

Education Policy Implementation from the Perspective of Pupils and Students with Disabilities

Ivona Salaj

Office of the Ombudsman for Children

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the perspectives of pupils and students with disabilities regarding their roles in the implementation of education policy for children and students with disabilities. The role of pupils and students with disabilities in the implementation of education policy is analysed using the Contextual Interaction Theory, created by Hans Bressers. The main assumption of the Contextual Interaction Theory is that policy is a process based on negotiation and participation of various social groups and organisations, that is, on multi-actor interactions. The data were therefore collected by focus group interviews. Eight focus groups were held between January 2014 and December 2015, including 45 participants (pupils with disabilities in upper secondary school classes and students with disabilities). The negative perception of disability, insufficient knowledge of advocacy for their needs, the lack of consideration for the beneficiary perspective and a low inclusion rate of beneficiaries in the implementation of education policy are the obstacles to an increased participation of pupils and students with disabilities in the implementation of education policy.

Key words: *Contextual Interaction Theory; disability; policy implementation; stakeholders' role.*

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right that forms the basis for “successful participation in the social, economic, cultural and political life of a community” (Kiš-Glavaš, 2012, p. 17). It is both a cause of social exclusion (in the case of the low education level) and a precondition for social inclusion (through increasing equal opportunities in education; Farnell, 2012). According to Matković (2009), the completion of secondary education is a key condition for social inclusion, while the

completion of higher education is the most important factor for a successful career launch.

Inclusive education has been extensively implemented in the Croatian education policy since the 1990s, mostly in primary and secondary education. Efforts towards the reduction of inequality were also made in higher education about ten years ago, when the issue of equal opportunities in higher education was made a policy priority, especially through the Bologna Process (Salaj, 2013). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) set the education policy framework for pupils and students with disabilities. For Croatia, which has ratified both conventions, this means giving priority to the development of an inclusive education system by acknowledging the individual needs of pupils and students, encouraging their active participation and ensuring an individual reasonable adjustment and support at all education levels (Igrić, Cvitković, & Wagner-Jakab, 2009; Krampač-Grljušić, Žic Ralić, & Lisak, 2010).

Advances in the strategic approach to inclusive education have been made by the new Strategy of Education, Science and Technology (Hrvatski sabor, 2014), which puts the pupil at the centre of the education process and, regarding the education of children with disabilities, emphasises pupil-centred interventions at the school level as the most effective strategy for improving education quality. The Strategy is also the first document of this kind to comprehensively regulate the educational inclusion of students with disabilities within the higher education system.

An examination of the implementation practice in Croatia, with implementation considered as a stage in the policy process encompassing the realisation of policy objectives and plans (Kekez-Koštro, 2012), shows some implementation deficits (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984), i.e., problems in the implementation of education policy. The European Parliament's report on the situation of children with developmental disabilities in Croatia (2014) highlights a lack of specific legislative framework for the regulation of the rights of children with disabilities and a lack of a single definition of persons with disabilities as the obstacles to the implementation of education policy. In the context of primary and secondary education, the European Parliament underscores a significant implementation gap related to the absence of a legal act providing for teaching assistants for pupils with disabilities, which causes problems in the functioning of education processes at the beginning of every school year. The report further states that Croatia has not made sincere efforts to increase the inclusion in education of children with disabilities, that no coordinated action has been taken by various institutions engaged in the area of education, and that educators are incapable of meeting the varied needs of pupils with disabilities (Ivanković-Tamamović, 2014). Research in higher education has identified difficulties in ensuring adequate adjustments and providing appropriate support to students with disabilities (Bošković & Rinčić, 2014; Korkut & Martinac Dorčić, 2014; Krznarić, 2013; Meić, 2014; Stančić, Kiš-Glavaš & Urbanc, 2014), the insufficient awareness and training of

education and non-education personnel (Fajdetić, Kiš-Glavaš & Lisak, 2013; Fejzić, 2007; Milić Babić & Dowling, 2015; Report of the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities, 2014; Stančić, Kiš-Glavaš, & Urbanc, 2014), poor spatial accessibility and availability of assistive technologies (Haničar, 2012; Korkut & Martinac Dorčić, 2014; Meić, 2014), lack of clearly defined frameworks and instructions for adjustments in teaching practices and examinations (Korkut & Martinac Dorčić, 2014), unadapted and inaccessible teaching materials (Fajdetić, Kiš-Glavaš & Lisak, 2013; Fejzić, 2007), lack of systemic support (Bošković & Rinčić, 2014; Milić Babić & Dowling, 2015; Slonjšak, 2014; Stančić, Kiš-Glavaš, & Urbanc, 2014) and the insufficient participation of students in the education policy implementation process (Divjak et al., 2007; Farnell et al., 2011).

