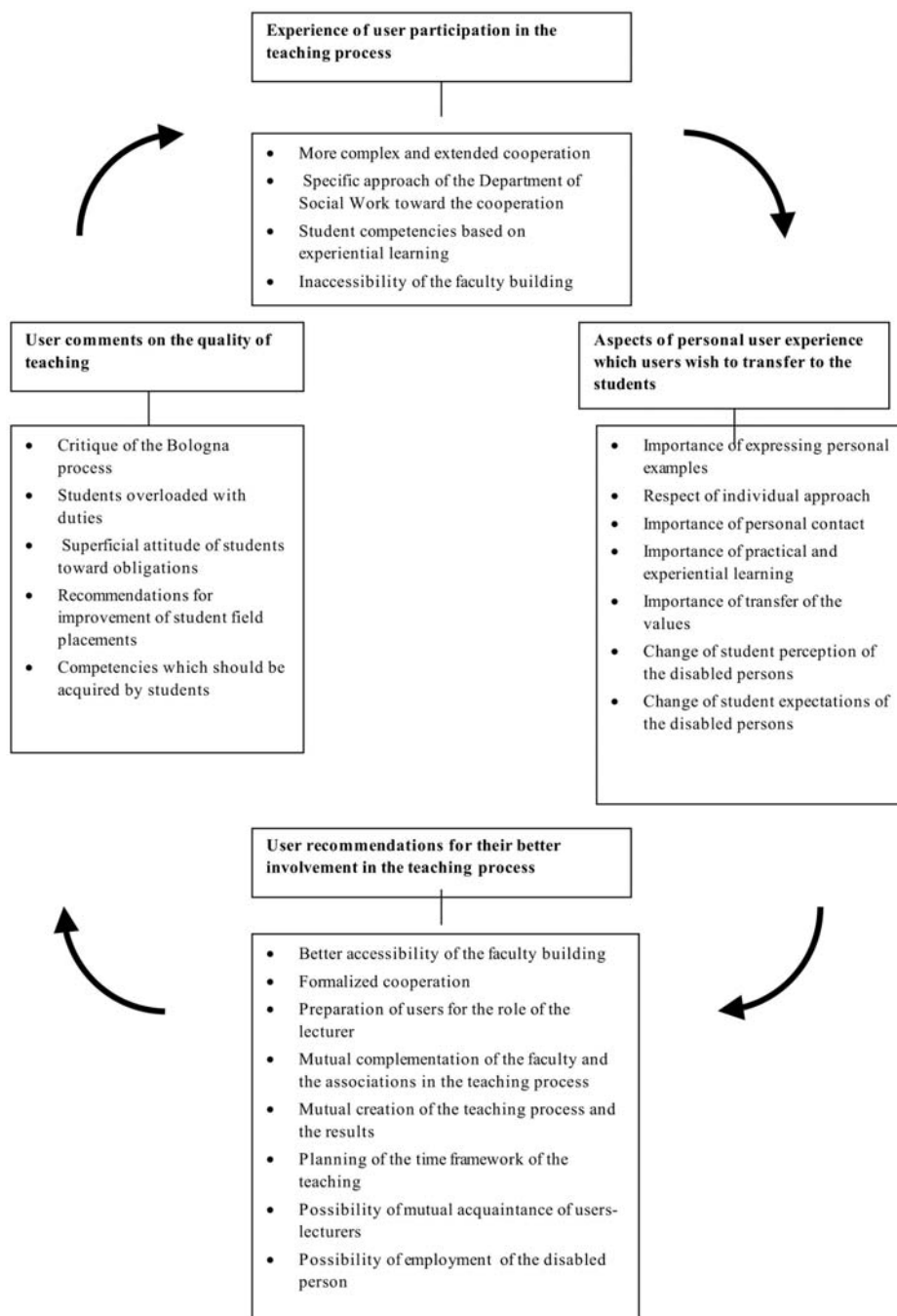
The recommendations for enhancement of the user involvement in the teaching process, as it was already mentioned, refer to a better accessibility of the faculty, formalized collaboration and preparation of users for their role as lecturers, to mutual complementation of the faculty and the associations, mutual creation of teaching and the results, i.e. outcomes as well as planning of the time framework of the teaching, possibility for the users-lecturers to meet each other in order for them to exchange the experience and the possibility of employment of persons with disability as lecturers.

In other words, we can say that all the mentioned recommended aspects reflect the need to define a more equal relationship in which the users would not be »temporary and short-term participants« of the education process, but partners who can be involved in the long-run in the process of defining education objectives, contents and the process itself. The promotion of a partnership is perceived by the users through a possibility of gaining a better insight into the planned teaching programme.

