

TEACHING ASSISTANTS' PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR ROLE IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Zlatko Bukvić

Centar za odgoj i obrazovanje Tomislav Špoljar, Varaždin

Abstract

Teaching assistants and professional communication mediators are a relatively new form of professional support for students with special educational needs (SEN) in the Croatian school system. In the context of Croatian primary and secondary schools, they represent valuable support for students with learning difficulties and disabilities as a subgroup of SEN students. Ministry of science and education, with numerous documents and projects, ensures opportunities for inclusive education. Providing this kind of support with teaching assistants and professional communication mediators is one way of good adaptation to the student's individual needs. With this, students can take their chances for participation in the educational process on an equal basis with other students and without discrimination based on disability. Current publications in the field of assistants and teacher collaboration reveal some aspects of inclusive education challenges and suggestions for improvement. This paper considers the involvement of teaching assistants in Varaždin County and the city of Varaždin, their and teachers' perception of assistants' role in supporting students with disabilities. The sample of this research comprises 160 participants.

Keywords: SEN students, disabilities, teaching assistants, Varaždin county

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has to rely on the cooperation between regular and specialized education to provide appropriate forms of support and teaching strategies for students with learning and behavioral difficulties that arise from their developmental, family, cultural, and other differences. Inclusive education implies positive changes in the school system for students' well-being with a diminution of obstacles to class attendance (Drandić, 2017). By Jurković et al. (2020), educational inclusion is described as the involvement and participation of children and young people with developmental disabilities in regular classes together with other children. There are also numerous benefits from inclusive education for children with and without disabilities, such as more opportunities to develop friendships, peer modeling for academic skills practicing, greater access to the general curriculum, tolerance, et cetera. (Jurković et al. 2020). With the contemporary curriculum of education and holistic approach to meeting students' needs, their full success is viewed through the prism of appropriate support (Puškarić & Vrbanić, 2017). To achieve this friendly environment for all diversities and differences, the school system has to be changed and ready to establish a new standard in inclusive education.

Drandić & Radetić Paić (2020) assess these components' cooperation as a basis for providing and detailing the support system, harmonized with the specifics of the educational needs of students with disabilities. Apart from the National ones, Croatia is bound by other international documents that regulate and ensure the right to education, and by signing them, it has taken an obligation to create optimal conditions and ensure quality education for every student (Drandić & Radetić Paić, 2020). Related to this is their interpretation of the role of teaching assistants as a response of schools to the different needs of students and ensuring quality education.

Available work of Croatian authors (Romstein, 2010; Romstein & Velki, 2017; Drandić, 2017; Marinić et al., 2019; Drandić & Radetić Paić, 2020; Jurković et al., 2020; Igrić et al. 2021) shows increasing interest in the assessment of teaching assistants role in school settings for inclusion of students with disabilities. The share of international and worldwide works in this field is also numerous (Groom & Rose, 2005; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Giangreco et al., 2010; Rutherford, 2012; Giangreco, 2013; Sharma & Salend, 2016). Sharma & Salend (2016) summarized research about assistants as their roles in inclusive classrooms; the impact on students, educators/teachers, and inclusive education; factors influencing the assistants' performance in inclusive classrooms. Providing the professional support (assistants should be professionals) of learning support assistants is an individualized response to students' individual and specific needs. The goal of assistant support is to equalize the opportunities of all students in school settings (Jurković et al., 2020). The introduction of teaching assistants in the Croatian education system is the most common form of supporting inclusive education, and the role of teaching assistants was directed toward the improvement of inclusive practice and supporting the