Implementation and Implementation Research

Public policies are neither static structures nor predefined entities or ready-made products ordered by governments. They constitute a process based on negotiation and participation of various social groups and organisations. The complexity of the public policy process derives from the dual nature of public policies, which are “both products (texts, values, principles) and processes (an ability to implement in practice the formulated objectives and task)” (Žiljak, 2009, p. 241). This paper focuses on one stage of the policy process – the implementation of education policy.

Researchers have differed in their views of the public policy implementation process – hence the distinction between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of public policies. In the late 1960s and early 1970s researchers were increasingly interested in policy effectiveness; that is, in the study of the implementation and translation of policy into practice. The top-down approach, designed by Pressman and Wildavsky, focuses on the hierarchical flow of decisions from the top down to citizens (Mazmanian & Sabatier 1989; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Schofield 2001). The horizontal dimension, i.e., “public policy as a structured interaction” (Petak, 2008, p. 23) is inherent to another theoretical approach to implementation, termed the bottom-up approach, which views implementation as the process of interaction, agreement, compromise and feedback as well as of formal and informal relations (Barret, 2004; Hill & Hupe, 2009; Hjern; 1982; Howlett & Ramesh, 1995). There is also a third approach, which synthesises the top-down and the bottom-up approaches, considering implementation to be a process, a sequence of decisions and a series of activities aimed at the implementation of decisions (Hill & Hupe, 2009). In this paper the emphasis is on the third view of implementation as a process of interaction and negotiation between those seeking to implement policies and those on whom action depends (Hill, 2010) and an exercise of sorts in collective bargaining between an authorised decision-maker and subordinated policy implementation agents as well as between implementation agents and interested actors (Kekez-Koštro, 2012).

Advances in the understanding of implementation have led to advances in the study of the implementation process. Since implementation began to be considered as a

negotiation process, the research focus has shifted from organisational-hierarchical structures and control mechanisms to what happens during implementation (Barett, 2004). This paper therefore analyses the experiences of pupils and students with disabilities regarding their inclusion in the implementation of education policy, the obstacles to their participation, the types and nature of interactions between pupils/students and other actors as well as the main factors influencing implementation results.

Participation of Pupils and Students with Disabilities in Education Policy Implementation

Education policy, like any other public policy, recognises actors (both governmental and nongovernmental) that make public policy “complete, created by participation, implementation-focused and multidirectionally controlled” (Bužinkić, 2009, p. 33). This paper focuses on nongovernmental or informal actors (Birkland, 2001) that, in contemporary public policy creation, increasingly share the responsibility for the design and implementation of public policies with governmental actors throughout all stages of the policy process (Sabatier, 2000). Nongovernmental or informal actors, as their name says, rather than being formally obliged to get involved, base their involvement exclusively on their own interests and willingness to make changes in public policy. Bužinković (2009, p. 34) asserts that these actors “are indirectly entitled by the natural element and the policy criterion of involvement in the policy related to a particular area of interest”. In this context, the policy criterion of involvement is provided by the already mentioned UN conventions, which require that consideration be given to the active participation of pupils and students in decision-making processes in various educational frameworks. Participation of pupils and students is based on the rights of children and persons with disabilities to express their views on matters affecting them. In addition, their unique experience of disability gives them the right to be seen as “experts” in this area (Cree & Davis, 2007; Mitra, 2008; Pereira, 2009; Preston-Shoot, 2005).

Informal actors of this policy are individuals, pupils and students with disabilities, young people, the organisations of students and persons with disabilities, media and researchers. This paper proceeds with an analysis of pupils and students with disabilities. Despite the fact that pupils and students differ according to their developmental abilities, educational status and interest in policy, they are considered as one group of actors. When viewed from the historical perspective, students, including students with disabilities, have more often than pupils put relevant issues on political and social agendas (Kovačić, 2014).