Based on the categories obtained by combining related notions, the following model has been constructed. It reflects relations between the categories in the following way:

**Figure 1.**

Schematic model of relations between the categories



## DISCUSSION

As it was mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the participants of the research were persons with disability, with several years of experience of participation in different forms of the teaching process (lectures, exercises, field placements, seminars) and within different courses at the Department of Social Work (Social Work with an Individual, Social Work with Persons with Disability, Field Placements related to these courses).

The analysis of participants' statements resulted in four categories covering different issues, i.e. themes of user involvement in the teaching process with social work students: (1) Experience of user participation in the teaching process; (2) Aspects of personal user experience which users wish to transfer to the students; (3) User comments on the quality of teaching and (4) User recommendations for their better involvement in the teaching process.

As far as the experience of user participation in the teaching process, the users express their satisfaction with years-long collaboration which changes at both qualitative and quantitative levels. From the first short informative exposés during orientation meetings aimed at the preparation of students for field placement, this collaboration in time became more planned and comprehensive and the participants had a chance to present their own initiatives related to the content, duration and modalities of the teaching process in which they wish and can participate. The outcome of such collaboration of mutual interest are better competencies of students related to the work with persons with disability, on the basis of which the user associations gladly hire social workers after they have completed their studies, when they have a possibility (...they came and they already knew the issues and they could handle existential and other problems more easily... (4)).

Considering the time context of the collaboration of the faculty with the user associations, we can say that in the last fifteen years the level and the modality of user involvement in the teaching process have changed. The developmental process of their role in teaching ranged from the role of the »guest lecturer«, i.e. the »executor of the tasks« to the one of initiators and active interlocutors. However, although the users are satisfied with such a development, we still cannot talk about the equal status nor about the involvement of all the parties included in the education process (representatives of users, representatives of professionals from the practice, ministries, students) at the level of partnership (Beresford, 2005.; Cree and Davis, 2007.). In that sense there is no legal obligation of the faculty or the academic community as a whole to formally involve all the participants in the decision-making process on teaching from the beginning. On the other hand, the document on global standards for social work education and training presupposes the inclusion of users in the decisions important for the theory, practice and research in social work (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004., 2005.). The non-inclusion in the decision-making process is revealed at the level of

inaccessibility of the faculty building and its premises as well. The difficulties related to the access are partially due to the fact that the building is a cultural monument which makes the administrative procedure of obtaining licences for adaptation of the premises more difficult. However, this situation should not become a justification for the lack of willingness and responsibility of the academic community. In the end, the issue of accessibility to public buildings and higher education institution is also the issue of equal participation of students with disabilities in the study programme. The lack of accessibility to the faculty also sends a message to the academic and general public on the unequal status which is related to the issue of the quality collaboration and involvement of service users.

The results related to the aspect of personal user experience reveal the importance of expressing personal examples, user personal stories, creating personal contacts. The personal contact between the social worker and the user makes the development of a cooperative relationship much easier. The cooperative relationship represents a modern concept of a helping process in which the social worker and the user become collaborators in the common co-creation of problem resolutions. They discover and define the difficulty, plan the changes, problematize, reflect, keep a dialogue and conclude the relationship (Čačinović Vogrinčić et al., 2007.; Urbanc, 2007.). The personal contact further generates the need for an individualized approach to different users, regardless of their common diagnosis. The acquisition of certain values and reflection on personal perception and expectations of students from persons with disability (...besides the passivity to which persons with disability are exposed, the bottom line is that very little is expected from them... (3)) through specificities of experiential and practical learning changes in the student perspective and critical reassessment can be achieved, and that is exactly what the users underline as important to be transferred to future social workers from their direct user experience (Urbanc and Družić, 1999.; Urbanc, Družić Ljubotina and Kregar, 2002.; Stevens and Tanner, 2006.).

The results of the research related to the perception of the quality of the teaching programme focus on the implementation of the Bologna process at the faculty. It is interesting that the participants answered the question on what would enhance the quality of teaching by criticizing the existing programme. During the focus group meeting, the participants stated that they were not informed on the curriculum as a whole. They were acquainted with the teaching activities only for the courses in which they actively participated. Providing insight into the planned curriculum is one of the recommendations that users give for the future collaboration. These suggestions are in line with the current prerequisites for the definition of a formal partnership between user associations and the faculty (Beresford et al., 2006.).

