WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN MONTENEGRO: NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to examine and improve the support provided to children with intellectual disabilities in Montenegro. We conducted a qualitative examination to a) determine existing practices, b) analyse the needs of teaching staff and children with intellectual disabilities, c) examine the knowledge and skills required by teachers to support these children, and d) propose relevant recommendations to improve the support provided to these children.

The findings of the focus groups indicate that the greatest challenge faced by teachers during the process of teaching is the Montenegrin language and foreign languages in relation to the additional engagement required in the preparation and adaptation of didactic material. Areas of work that have been recognized as crucial for the education of pupils are socialisation, graphomotor skills, and literacy. For the effective planning and realization of teaching, teachers prefer to have a description of the child, the way in which the child works and learns, the child's interests, needs, and possibilities for learning, as well as their ability to interact socially and maintain relationships with peers.

The recommendations are as follows: instead of tagging a child based on the coefficient of intelligence, a functional description of a child should be used; the teaching process and the environment can be adapted based on the child's needs; a list of situations and characteristics of the process with instructions or ideas for action can be defined; and individualized teaching and didactic material can be developed.

The implementation of these recommendations should be monitored through coaching. The topics of training that the teachers believe are useful for professional development and efficient work are developing the educational characteristics and needs of these children, designing and using special teaching and didactic materials, applying assistive technology, mastering basic skills, cooperating with parents, and coaching.

Keywords: inclusive education, children, intellectual disabilities, adaptation

INTRODUCTION

In the context of education, the term "inclusion" reflects the way in which society adapts to individuals. Starting with acknowledging the differences between children, it is typically based on the education of the teachers, management staff, professional associates, and students. Teachers and school staff can set an example for the students by modelling positive attitudes and virtues, as well as being advocates and promoters of the universal rights of children and all human beings (Booth and Ainscow, 2002).

Muanović and Novak (1998) suggested that support encompasses all activities that increase one's abilities, as well as those that relate to modifications or adaptations with respect to the physical environment, education and curriculum, didactic tools and materials, and methods of work. Through intensive discussions and monitoring of the environment in which inclusive teaching takes place, it was established that it is important to provide a better quality of education to children with intellectual disabilities in order to ensure that they can achieve developmental and educational goals (ICF, 2001).

In the inclusive teaching process, it is necessary to provide support to both the children and the teachers, because an adequate response to the needs of these children depends on the skills of their teachers. Within the Strategy of Inclusive Education (2019), professional and civil personnel dealing with human rights have highlighted multiple cases of exclusion and discrimination of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Apart from certain parent associations and NGOs associated with the Special Olympics, there are very few NGOs that focus on the rights of individuals with disabilities, especially children and people with intellectual disabilities.

Towards the end of the 20th century (in the 1990s), Montenegro recognized the need to moder-nise systems associated with the upbringing and education of children, and introduced a system of inclusive orientation for children with disabilities. The Montenegrin education system assigned inclusive education within regular schools as the primary choice for children with special educational needs. Figures 1 and 2 show trends in data on children with special education needs - SEN and inclusive education in Montenegro between 2014 and 2020.

The Individual Developmental-Educational Program (IDEP) provides a basic framework that defines the academic and developmental goals that need to be achieved when working with children with special educational needs. An individual transition plan (ITP) is formulated for each SEN stu-
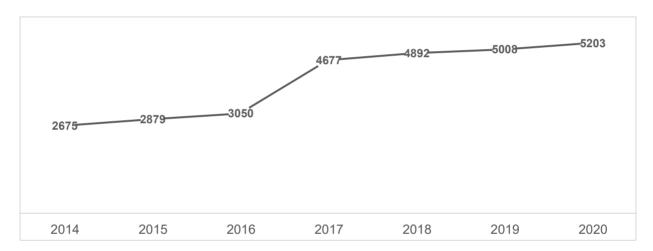