The main purpose of the participation of pupils and students with disabilities is to ensure that attention and consideration is paid to their views, ideas, needs and issues they regard as positive as well as to enable the visibility of pupils and students

and their involvement in education processes, from the definition of procedures and strategies to the definition of the education content (Pereira, Mouraz, & Figueiredo, 2014). Bužinković (2009) defines participation as the consent of the stakeholders in the horizontal dimension of the policy process. The creation of the conditions for active participation primarily depends on the readiness of the government and policy implementation agents (schools and universities) to make accessible adequate communication channels and put in place institutional mechanisms for joint decision-making and participation of pupils and students in the implementation of education policy.

Literature analysis shows a growing interest of researchers in the role of pupils and students with disabilities in education (Brandt, 2011; Christidou et al., 2013; Fuller et al., 2004; Hurst, 1999; Jurković-Majić, 2007; McLaughlin, 1987; Mlinarević & Marušić, 2005; Pereira, Mouraz & Figueiredo, 2014; Piggott, 2007; Rochette & Loiselle, 2012; Schmidt & Čagran, 2014; Širanović, 2012; Tinklin, Riddell, & Wilson, 2004; Turnšek, 2008; Vickerman & Blundell 2010). However, the education practice in Croatia does not offer sufficient empirical data on the role of pupils and students in the implementation of education policy. Shown below are the findings of a survey carried out by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (2015) on the participation of children with disabilities in the secondary school setting and the findings of the peer research on pupils' participation in school life. As shown by the findings of the survey on children with disabilities, pupils do not see themselves as equal partners in decision-making, and do not have much opportunity for expressing their opinions at school. The findings of the peer research conducted by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children within the project "Evaluation of Legislation, Policy and Practice on Child Participation in the European Union" show that children and young people have a positive attitude towards, and positive experience with participation in decision-making in education, but that they are not satisfied with their representation and the consideration given to their views (Salaj, 2016). The results of this project indicate a very low level of participation of children with disabilities in decision-making, which is due to the prevalent view that they are incapable of participating in this process, stemming from enduring stigmatisation and the culture of overprotectiveness in which they grow up (Day et al., 2015). Students are also recognised as education policy actors of low importance (Mihanović, 2007), who are only in ideal situations asked for their opinion and included in the methods of education quality assurance (Barić et al., 2012).

Contextual Interaction Theory – a Tool for the Analysis of the Making of Policy-Implementation Decisions

As explained previously, policy implementation is a negotiation process that combines the interactions of diverse actors, with the result that the final policy product is shaped by a multitude of factors. The complexity of the process has led

researchers to develop theories and models aimed at forecasting the manner and conditions of policy implementation (O'Toole & Montjoy, 1984). A Dutch scholar, Hans Bressers (2009), has developed the Contextual Interaction Theory to explain the dynamic interaction between actors and provide a relatively simple, empirically tested framework for establishing fundamental obstacles in the policy implementation process (Spratt, 2009). The Contextual Interaction Theory identifies the motivation, cognition and power of actors as the key variables influencing policy implementation. Motivation drives actors; it is manifested in their readiness to participate, depends on their own goals and values and can be influenced both by external pressures and by the self-effectiveness assessment of actors. Cognition, in terms of the cognition of policy goals and measures and of the methods of participation and communication between actors, is crucial for the formulation of the problem and its potential solutions. Power, which guarantees actors a greater influence on policy implementation, depends on resources (human resources, cognition and finances) owned by actors (Bandura, 1986; Bressers, 2007; Bressers, Bressers, & Larrue, 2016; Owens & Bressers, 2013; Spratt, 2009; Vinke-de Kruijf, Bressers, & Augustijn, 2014). Ostrom (1999) defines actor characteristics as the drivers of the process, independent variables influencing the dependent variable, that is, interaction types (cooperation, opposition and joint learning). Motivation, cognition and power have not been arbitrarily selected as the three most important variables – they are at the core of every interaction process and have a high explanatory power for the process dynamics (Bressers, 2004; Bressers & Klok, 1988; Owens, 2008). This theory does not deny the influence on implementation of other contextual factors (other policies, governments, cultures...), but analyses them through their influence on actor characteristics (Bressers 2009; de Boer & Bressers, 2011). The characteristics of actors involved in the process shape the process and are, in turn, reshaped by various interactions taking place during implementation.

