



This project is funded by the European Union.

# The State of Educational Inclusion in Croatia

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## Acknowledgement

This guide has been produced within the scope of the “BENvob – Building Bridges for Inclusive Education” project funded by the European Union under the Civil Society Dialogue V Grant Program and carried out by Spastic Children’s Foundation of Turkey.

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October 2021

This guide was created with the financial support of the European Union. Its content are the sole responsibility of Spastic Children’s Foundation of Turkey and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



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## 1. Introduction

For the last four decades, the most significant challenge in care and education has been how to meet the individual learning needs of all children. This question is sought to be answered under the term of inclusive education.

As early as the 1980s, many new challenges were identified in meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities in the regular system. The number of students estimated to have special educational needs has increased significantly, thus increasing the number of "marked" compared to traditional groups of special needs. However, even after the identification, most students faced numerous obstacles in school, from inappropriate support for their educational potential to their relationships with peers, acquiring habits necessary for life as well as developing a positive image of themselves.

On the other hand, it was recognized that special education could not cope with the dramatic increase in the number of children who needed learning support and did not belong to any of the categories of children with disabilities, such as children belonging to minorities and children from poor families. It was also shown that behaviors characteristic of a deprived environment such as passivity, self-stimulation, stereotypical behavior, and self-destructive behavior develop in special institutions where children with disabilities are accommodated. After finishing school and being separated from their family due to attending a special education institution outside the place of residence, the child and family usually become strangers to each other, and the situation is similar with the local community to which the child or adult returns after school. The current structure of the regular schooling system in Croatia did not contribute to better effects either, because if the system is imperfect, trying to adapt the child to that system only fixates the child's weaknesses more strongly. Unfortunately, even the current schooling system in Croatia has not overcome the obstacles to exercising the right to education of children with disabilities.

For example, there may be a case when a child with attention deficit is in a frontal instruction class, where the teacher presents the material for 15 to 20 minutes and the students are passive recipients and are required to follow the teacher's presentation at all times. A student with attention deficit cannot do that, so they focus their attention on other students, look out of the window, and the like. In this way, the student develops and fixates this undesirable pattern of behavior. With the growing awareness that students are not standardized or that teaching is not a routine, it has become obvious that the existing educational structure will not increase the effectiveness of education, nor will improved learning happen.

The book "Basics of Education Inclusion" (Igric, 2015)<sup>1</sup> justifiably points out that the Croatian education system should be questioned about the reasons for insufficient school efficiency for all students, despite numerous attempts at school reform. The changes that were introduced were temporary and partial and "remained like islands in the sea of Croatian education" (Igric, 2015).

1. Igric, Lj. (2015). (ed.): Basics of Educational Inclusion- Tailor-made school for every child is possible. Zagreb, Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation of the University of Zagreb and Školska knjiga.



There is a lack of society's commitment to long-term changes, and introduction of systematic and gradual changes, thus avoiding the fears and frustrations caused by unpreparedness for new roles and tasks in education. Parents, who could be a great force in promoting changes, are not sufficiently involved, and neither is the local community satisfactorily present in the changes, thus the support of those whom educational reform relies on is lost. Changes are too isolated and poorly coordinated and as such cannot be the focus of attention of teachers who are counted on in integration.

The main change that has occurred in many schools is providing support to students with special needs for regular classroom education. However, too often supporting students with special needs is considered a peripheral task at all levels, as is the case in Croatia as well.

## **2. Students with Special Needs / Disabilities and Types of Special Needs**

Although the modern approach to disability starts from the social model, the traditional, category-based medical approach (OECD, 2000) to classify students with special needs still prevails at the international level.

The medical model of disability defines disability as "a limitation of the ability to function." The social model of disability defines disability as "a limitation in opportunities and accessibility to participate" (ICF, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

The categories used by the system of education derive from the medical classification of disorders and impairments identified by "diagnostic processing" of children with disabilities. But the fact is that knowing the cause, which is given by the diagnosis, in many cases does not answer the question of the most appropriate intervention or teaching strategy. Thus, children identified as children with special needs of the same category, for example, a mild degree of intellectual disability, may require different educational approaches; just as children in different categories may require the same educational approach.

The problem is that such categories reinforce some misconceptions and wrong patterns of thinking that underestimate the role of educational assessment in education planning. The child's special needs or impairments are diagnosed instead of assessing the child's strengths or weaknesses resulting from insufficient support and obstacles from the environment itself (Wedell and Lindsay, 1980; Adelman and Taylor, 1993 according to Igrić, 2015).