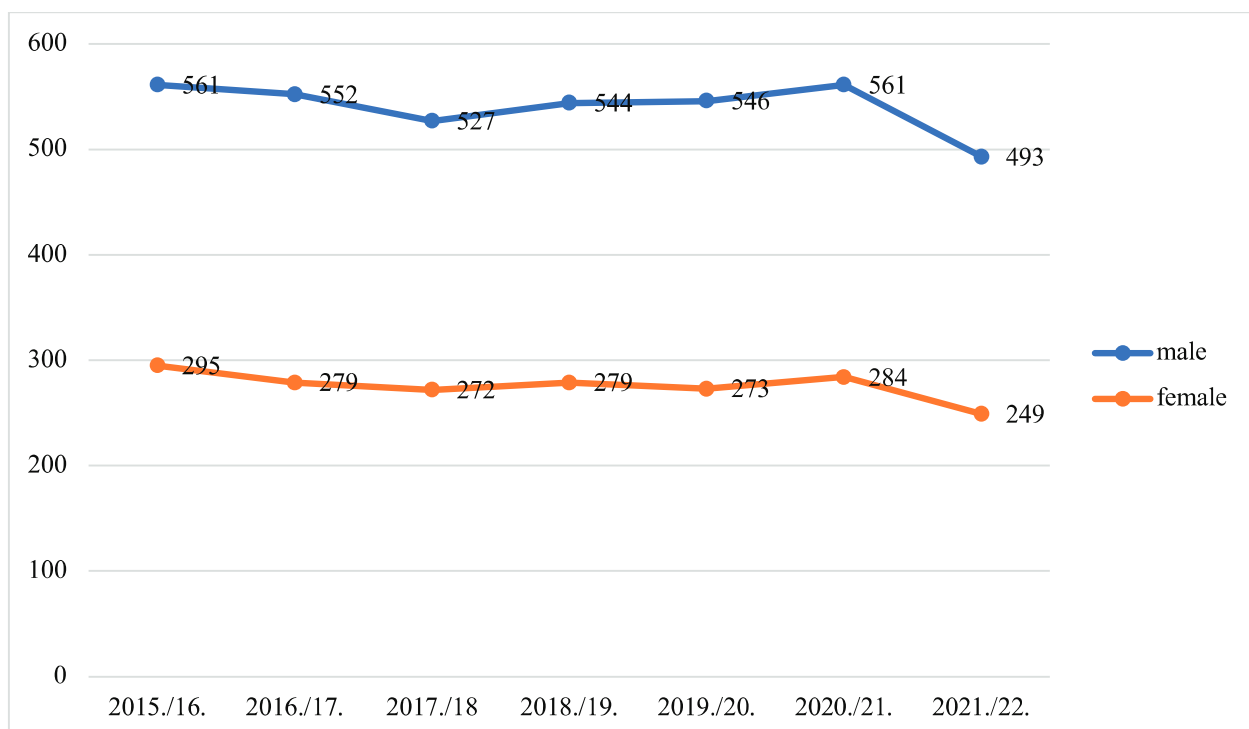
rights of SEN students to education in mainstream schools and classes alongside their peers (Igrić et al. 2021). The education system rely on competent teachers, associate professionals, and all other staff in schools. Because of that, initial teacher education has to be dedicated to professional outcomes and specific competencies in so-called “specialized teaching “. The power and strength of the educational system is the teacher’s obligation to continue professional development and long-life learning. These also include the professional development of learning assistants (Puškarić & Vrban, 2017), as they often represent a key role in student participation in class and school interactions. Like many other authors, Drandić & Radetić Paić (2020) see the primary role of teaching assistants in supporting students with disabilities and typical students in their daily activities, encouraging them to accept and understand individual differences, creating opportunities to learn about differences, self-esteem, a sense of belonging to the school community, and in the support that assistants should provide to parents, teachers and the school. According to professional standards, the basic teaching assistants’ tasks are using an appropriate approach to teaching and learning via adapted strategies, assisting teachers and all students in class, including those with special educational needs, with the consideration that the levels of their responsibility vary depending on the assistant’s level of competences (Drandić & Radetić Paić, 2020; Igrić et al., 2021). From this point of view, these are complex tasks and requirements that are currently performed by professional school associates through the systematization of jobs in schools, and for which, given the level of education and the design of training, teaching assistants are certainly not trained. Croatian teaching assistant training includes 20 hours of basic information about school and disabilities and is, according to Igrić et al. (2021), designed to improve teaching assistants’ confidence but not to gain necessary competencies at the same time. Romstein & Velki (2017) found three major groups of problems in assistant work: problems related to the educational process, problems in interactions with teachers and other personnel in schools, and student-assistant relation problems. The work of Romstein & Velki (2017) and Drandić & Radetić Paić (2020) highlighted that teaching assistants evaluate their education/training and competencies as insufficient for work with SEN and students with disabilities and inclusion implementation. Igrić et al. (2021) also pointed out some challenges in this field of support, for instance, that arise from the temporary nature of teaching assistants’ employment, low wages which depend on project budget and local government decisions, the risk of isolating the child/student who receives a teaching assistant support, and teaching assistant training. The current roles of teaching assistants include some activities that lead to the isolation of the students instead of contributing to their acceptance by peers (Igrić et al. 2021).