The making of policy-implementation decisions is a balancing act between actors' motivation, cognition, policy perception, power and capacities. Decisions made by actors during policy implementation result from their mutual interactions. A better understanding of what influences actors in decision-making can improve the quality of decision-making, that is, the effectiveness of policy implementation. In this context, the Contextual Interaction Theory can be used to analyse the process of making policy-implementation decisions (Bressers, 2004; Evers, 2014).

Research Aim

This paper aims to examine the views of pupils and students with disabilities on their role in the implementation of education policy for children and students with disabilities. The author focuses on the impact of motivation, cognition and resources of pupils and students used in interactions with other actors during policy implementation and on the way these actor characteristics influence the type of interaction process.

Methodology

The research involved 45 participants (25 males and 20 females), including 30 pupils with disabilities (upper secondary school classes), 10 students with disabilities and 5 employed persons with disabilities; 4 of the employed were university graduates and 1 interrupted studies (in the further analysis, the present and former students are viewed as one group: students). The sample was a convenience sample. The participants were between 18 and 38 years of age; the pupils were on average aged 19 years and the students 23 years. The pupils attend three education centres (Dubrava EC, Vinko Bek EC and Slava Raškaj EC), while the majority of the students (n=12) attend the University of Zagreb. As regards their disabilities, the majority of the pupils have motor disabilities (n=20), followed by the pupils with hearing impairments (n=7) and the pupils with visual impairments (n=3). In the student population, the participants with motor disabilities and visual impairments are equally represented (n=6), followed by the participants with hearing impairments (n=2) and a participant with dyslexia (n=1).

The data were collected by the focus group method, as this method enables a deeper insight into the researched phenomenon (Đurić, 2007; Milas, 2005). The research was carried out in Zagreb, in the period from January 2014 to December 2015. It complies with the standards of the Code of Ethics for Research Involving Children (2003), the Code of Ethics of the Ethics Committee in Science and Higher Education (2006) and the Code of Ethics of the University of Zagreb (2009). Eight focus groups were held and the sessions were recorded, with the prior consent of the participants. At the beginning of each focus group session, the researcher explained the aims and purpose of the research, emphasising that participation was voluntary. The participants were granted confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the focus group.

The empirical material for content analysis was comprised of the transcripts of the direct statements of focus group participants. The audio recordings were transcribed and language edited to a minimum degree. The gathered data were processed using the qualitative analysis, by means of the open coding procedure according to Mesec (1998), consisting of seven steps: (1) the paraphrasing of all recorded participants' answers related to research question topics; (2) the underlining of answers related to individual questions on the same topic; (3) the writing down of underlined participants' statements; (4) the coding of extracted statements with regard to the participants' role in the implementation of education policy; (5) the assigning of terms to the empirical material and the classification of related terms into categories; (6) the analysis of meanings and summarising; and (7) the creation of the model of relationships between categories.

For the purposes of this paper, the analysis of the questions related to motivation, cognition, and the power of pupils and students as education policy actors was used. This paper therefore presents the results of the first thematic unit – actor characteristics¹. The three key discussion topics included:

¹ In line with the instruction regarding the volume of the paper, only some participants' statements are presented. All statements are available on request from the author.

1. What is your role in education – would you like to change anything, is your voice heard?
2. Are you familiar with education policy (objectives, measures, participation methods, actors, etc.)?
3. Can you influence others to change a decision or to adopt a decision on your proposal?

Results Analysis and Discussion

What is Your Role in Education – Would You Like to Change Anything, Is Your Voice Heard?