Figure 1. *SEN data from Montenegrin Education Informative System - MEIS*
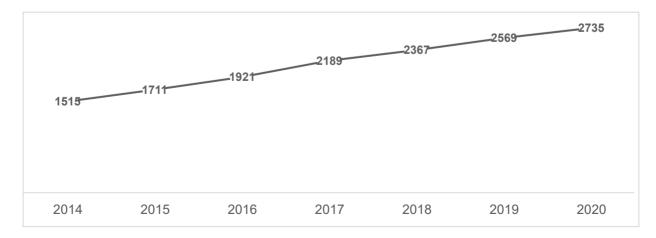

Figure 2. *Change in number of children with disabilities - CWD after the official introduction of inclusive orientation*

dent and implemented in two phases: at the end of primary school and at the end of secondary school. In addition, ITP1 is applied before choosing the appropriate secondary school, ITP 2 is applied before receiving employment, and ITP 3 is applied before enrolment at the faculty.

Special schools have been transformed and reformed into resource centres that provide support to inclusive education programs in the following aspects: early intervention, individualized treatments, counselling and professional support, training of teachers and professional associates to work with SEN children, use of sign language, as well as preparation, adaptation, development, and training required to use special textbooks (in Braille or the Daisy format) and other specialized teaching aids. Additionally, the Bureau of Education Services has organised "mobile services" to provide outreach and inclusive support to schools: special educators, rehabilitators, speech therapists, and psychologists visit schools and work with individual children, as well as provide advice to the teachers, school associates, and parents.

AIM, PROBLEMS AND HYPOTHESIS

The main question addressed in this study is: How do we identify and meet the needs of students with intellectual disabilities as part of the teaching process?

Considering the field of inclusive education in this part of Europe, research related to practical knowledge, direct support, and inclusive competencies is limited; most studies on inclusion focus on examining the attitudes of teachers. Forlin (1998) reported that as more children with intellectual and physical disabilities are being included in regular schools, there has been an increase in the level of apprehension amongst teachers in regular classrooms, indicating their own lack of competency for inclusive practice. This highlights the need to expand the basic knowledge of teachers and improve support for the application of new methods to improve the effectiveness of inclusive practices.

The aim of this study is to examine and improve the support provided to children with intellectual disabilities in the teaching process in order to a) identify existing practices and support systems,

b) assess and analyse the needs of teachers and children, c) assess the knowledge and skills required to provide quality support to children with disabilities in intellectual development, d) design evidence-based support systems for children with intellectual disabilities, including working material and instructions.

We set up two hypotheses based on AAIDD (2010):

H1 Children with intellectual disabilities need additional support in a way that empowers teachers to work more flexibly and competently with them (knowledge of characteristics, ways of communication, adaptation, organization of classes etc.).

H2 Teachers in their daily work continue to be challenged by children with intellectual disabilities in terms of determining the correct teaching approach, followed by adaptation, individualization, goal setting, and assessment.

METHODS

Sample

To test these hypotheses and define a model of work, we conducted focus groups with teachers from primary schools where the classes are attended by large numbers of students with intellectual disabilities. An analysis was conducted using data on children with intellectual disabilities in inclusive education programmes collected from MEIS. Based on this analysis, we identified elementary schools where the highest numbers of children with intellectual disabilities were enrolled and requested their teachers to participate in the focus groups.

The sample analysed in this qualitative study is considered intentional, because the respondents were certain members of the population, i.e., teachers, who meet the criteria important for the study.