There is a question about education quality in regular schools for students with disabilities and double standards in the teaching process, considering that numerous published works have revealed munificent assistants’ competencies, teacher competencies for teaching all SEN students, and a lack of understanding of the role of teaching assistants. The quality of inclusive education comprises good and harmonized practice, culture, and policy. That includes all

interactions between students, teachers, families, communities, stakeholders, and societies. Bouillet (2019) pointed out that schools, as part of the student ecosystem, contain different challenges and protective factors, and their cumulative impact enhances or diminishes possibilities for the students' developmental outcomes. Further, she describes these risk factors as "any events, circumstances, or experiences that increase the likelihood of a problem occurring, and can be found in individual characteristics, socio-economic, cultural, demographic and other conditions and circumstances that increase the certainty of serious difficulties in an individual's life or family "(Bouillet, 2019: 64). Protective factors are "all resources, individual or those from the environment of the person (child) which can minimize the effect of the risk circumstances, and all strengths that contribute to the desired outcome in a risk situation "(Bouillet, 2019: 64).

In Varaždin county, during the last decades, students with disabilities were included in regular schools and a school with a special curriculum. Graph 1. presents data for some students with disabilities in regular county schools from the school-year 2015/16 to 2021/22 as a number of male and female students in primary and secondary school.

*Graph 1. Number of students with disabilities in regular schools of Varaždin county
(Source: Croatian Ministry of Science and Education, e-Rudnik 2022)*



Graph 1 presents the number of students with disabilities in regular schools from 1st to 8th grade. Analyzed by the school or academic years, the number of students with disabilities in 2015/16 was 6.25% of all students in regular schools; in 2016/17, there were 6.09% of students with disabilities; in 2017/18, there were fewer students with a share of 5.91%; then again more in the 2018/19 school year with a share of 6.19%; few more in 2019/20 with a

share of 6.21% and more in 2020/21 with a share of 6.57%. This year, the share is the lowest, with 5.88% of students with disabilities in regular schools. By internal data, there were 130 teaching assistants included in the year 2020/21 for supporting 141 students with disabilities.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Self-assessment analysis of teaching assistants' role and efficacy (N=76) in a regular and special school, and perception of their role from teacher/educator's (N=84) perspective in Varaždin County.

The research was conducted in 2021 using an online questionnaire created for this purpose. With sociodemographic and work settings questions, participants could give descriptive answers to open questions and express their agreement with scaled statements. Open questions consider the role of the assistant in involvement and students' progress, responsibility, expectations, supplement and replacement for teachers, improvement of assistant position, work conditions, and participation in teaching. The online form was distributed to school leaders (principals and professional associates of schools) with a request for their distribution to teachers and teaching assistants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this limited research, 160 participants were included, with 126 of them giving information if they were teachers (N=50) or teaching assistants (N=76). The answers and opinions about the teaching assistants' role of participants are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Teaching assistant's role from teacher and assistant's perspective

Teachers' perception of assistants' role	Teaching assistant's perception of their role
Supporting students	Helping SEN students with learning and school tasks
Positive, noble work	Facilitating SEN student interaction with classmates
Helping students with disabilities in accordance to their diagnose	Helping and supportong the teacher
Helping teachers	SEN student empowerment
Positive influence on student development	Daily living activities
	Nice and humane job
	Responsible and noble
	Personal happiness