In reply to the first question “*What is your role in education – would you like to change anything, is your voice heard?*”, regarding intrinsic motivation, the participants state self-motivation as the main driving factor. The students show awareness that *every change depends on themselves and on the intensity of their desire for change*, emphasising that *they have an opportunity to make a change, but that it depends on themselves whether the change will take place or not*. The results show that both the students and the pupils are motivated to action by their own interests and wish to fulfil their own needs; the most common statement is that *everyone must advocate their own needs*. The results also suggest that the participants prefer normative activism (Altbach, 1966, as cited in Kovačić, 2014), focused on single-issue actions, that is, that they seek to resolve their own problems in education, such as adjustments in examinations, teaching practice, practical classes, etc. Value-oriented activism (Altbach, 1966, as cited in Kovačić, 2014) is rarer and it is associated with the students with disabilities; the examples given by the students include *architectural adjustments to the building of the Faculty of Economics, made thanks to students’ efforts, a room for computers for the blind on the Faculty premises, assistants in the student residence appointed on the initiative of students and student organisations as well as transport for students at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences*.

The pupils with disabilities declare more often than the students without disabilities that *they are afraid to express their opinions at school, that they get angry and hurt, that they cry and have a feeling of inferiority*. Pereira, Mouraz, and Figueiredo (2014) argue that the feeling of fear accompanying the expression of opinions must not be ignored in educational relationships, and they attribute the occurrence of fear to the power of professors and teachers, stating that “power relations in school have traditionally been asymmetrical, and teachers’ perspectives prevail in the decision-making process” (Pereira, Mouraz, & Figueiredo, 2014, p. 953). Some of the participants assert that *they would like to be independent*, but are prevented by the lack of skills and knowledge, *as they have never been independent or have not been independent to such an extent, being used to letting things work out on their own and expecting someone else to do their job*. The participants rate their own effectiveness as low, stating that they primarily need support to increase it, from *professors or class masters* (the pupils) and

from an *association* (the students). The pupils with disabilities mention the need for workshops or any other form of training on the general principles of democracy and citizenship. The insufficient capacities of the pupils and students, inadequate support provided by policy implementation agents as well as the lack of confidence and the feeling of fear indicate a need to train educators in creating a positive environment where pupils and students will be encouraged to active participation and the free expression of opinions and proposals. The students, whose activity is greater than that of the pupils, state that, in a situation when they want to change something, they sometimes *react aggressively, become frustrated and furious, blame everything on others or do not make an effort to change things, and tend to avoid problems or simply take the current situation for granted*. One participant claims that students with disabilities become increasingly passive, stating that the possible causes of their passivity are improvements in the education system or giving up on the part of students due to the absence of ideas for improvement or interest for change. The results of the research on student activism among students in Zagreb, conducted by Ilišin (2008), suggest that the main causes of students' inactivity are the lack of faith in the possibility of change, the distrust of policy and disregard of their interests and opinions. In connection with extrinsic motivation, the participants primarily refer to negative factors from the environment that, rather than inspiring them to action, discourage them. The participants perceive their negative previous experiences with participation and the negative perception of people with disabilities as the main reasons for their weak involvement. The participants describe their previous negative experiences as follows: *when you say something - nobody hears you, even if your proposal is very good and everyone agrees with you, there is always someone above you preventing any change to advance own interests and I had negative experiences and I do not feel like doing anything anymore*. In the context of disability, the participants identify the following negative factors: *prejudice, the social perception of persons with disabilities as "outsiders" and the negative first impression when meeting a person with disabilities*. The participants also claim that pupils and students sometimes "exploit" their disabilities, *expecting that they can be let off lightly or that they need not comply with rules*. They attribute such behaviour to years-long social oppression. One participant, for example, thinks that such behaviour is inadvertent, as pupils and students lose a realistic image of themselves and their abilities under the influence of the environment. A female participant suggests a solution claiming that they are precisely the ones who are called upon to break prejudice and that it is up to them whether they will accept disability as a problem or a challenge. Educators' perception that disability is only a physical and visible impairment of pupils and students with disabilities points to a need for them to be educated on the social model of disability that views disability as the interaction between the individual and the environment (Fajdetic, Kiš-Glavaš, & Lisak, 2013, p. 35), emphasising their responsibility for the identity formation of pupils and students with disabilities. However, in addition to mentioning negative factors from

the environment, the participants also indicate friendship as a positive factor as they find support, comfort and encouragement in their friends.