Two focus groups were conducted: one with primary school subject teachers (N = 9), and another with primary school teachers (N = 7). All teachers participating in the focus groups had experience working with students with intellectual disabilities. The list of schools where the respondents worked is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. *List of primary schools included in the focus groups*

Group 1 - Focus group consisting of first grade teachers	Group 2 - Focus group consisting of subject teachers
Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin Dr Dragiša Ivanović Marko Miljanov Milan Vuković Vuk Karadžić Sutjeska Milorad Musa Burzan	1. Božidar Vuković Podgoričanin 2. Dr Dragiša Ivanović 3. Marko Miljanov 4. Milan Vukotić 5. Vuk Karadžić 6. Sutjeska 7. Milorad Musa Burzan 8. 21. maj 9. Branko Božović

Instruments

Considering the content and essence of the goal and hypotheses of this study, we used a descriptive analytical method. Although this study is qualitative in nature, it has an applied and practical perspective because it directly determines the attitudes of teachers, the perception of the teaching process aimed at children with intellectual disabilities; i.e.,– teacher's assessments, as well as critical areas where support is required. This study also aims to provide recommendations to support these children.

Based on recommendations of the World Health Organization (1992), we created a guideline for the focus group. The focus group offers data for the analysis and mapping of inclusive needs and practices aimed at students with intellectual disabilities. It is designed as a semi-structured instrument, which is conceptually defined, interactive, and encourages responses through exchange.

The first part is aimed at presenting the perception and definition of the very concept of children with intellectual disabilities. In their statements, the respondents spoke about what this type of disturbance means to them, whether they assume IQ as a key determinant during the teaching process, as well as how they determine the basis for recognising the needs of these children.

In the second part, the teachers, based on the principle of scaling, defined which situations were challenging and to what extent when they worked with these children; their responses were repor-

ted as grades from 1 to 5, where 1 was the least challenging and 5 was the most challenging). This was followed by an analysis of what the teachers perceived objectively as a challenge "belonging" to the child as a consequence of the inadequacy of teaching; this analysis was based on a previously defined list.

The third and fourth parts of the focus group were based on an interactive approach. The respondents reported who they cooperate with whether it was a professional service associated with the school or professionals from a resource center, how the cooperation and support takes place, what training sessions and materials have proven useful in their work so far, as well as the measures that they take in their work.

Finally, we received recommendations for work related to children with intellectual disabilities with respect to: a) areas, b) approaches, c) content of work guides, and d) topics and content of training sessions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the focus groups was processed using programs for qualitative data analysis and to derive descriptive inference statistics. We also used ATLAS.ti 8.2 for systematization and coding of the results (Friese, 2012). This was done to provide evidence, reduce the risk of subjective interpretation of the data, and obtain significant and reliable findings.

Focus group findings with primary school teachers

Our results show that the teachers perceived intellectual disabilities as a challenge in relation to the possibility of learning, attention span, and communication with the teacher and peers. They believe that this limits the student's ability to master the material and to socialise and be accepted in the group. This presents a challenge in the work because it requires additional engagement in the preparation and adaptation of didactic material. They believe that IQ does not provide the information needed by the teacher and does not describe the components of the child's

personality, and thus may negatively affect the estimations of the student's ability to learn and develop.

While working with children with intellectual disabilities, the teachers notice that the students have a need to belong, to be accepted by peers and teachers, to communicate, and to show emotions in a way that is understandable to them. From time to time, this creates a sense of insecurity that can lead to withdrawal and rejection of communication. The challenge in the teaching process is how to recognize and respond to the needs of these children, without causing inhibition and resulting in a situation of withdrawal and avoidance of communication with peers.

Teachers usually cooperate with school professional associates, resource centres, and mobile support teams. The measures used to support students are the preparation of individual material, adapted classroom spaces, didactics, pictorial material, and other obvious supplies. The key areas of work that they noticed associated with educating students are socialisation, improving graphomotor skills, and literacy. Also, they believed that the luck of adequate adaptation of teaching process has a great impact on overall achievement and the classroom atmosphere.

In challenging situations, they believe that they should use the following approaches: adjust working plans, concretely and in detail, based on the Individual Developmental Educational Plan (IDEP), prepare material for daily work, cooperate with parents, professional associates of the school, and mobile support teams; they should also undergo training seminars and reading literature dealing with this topic.

The data shown in Figure 3 indicates how teachers observe the functioning and achievement of children with intellectual disabilities.