The answers of teachers and teaching assistants are summarized, and it is interesting that the assistants gave a more detailed description of their roles and duties. Teachers, on the contrary, mostly described the assistant's role shortly and with few words. The teaching assistant also described the emotional aspect of their role. For example, *I like to work as a teaching assistant; I am happy when a student progresses, love to help and direct them; I have a great collaboration with teachers, and we are all trying to help students in mastering content.*

Table 2. Absolute and relative frequencies of teaching assistant role variables

	N (%)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
The role of the teaching assistant is to supplement and replace the teacher.	22 (17.3)	23 (18.1)	29 (22.8)	50 (39.4)	0	2.86	1.135
According to previous experience, a teaching assistant has a positive effect on students' progress.	0	0	0	5 (3.9)	121 (95.3)	3.96	.195
The position of teaching assistant should be related to supporting the student in teaching.	1 (0.8)	2 (1.6)	9 (7.1)	114 (89.8)	0	3.87	.437
The position of teaching assistant should be focused on assisting the teacher in teaching.	38 (29.9)	26 (20.5)	27 (21.3)	35 (27.6)	0	2.46	1.191
I can clearly separate the scope of work of teachers and teaching assistants.	1 (0.8)	2 (1.6)	11 (8.7)	112 (88.2)	0	3.85	.451
Teaching assistants should be permanent employees of schools.	3 (2.4)	4 (3.1)	17 (13.4)	102 (80.3)	0	3.73	.637
Responsibilities to students with disabilities are transferred to teaching assistants.	25 (19.7)	27 (21.3)	32 (25.2)	42 (33.1)	0	2.72	1.128
I think too much is expected of me	34 (26.8)	40 (31.5)	37 (29.1)	15 (11.8)	0	2.26	.989
There are clear protocols/agreements on the conduct of teachers and assistants	6 (4.7)	17 (13.4)	20 (15.7)	83 (65.4)	0	3.42	.898

1-strongly disagree; 2-mostly disagree; 3-equally agree and disagree; 4-mostly agree; 5-strongly agree; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation

From table 2, we can read interesting data that teachers and teaching assistants gave. As for the first statement, *"The role of the teaching assistant is to supplement and replace the teacher,"* 40% (N=50) of them mostly agree. Further, we have almost 23% of those who equally

agree and disagree with that statement. Both groups agree that teaching assistants have a positive impact on students' progress. The majority (89.8%) agree that the position of teaching assistant should be related to supporting the student in teaching, but on the statement "*The position of teaching assistant should be focused on assisting the teacher in teaching,*" they do not have an equal share of disagreement. Every third (33.1%) of participants mostly agree that the responsibilities to students with disabilities are transferred to teaching assistants. Almost 12% of both teachers and teaching assistants perceive too much expectation of them.

A comparison between teachers and teaching assistants is shown in table 3.

Table 3. Differences in teaching assistant's role perception

		Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	p*
The role of the teaching assistant is to supplement and replace the teacher.	T	56.13	2750.50	0.095
	TA	66.66	4999.50	
According to previous experience, a teaching assistant has a positive effect on students' progress.	T	60.96	3048.00	0.080
	TA	65.17	4953.00	
The position of teaching assistant should be related to supporting the student in teaching.	T	60.75	3037.50	0.193
	TA	65.31	4963.50	
The position of teaching assistant should be focused on assisting the teacher in teaching.	T	53.71	2685.50	0.011
	TA	69.94	5315.50	
I can clearly separate the scope of work of teachers and teaching assistants.	T	66.52	3326.00	0.213
	TA	61.51	4675.00	
Teaching assistants should be permanent employees of schools.	T	48.83	2441.50	0.000
	TA	73.15	5559.50	
Responsibilities to students with disabilities are transferred to teaching assistants.	T	43.81	2190.50	0.000
	TA	76.45	5810.50	
I think too much is expected of me	T	70.49	3524.50	0.069
	TA	58.90	4476.50	
There are clear protocols/agreements on the conduct of teachers and assistants	T	58.10	2905.00	0.111
	TA	67.05	5096.00	