Are You Familiar with Education Policy (Objectives, Measures, Participation Methods, Actors, etc.)?

The participants' answers to the second question "*Are you familiar with education policy (objectives, measures, participation methods, actors, etc.)?*" can be divided into those related to their familiarity with education policy and those related to the methods of participation and communication with other actors. As regards familiarity with education policy, the participants say that they are not familiar with its objectives and measures and that they find it difficult to obtain information. Their answers show that they do not pay attention to policy because they *are not interested in it*. Although they admit that they have insufficient knowledge about policy goals, they list a number of measures that they mostly consider positive (*adjustments to examinations, the student residence, scholarships, study enrolment, travel expense compensation, assistants for secondary school leaving exams, increased spatial accessibility*). As regards policy transparency, including information accessibility and the ease of information search, the participants claim that they do not have access to a great deal of information. In the period when advances in technology and information technology enable the adjustment and accessibility of a considerable amount of information, the results indicating the inadequate use of existing resources give rise to concern. The participants consider personal knowledge and skills as the prerequisites for a greater participation in the policy implementation process, especially emphasizing the basic knowledge of democracy and citizenship, good information literacy and knowledge of English. These results are in line with the results of the research on the opinions of pupils with disabilities on secondary education, which indicate the necessity of modernising the curriculum by introducing foreign languages and information science (Salaj, 2017). As regards the actors they interact with during policy implementation, the participants mention the following: *teachers, professors, university teachers, the competent ministry, local communities, the Office for Students with Disabilities, associations of persons with disabilities, associations of young people with disabilities and participants' parents*. The participants express a negative attitude towards the Ministry of Science and Education, asserting that the need to consult with pupils and young people during the adoption, implementation and monitoring of education policy is not sufficiently recognised. The pupils' dissatisfaction also arises from the minister of education's low perception of pupils with disabilities, stating that *it is beneath minister's dignity to talk with pupils with disabilities, that this is just a burden to the minister, who does not want to deal with this issue, does not assume the responsibility and does not want to have anything to do with the disabled*. Associations of persons with disabilities and associations of young people with disabilities are recognised as the actors that the participants cooperate with most frequently and rely on the most. The pupils say that their parents are the most important actors, but their parents largely turn to associations to provide them

with help and support in realizing specific goals for their children. This narrow participation in policy implementation poses a risk as it reduces the possibility for producing new ideas and leads to a lack of policy innovations. As regards participation models, the most common model is non-institutional participation (Kovačić, 2014), that is, participation in the civil society and, specifically, in its segment connected with disability. The participants have no experience of institutional participation (Kovačić, 2014). This may be attributed to the fact that only a relatively small percentage of the student population, and especially of students with disabilities, is represented by public authorities (Kovačić, 2014), which is due to social and cultural assumptions and generational power relations (Ilišin, 2002). In the case of students with disabilities this is also caused by long-standing historical oppression. As regards co-institutional participation, the participants mention *pupils' councils, the representatives of students with disabilities at each of the University's constituent units (faculties/academies) and the Commission for Students with Disabilities* as the types of counselling and representative bodies that protect their rights and interests. Although policy implementation agents encourage the participation of pupils and students, at least nominally, the quality of their participation is relatively low due to the lack of effective institutional mechanisms aimed at the strengthening of participation. It is therefore necessary to enable the greater accessibility of information, pupils' training in democracy and civil activism, counselling and support for students.

Can You Influence Others to Change a Decision or to Adopt a Decision on Your Proposal?

In reply to the third question "Can you influence others to change a decision or to adopt a decision on your proposal?", the participants mention the deficit of power, attributing it to the deficit of resources, described as *the lack of knowledge, the lack of time (due to meeting the complex demands of everyday life of persons with disabilities), insufficient networking and the absence of support from other actors*. The participants say that *they do not know how to clearly articulate their wishes* and that *in most cases they do not even know how to specify their problem*. According to one participant, *although they have the strength to make changes, they are not powerful enough, and exactly because of their weak power they have little interest in the implementation of this policy*. In connection with the power of these actors, the interaction of the three actor characteristics can be clearly observed. In the situations when pupils and students wish to make a change, their proposals and solutions come under the influence of their perception of the problem and the existence of the capacity for its resolution. The lack of resources can have an impact on what pupils and students want: if they deem that they lack knowledge and time and that they cannot act on their own, and if they do not know how to connect and who to connect with, they tend to give up their ideas. In addition, their wishes, knowledge and capacity may also be influenced by other actors in the decision implementation process, such as, primarily, parents in the case of pupils and associations in the case of students. If they are more powerful, they can