These are the recommended measures for overcoming challenges in future work: The first-grade teachers recommend that it is important to simplify the content according to the abilities of the students, and introduce a longer break between activities because that reduces the loss of attention and rapid fatigue. The importance of applying a multisensory approach (sight, hearing, touch, movement, smell) and visual pictorial material connected with the pupil's experience was highlighted, since this could slow down the process of
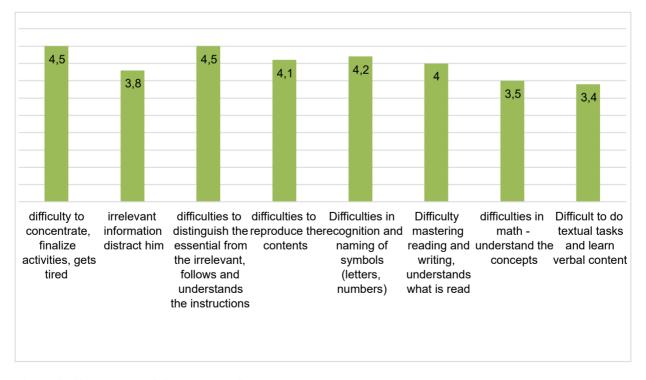

Figure 3. *Observations of classroom teachers*

forgetting. Also, highlighting important topics during the teaching process by associating them to life experiences can help the children focus on activities. Providing schematic presentations of procedures arising from each other in a visible place can help ensure that they are not forgotten. During the literacy process, the teachers recommend starting with simple sentences accompanied by a picture or photograph, which is related to everyday events. Adopting one printed letter (Latin) day can help facilitate literacy. Tasks like read text and formulating them in a simple way with the help of a picture are also important (Radulović at al., 2017). Table 2 presents the frequency of statements processed through the Atlas program in terms of the most frequently received recommendations from the first-grade teachers.

Table 2. *Recommendation of the first-grade teachers*

General recommendations of first-grade teachers	
General approach	• Focus on attention • Step-by-step learning • Highlighting activities that the child needs
Concrete techniques	• Visual materials • Schematic presentation of procedures • Relate topics to everyday events
Attitudes	• Respect the abilities of the students • Be aware of requirements that are applicable to life

The teachers suggested that a manual for working with students with intellectual disabilities would be useful. It should include the needs of these students in the teaching process, activities related to learning symbols, literacy, mastering basic arithmetic operations, recommendations and activities for socialising, achieving functional communication, strengthening self-confidence, as well as workshops on discrimination, acceptance of diversity, and respecting other people's needs.

Regarding training sessions, the respondents believed that the teaching staff should receive training in the following topics: developmental, educational characteristics and needs of children with intellectual disabilities, development of didactic material, application of assistive technology, as well as the mastering of pre-reading, reading, and mathematical skills.

Focus group findings with subject teachers

First, we observed that the participants in this focus group were teachers who taught Montenegrin and foreign languages, and they all reported that teaching these subjects was a challenge.

We understood that the subject teachers see the following difficulties associated with intellectual disabilities: learning (reading, writing, and arithmetic), expressing, formulating thoughts, expressing needs and desires, and communicating. The student faces difficulties in mastering the material, socialising, and has a fear of failure that is accompanied by strong emotional reactions. During the teaching process, greater engagement is needed in the preparation and adaptation of teaching and didactic material.

They reported that their students need additional help due to pronounced forgetfulness, difficulties in transition from one topic to the next, more demanding levels of learning, difficulties in concentrating on a task, and short-lived attention spans that are easily disturbed. The subject teachers believe that IQ does not provide information about factors that affect adaptation and learning, including how a child functions and learns, their learning abilities and social interaction skills, their relationships with peers, and their needs and personalities.