2. The International classification of functioning, disability and health (2010). World Health Organization, Zagreb:HZZJZ



Following the principles of OECD (2000)<sup>3</sup> Croatia introduced three categories in the 2008 Primary and Secondary Education Act (Article 65, which has not been changed in subsequent revisions of the Law) as follows:

- students with developmental special needs
- students with learning difficulties, students with behavioral and emotional problems
- students with disabilities due to educational, social, economic, cultural, and linguistic factors.

Regulatory Act on Primary and Secondary Education of Students with Developmental Difficulties (Article 2, The Official Gazette 24/2015)<sup>4</sup> only defines a group of students with developmental special needs as: "A student with disabilities is a student whose abilities in interaction with environmental factors limit their full, effective and equal participation in the educational process with other students and arise from:

- physical, mental, intellectual, sensory impairments and dysfunctions,
- combinations of several types of the above impairments and dysfunctions."

The specified Regulatory Act (2015) distinguishes the following groups of special needs:

- Visual impairments
- Hearing impairments
- Impairments of language, speech and oral communication and specific learning special needs
- Impairments of organs and organ systems
- Intellectual special needs
- Behavioral and mental health disorders
- The existence of several types of special needs in psychophysical development.

### **3. The Frequency of Special Needs / Disabilities**

Since 2001, the parameters on persons with disabilities that are in line with the average values of the world and Europe measurements of the number of persons with disabilities have been systematically monitored in Croatia. There is no single definition in the world, nor is there a methodology for determining disability, which hinders the development of its epidemiology as well as the absolute comparability of the prevalence obtained. Croatia is set to follow the guidelines of the World Health Organization and the United Nations and form a socio-medical model of disability that, in valorizing disability, in addition to diagnosing the causes of disability, takes into account the functioning of the person and the person's interaction with the environment. However, there is still room for progress in that area. According to the estimations of the United Nations, there are 650 million people with disabilities in the world and they make up 10% of the world's population.

Act on the Register of Persons with Disabilities in Croatia (The Official Gazette, 64/2001) prescribes the way of collecting, processing, and protecting the confidentiality of data on persons with disabilities. The Register is managed by the Croatian National Institute of Public Health.

3. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/annrep-2000-en.pdf?expires=163411016&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=23A733C97352BC13A37279278F49DF9>

4. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015\\_03\\_24\\_510.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015_03_24_510.html)



According to the data of the Register of Persons with Disabilities (2019),<sup>5</sup> there are 511,281 persons with disabilities living in Croatia which makes up 12.4% of the total population. The largest number of persons with disabilities, 248,389 (49%), belongs to the age group of 65+, while 217,578 (42%) of those with disabilities belong to the working-age population of 20-64 years of age.

It is stated that there is a total of 45,314 (9%) of children with disabilities or children with developmental special needs under the age of 19 (0-19). The frequency of types of special needs in children is as follows:

	%
Damage to the locomotor system	28.8
Impairments of other organs and organ systems	26.4
Mental impairments	26.1
Central nervous system disorders	14.9
Voice and speech communication disorder	6.0
Intellectual special needs	5.4
Visual impairment	5.3
Hearing impairment	2.6
Peripheral nervous system disorders	2.3
Congenital anomalies and chromosomopathies	2.3
Autism	0.5

(The Report on Persons with Disabilities in The Republic of Croatia, Croatian National Institute of Public Health, May 2019)

The Register of Persons with Disabilities received decisions on the appropriate form of education for 55,537 persons, with a larger number of men (64%). Impairments of language and speech oral communication and specific learning difficulties are the most common specified causes that determine the need for an appropriate form of education, while the regular program with content adaptation and individualized procedures is the most common form of its specified implementation.

Although the number of detected students with disabilities for whom support is provided in care and education is rising, it is unfortunately not yet available to the same extent as in countries with a higher level of inclusive education (up to 15%). For example, US data for 2019/2020 on children with disabilities aged 3 to 21 show that 14% of them are children who receive support under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The majority of them (34%) have specific learning difficulties.<sup>6</sup>

5. [https://www.hzjz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Osobe\\_s\\_invaliditetom\\_2019.pdf](https://www.hzjz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Osobe_s_invaliditetom_2019.pdf)

6. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>



## 4. Inclusion in Care and Education in Croatia

Just as education is a human rights issue, so is a disability. Disability as a human rights issue is not about a person's health, but about social justice, fairness, and opportunities to participate in everyday life. The medical approach to disability, which is focused on damage or disorders, is very resistant to changes in practice and everyday life in Croatia. It is visible in many ways. The steps are first to establish a diagnosis that indicates what is wrong with a particular child or person and then based on the diagnosis, to determine the type of care and education required. An example of the medical approach is the Guide List of Types of Special Needs, which is an Annex to the Regulatory Act on Primary and Secondary Education of Students with Developmental Difficulties (2015), and the attached documentation, which determines attending special classes for some groups of students.