*T=teacher; TA=Teaching assistant; *Mann-Whitney U test. p<0.05*

A comparison of teachers and teaching assistants' perception of the assistant's role and their duties in school resulted in statistically significant differences in three variables. The first one is that teaching assistants think more than teachers ($p < 0.05$) about their position, which should be focused on assisting the teacher in teaching. The second difference is found in the variable about employment. Teaching assistants, also more than teachers ($p < 0.05$), think they should be permanently employed. At the moment, in Croatian schools, this is not an option. One of the reasons is their financing sources, mainly from local governments and project activities. The third difference is found in the variable about responsibilities to students. Teaching assistants think, more than teachers ($p < 0.01$), that the responsibility to students with disabilities is transferred to teaching assistants.

Conclusion

What conclusion can we draw from this data and inclusive practice analysis, or do we have even more questions? First, formal initial teacher education is not sufficient for all diversities that are visible in the classroom, especially for teaching students with disabilities. Initial teacher faculty education (including before Bologna) has one compulsory study course dedicated to this topic. Second, teaching assistants do not have standardized education and training for that responsible role, and at the same time, there is no adequate preparation for specific students' developmental, communication, learning, or any other kind of disabilities or differences. According to the teacher education and assistants' education, we can expect more than is shown, inconsistency in their role perception, lack of competence in teamwork, task delegation, responsibility to a student with disabilities, et cetera. Analyzing the teacher education syllabus in ten faculties or departments for teacher education, there is one compulsory and one or two specific but optional faculty subjects that cover special educational needs and model of support. One specialized postgraduate study in inclusive education and one year of formal teaching assistant education are available at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, and one postgraduate specialist study of early intervention in Zagreb at the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences. One of the concerns is planning teacher and teaching assistants' education and identifying their responsibilities to students.

This limited research revealed that still, after decades of teaching assistants in school, their role is not clear. Their obligations range from personal help in activities of daily living, help with classroom activities and task performing, teaching and individualization, assisting teachers, to communicating with parents and other school employees. Data from this research should be evaluated with a more significant sample of teachers and assistants.

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PROFESIONALNA PODRŠKA POMOĆNIKA U NASTAVI UČENICIMA S TEŠKOĆAMA I NJIHOVA ULOGA U INKLUZIVNOM OBRAZOVANJU

Sažetak

Pomoćnici u nastavi i stručni komunikacijski posrednici relativno su novi oblik stručne podrške učenicima s posebnim obrazovnim potrebama u Hrvatskom školskom sustavu. U kontekstu hrvatskih osnovnih i srednjih škola one predstavljaju vrijedan izvor učenicima s teškoćama u učenju i invaliditetom kao podskupini učenika s posebnim odgojno-obrazovnim potrebama. Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja brojnim dokumentima i projektima osigurava mogućnosti i realizaciju inkluzivnog obrazovanja. Pružanje ove vrste potpore pomoćnika u nastavi i stručnih komunikacijskih posrednika jedan je od načina razumne prilagodbe individualnim potrebama učenika. Na taj način učenici mogu iskoristiti svoje šanse za sudjelovanje u obrazovnom procesu ravnopravno s ostalima i bez diskriminacije na temelju teškoća i različitosti. Aktuelne publikacije u području suradnje asistenata i nastavnika otkrivaju neke aspekte izazova inkluzivnog obrazovanja i prijedloge za njihovo poboljšanje. U ovom radu razmatra se uključenost pomoćnika u nastavi u Varaždinskoj županiji i gradu Varaždinu te njihova i učiteljska percepcija uloge pomoćnika u podršci učenicima s teškoćama na uzorku 160 ispitanika.

Ključne riječi: *učenici s posebnim potrebama, teškoće, pomoćnici u nastavi, Varaždinska županija*