During the work, the teachers must focus on the fact that these children have a need to belong, to be accepted by peers and teachers, to realize emotional interactions, and to communicate. In the lower grades, students with intellectual disabilities are better accepted and progress better in learning. In the third cycle – means VII, VIII and IX grade of primary school, there is stagnation in socialisation and learning because puberty is a great challenge for everyone. Other students begin to show a lack of interest in students with intellectual disabilities, leading to further insecurity and a lack of understanding of the changes related to growth, which in turn can lead to them being less involved in peer activities and experiences.

In practice, these subject teachers often required to cooperate with professional services (meetings, observations, assistance in drafting the IDEP, recommendations), resource centres, and parents. Also, the data shows that the measures used to

support students include the preparation of individualized material (worksheets, video material, audio books, computers (tablets), audio material with headphones, "first bench" teaching, and films), obvious teaching, peer support, as well as pairwise and group work. During the teaching process, these subject teachers use praise and motivation, removal of distracting elements, individualization, simple requirements in accordance with the abilities of the child, gradual learning, segmentation of materials, and peer help.

Figure 4 shows how subject teachers view the functioning and achievement of children with intellectual disabilities.

While working with these children, the teachers believe that the greatest risk for failure is inadequate teaching. Ways to overcome these problems include the preparation and production of working material and the use of aides (it seems that they are not still actively present in the class). The subject teachers proposed the following recommendations for future work: split the activities, take breaks between sequences, and use short simple questions in order to help chil-dren who have difficulties concentrating, who get tired quickly, and who are unable to complete the activities. Provide an environment without distractions, ask the child to sit at the "first bench", where only the material for the given activity should be provided, and describe pictures with the help of questions in order to help focus the child's attention and avoid distractions caused by things that are not relevant to work (Ćordić, Bojanin, 2011). Present work-related instructions as a pictorial layout, highlight the facts in a step-by-step manner so that we can ensure that the child remembers; this will help improve understanding and distinguish the essential from the irrelevant. Provide schematics of previously learned topics to preserve what has already been learnt. Facilitate the recognition and naming of symbols (letters, numbers) by placing images of symbols in a visible location, and presenting them graphically or, simply, in black and white. Adapt the way of mastering reading and writing through the development of motor and graphomotor skills - do not move to a more demanding level. When it is difficult to understand what is read, as the child to repeat and write a composition on the topic. In
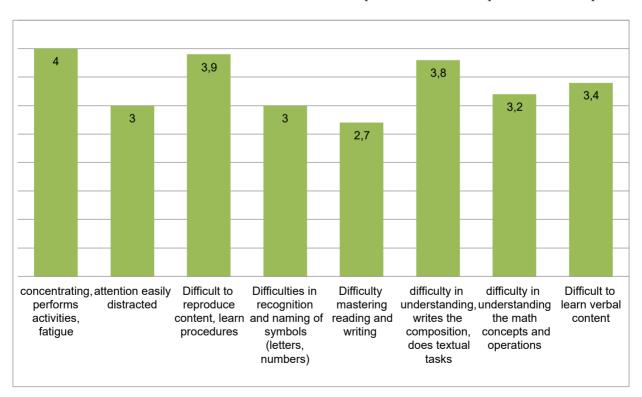

Figure 4. *Observations of subject teachers*

this case, it is necessary to follow the content with a picture and provide a simple sentence referring to the picture that can be found in the sentence. When it is difficult to understand the concepts of quantities and numbers and perform arithmetic operations, it is necessary to adopt the concept of quantity up to 10 and use a calculator for security and traceability. When it is difficult to do textual tasks, it is necessary to explain to the children in several steps using simple sentences. When it is difficult to learn procedures, it is necessary to break them down into steps, show them in a picture, and keep them in a visible place so that the children can remember (Lazor at al. 2012). Table 3 presents the frequency of statements processed through the Atlas program in terms of the most frequently received recommendations from the subject teachers.