impose their desires on pupils and students. In their mutual interactions, actors can change their views of the problem and of the validity of the proposed solutions. An actor with more resources, such as an association, can use its resources to increase the capacities of other actors, such as pupils and/or students (e.g., through training), thus empowering them to have more influence on changes due to their enhanced knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

As shown by the results of the research, it seems that pupils and students with disabilities are in the implementation of education policy most often motivated by the need to meet their own needs and interests. The research participants share a view that the lack of knowledge and skills, the non-accessibility of information on education policy measures, the lack of self-confidence, insufficient support by education policy implementation agents (teachers and professors), negative previous experiences with participation and the prejudice of the environment constitute the obstacles to their active participation in education policy implementation. Pupils and students are not strong actors, they do not have great power so that they very often rely on associations, which have gained prominence as indispensable partners in implementation. Their interactions are primarily co-operative, they co-operate actively for the purpose of resolving their own problems in the education system, resorting to passive co-operation more often when it comes to larger social and political changes. This narrow participation poses a risk for the implementation process as actors, who are at the same time the end-beneficiaries of this policy and “experts” by experience of disability, do not have at their disposal the strong mechanisms for participation. The priorities of education policy are therefore related to the development of consultation processes and to giving consideration to the assessments of these actors’ needs.

If these results are observed in the context of policy documents that advocate the strengthening of the role of horizontal actors in the implementation process, it appears that the recommendations for the strengthening of the role of pupils and students with disabilities could be sent to several addresses. The first is aimed at the government and education policy makers and refers to the need to establish institutional mechanisms for the strengthening of the participation of pupils and students with disabilities in policy implementation. The second is directed at decision-makers and emphasises the need for a curriculum reform that would provide pupils and students with education in democracy, civil activism and participation in the processes of implementation of decisions that affect them. The third recommendation is for pupils and students with disabilities, as well as for associations, which can exploit their resources to contribute to the strengthening of these actors and, in turn, increase their negotiating power.

Given the very few research papers on the role of pupils and students with disabilities in public policy implementation in the scientific community in Croatia, it is of utmost importance that research on this subject be continued.

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Ivona Salaj

Office of the Ombudsman for Children

Teslina 10, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia

ivona.salaj@dijete.hr

Provedba obrazovne politike iz perspektive učenika s teškoćama u razvoju i studenata s invaliditetom

Sažetak

Cilj je ovoga rada istražiti poglede učenika s teškoćama u razvoju i studenata s invaliditetom o njihovoj ulozi u provedbi obrazovne politike prema djeci s teškoćama i studentima s invaliditetom. U ovom se istraživanju za analizu uloge učenika s teškoćama i studenata s invaliditetom u provedbi obrazovne politike primijenila Kontekstualna teorija interakcija (Contextual Interaction Theory) utemeljitelja Hansa Bressersa. Osnovna je pretpostavka Kontekstualne teorije da je politika proces koji se temelji na pregovaranju i sudjelovanju različitih društvenih skupina i organizacija, odnosno interakcija različitih aktera. Stoga su podatci prikupljeni fokus grupnim intervjuom. Provedeno je osam fokus grupa, u razdoblju od siječnja 2014. do prosinca 2015. godine, kojima je obuhvaćeno 45 sudionika (učenika s teškoćama u razvoju završnih razreda srednjih škola i studenata s invaliditetom). Negativna percepcija invaliditeta, nedostatan znanje za zagovaranje potreba, neuvažavanje korisničke perspektive i slabo uključivanje korisnika u proces provedbe obrazovne politike prepreke su većem sudjelovanju učenika s teškoćama u razvoju i studenata s invaliditetom u provedbi obrazovne politike.

Ključne riječi: *invaliditet; kontekstualna teorija interakcija; provedba politike; uloga aktera.*