Furthermore, the results suggest that the users have the impression that the number of hours which the students spend in field placements has decreased, although it remained the same (sixty hours during the fourth semester). The novelty related to the field placement is the time of its implementation since before the placements were organized during the



third and the fourth semesters, which enabled a more gradual entrance of the student in the relationship with the user (Guidebook for social work students 2008./2009.). The participants also suggest several very concrete ideas on mutual exchange within one »generation« of students, analysis of expectations, organization of common round tables of students and users and the continuation of existing field placements. They also enumerate specific competencies which the students should acquire and which relate to the knowledge and respect of user perspective.

The recommendations related to the better inclusion of users in the teaching process are numerous and very specific. They correspond to the experience of Anglo-Saxon countries which have a long-standing tradition of partnerships between user associations and the academic community (Cree, 2002.). Thus, the recommendations are not related only to the inclusion of users in general, but also to removal of organizational and administrative obstacles which have existed for a long time between the users and those who create and offer the services and decide on them. In that sense, the users do not perceive themselves as passive receivers of services, but as active, informed participants, or as Davies (2006., in Cree and Davies, 2007.) calls them »agents of change« in helping, education and decision-making processes.

The participants state the need for regular training for their role of lecturers and participants in other forms of teaching in order for the transfer of their experience to the students to be more relevant and adequate. A personal experience is a valuable personal story of the user, but as far as presenting this experience is concerned, the participants are left on their own, which makes many of them insecure, especially when they have to address a group of students. The basic prerequisite of the involvement is that the participating parties have the possibility of intervention and co-decision in relation to the process (Oliver, 1992., 1996.). The users have the right to participate in the decision-making process which refers to them, so the inclusion therefore reflects the key values of social work (Croft and Beresford, 1994., in Payne, 2005.). The recommendations on the need of formalization of the collaboration, planning time frameworks and teaching outcomes, accessibility of the faculty building, planning of common projects and education and employment of social workers with a disability go in the same direction. The participants also consider mutual acquaintance among users-lecturers and »networking« with the aim of sharing experience and support to be very important.

It is interesting that the experience, wishes and attitudes of participants related to the question »What does a quality education of future social workers mean for the users?« are quite homogenous, even from the international perspective. According to Cree and Davis (2007.), the users appreciate social workers who during their studies learned to listen, express their respect toward every individual and are capable of analysing his situation in the unique context of his environment and life experience. Certain authors agree with this perception stating that the users are more likely to cooperate with and better accept social workers

who see »the individual, not the case«, show warmth, compassion, are informal, know how to listen, do not encourage the feeling of guilt in users, do not finish their sentences and do not leave the impression that they are overloaded and they take every user's difficulty seriously and do not underestimate it (Ford and Jones, 1987.; Miley, O'Melia and Du Bois; 1995., Hastings, 2000., in Urbanc, 1996.). These features of efficient social worker correspond to the concept of a cooperative relation, in which the power of the professional, teacher and researcher in the social work »to know what is best for the user« is replaced with a common search and co-creation of problem solutions. The ethics of participation which is added to the ethics of social work becomes a sort of a »meta-ethics« and a central value for modern social work (Hoffman, 1994., in Čačinović Vogrinčić et al., 2007.)

## CONCLUSION

The paper presented the results of a research organized with the aim of gaining insight into the user experience of inclusion in the teaching process of social work students.

The data were gathered by means of a conversation within a focus group and were analysed by qualitative methods. The analysis revealed four categories: 1) experience of user participation in the teaching process; 2) aspects of personal user experience which users wish to transfer to the students 3) user comments on the quality of teaching and 4) user recommendations for their better involvement in the teaching process.

Based on the results, a schematic model of relations between the categories was constructed. We perceive the relation of the four categories important for the inclusion of users in the teaching process as a circular process: a richer experience of participation of users in the teaching process results in valuable information on the aspects users consider important from their direct user experience to transfer to the students and what they need in order for their inclusion in teaching to be more relevant, and the quality higher in order for the future social workers to have a »first hand« experience on what the users need and want from them. The experience from the past generations of students as well as from the »new« social workers is included by the users in their own experience of participation and the process is repeated for the next generation.

During the preparation and implementation of this research, the users have shown a high level of motivation and openness to share their personal stories. It was revealed that the users, in their considerations on a more quality inclusion in the teaching process entirely follow the requirements of modern social work theory and practice, what can not be said for professionals, lecturers and institutions. The question, therefore, is who is in the position to involve whom in the social work education process (the faculty involves the users or the users involve the faculty). The research results suggest that there is a need to redefine the roles in the context of education of social workers and support the idea of inclusion of us-

ers to be a part of education standards in the profession (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004., 2005.). We consider, therefore, that the faculty and a wider academic community should take their share of the responsibility in the creation of prerequisites of partnership between the users and the faculty, using the results of this research as guidelines.

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