In order to design a teachers' manual for the future, the subject teachers provided instructions regarding the content and structure of the manual. They recommended that this manual for working with students with intellectual disabilities should contain a variety of teaching materials categorised by subjects and topics, working material placed at different levels of possibilities and requirements (graded material), recommendations on how to react in specific situations (primarily in the puberty phase, such as recognizing changes and needs, accepting one's self, controlling emotions), examples of good practice, examples of IDEP, and a collection of materials and ideas (www.skolskiportal.edu.me, 2018).

As a part of the training programmes for teachers, they suggest topics such as how to react in specific situations, examples of good practice, peer help (accepting diversity), and collaborative learning.

CONCLUSION

Based on our findings, we conclude that the biggest challenge for teachers is the implementation of teaching subject programs, such as Montenegrin and foreign languages (when it comes to subject teaching). Another challenge was the fact that additional engagement is required in the preparation and adaptation of didactic material.

Table 3. *Recommendations from subject teachers*

General recommendations from subject teachers	
General approach	• Stimulating and undisturbed environments • Presentation, demonstrating, instructions • Social and model learning
Concrete techniques	• Split, divided, gradually conducted activities • Schemes, schedules, visible symbols, graphically and simply, in black and white presented • Retells, practicing, explain in several steps
Attitudes	• Being a model, mastering and mentoring the children • Respecting the child abilities, not demanding certain standards

For the effective planning and implementation of the teaching process, teachers need to know how the child functions and learns, his/her desires, interests, needs and opportunities for learning, as well as ability to interact socially and maintain relationships with peers. This information is more useful than information about the child's IQ.

The key areas in student education are socialisation, graphomotor skills, and literacy. In the case of irregular work, the circumstances and factors that make it difficult to work with children with intellectual disabilities stem from the inadequacy of teaching. This reinforces the demand for additional help to tackle issues like forgetfulness, lack of concentration, lack of attention, and the need to repeat what has been learned, making it more difficult to move to the next level of learning.

The socio-emotional characteristics and the needs of these children that are neglected include the need to belong, to be accept, to express emotions, and to communicate. Puberty is a great challenge for everyone. At this stage, the measures needed by students are the preparation of individual materials, adapted spaces in the classroom, didactic materials, pictorial guides, and other obvious supplies (Milić at al. (2017).

Regarding the recommendations, we conclude that the medical model that requires information on IQ must be replaced with a functional model oriented to the child's personality, abilities, as well as ways of functioning and performing a developmental task. , The teaching process and the environment must be adapted based on the functional assessment

of the child's abilities and needs. It is also important to define a list of challenging situations and provide instructions or ideas for teaching measures and actions, as well as to prepare useful teaching and didactic material.

We conclude that learning needs to be adjusted to the abilities and needs of students by simplifying the content, singling out important topics, connecting them with life, and explaining further. Instructions for work should be presented in a pictorial layout, and mental maps or schematics can be used to present procedures and reminders for previously learned topics. Literacy can be facilitated using printed letters, and the development of motor skills and graph motor skills can be encouraged. We conclude that it is important to find a way to adopt only one alphabet (Latin), because, in the current teaching process, children need to learn 128 letters (hand written and printed letters, both in Cyrillic and Latin).

We conclude that it is justifiable to create a manual for teachers, because, at this moment, they do not have satisfactory initial education, support, and additional information to work effectively with children with intellectual disabilities. Based on Goldbart and Caton (2010), the manual should include the monitoring of developmental and personal characteristics, as well as the needs of these students in the teaching process. Activities related to learning and development, a variety of teaching materials (graded according to levels), ideas for acting in specific situations, as well as peer activities focused on accepting and respecting diversity must also be included.

The manual also needs to be adopted during teacher training programmes, of the lack of sufficient training and support programmes. We conclude that these training sessions have to address the following topics: developmental and educational characteristics and needs of these children, conceptualization and production of teaching and didactic material, application of assistive technology, mastering reading and math skills, and cooperation with the parents. Competencies should be strengthened and monitored through practical guidance and mentoring (coaching), as well as through consultations with members of the mobile service.

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