Impairments and disorders should be seen (Rioux, Carbert, 2003, according to Iglic et al. 2015) as variations in human characteristics that contribute to differences as a possible contribution of individuals in society, and social context as the inflexibility of society to adapt to different needs of individuals. A person with a disability needs to be provided with different ways of meeting their needs, and society needs to create opportunities for such support so that the person with disabilities can function in society with their disability (Raphael, Bryant, Rioux, 2006, according to Iglic, 2015). Therefore, associations of persons with disabilities and parents' associations, together with experts, are looking for community support systems as a way to "compensate" for needs or disabilities.

Obstacles to inclusion are removed by compensation. So, what are we using as compensation methods for children with disabilities? We determine who the children who can be brought up with their peers in a stimulating environment are, and those who should be separated due to their special needs being incompatible for learning with others. It should be determined which schools they will be able to attend because "it costs too much to install an elevator in every school, the necessary professional support cannot be organized in every school, they are better in special classes with an expert for special needs and not with a teacher and their peers" (the author's note).

Croatia accepted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by adopting the Law on the Ratification of the Convention (The Official Gazette, 6/2007)<sup>7</sup> and made a commitment to comply with Article 24 of the Convention to implement "the reasonable adjustment" in education. It is about determining whether the compensation for a child's disability, for example, a teaching assistant for a student with intellectual disabilities or a personal assistant for a child with a motor disability, is considered to be an "unreasonable adjustment" for society or about discriminating against and excluding them from the community.

7. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/medunarodni/2007\\_06\\_6\\_80.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/medunarodni/2007_06_6_80.html)



From 2000 to present day, the Republic of Croatia has adopted a number of documents that determine the strategy for the development of the inclusion of children with special needs in regular schools, such as:

- Priority Activities for The Welfare of Children from 2003 to 2005 (2003),
- National Activity Plan for The Rights and Interests of Children from 2006 to 2012 (2006),<sup>8</sup>
- Croatian National Educational Standard (CNES, 2007),<sup>9</sup>
- National Strategy for Equalization of Opportunities for Disabled Persons from 2007 to 2015 (2007),<sup>10</sup>
- National strategy for the rights of children in the Republic of Croatia for the period 2014-2020 (2014),<sup>11</sup>
- The Education, Science and Technology Strategy (The Official Gazette, 124/2014),<sup>12</sup>
- National Strategy for Equalization of Opportunities for Disabled Persons from 2017 to 2020 (The Official Gazette, 42/2017)<sup>13</sup>

Despite the listed plans and strategies that contained a number of measurements for inclusion of students with special needs, the state of Croatia received the following recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2014):

- to take immediate steps to ensure that all persons with disabilities have access to inclusive primary, secondary and tertiary education,
- to ensure reasonable adaptation for them within regular education,<sup>3</sup>
- adopting the principle that exclusionary and separate education is discriminatory,
- to provide training on inclusive education for teachers and other professionals,
- all secondary education facilities to be accessible to persons with disabilities.

The National Strategy for Equalization of Opportunities for Disabled Persons from 2017 to 2020 came as a response to the recommendations listed above and Croatia set up the following goals:

- Provided conditions (program, professional, location, etc.) of inclusive education of students with developmental special needs.
- Created support centers and expert (mobile) teams.
- Inclusion of a larger number of children with disabilities in the regular system of preschool, elementary, secondary, and higher education in the environment in which the child/young person lives.

8. <https://udomiteljizadjecu.hr/wp-content/uploads/documents/dokumenti/Nacionalni%20plan%20aktivnosti%20za%20prava%20i%20interese%20djecu%202006%20-%202012.pdf>

9. <http://hud.hr/wp-content/uploads/sites/168/2014/11/vodic-kroz-hnos.pdf>

10. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017\\_04\\_42\\_967.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017_04_42_967.html)

11. <https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages//ZPPI/Strategije%20-%2000GP/socijalna>

12. <https://vlada.gov.hr/strategija-obrazovanja-znanosti-i-tehnologije-nove-boje-znanja/151>

13. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017\\_04\\_42\\_967.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017_04_42_967.html)



The following laws and bylaws are crucial for the education of students with special needs:

Primary and Secondary Education Act (The Official Gazette, 87/2008, previous revision 64/2020),<sup>14</sup> The Anti-discrimination Law (The Official Gazette, 85/2008, 112/2012),<sup>15</sup> Regulation on the Procedure for Determining the Psychological Condition of the Child, Student and the Composition of Expert Committees (The Official Gazette, 67/2014),<sup>16</sup> Regulation on Elementary and Secondary Care and Education of Students with Disabilities (The Official Gazette, 24/2015),<sup>17</sup> Regulation on Teaching Assistants and Communication Facilitators (The Official Gazette, 102/2018),<sup>18</sup> Regulation on the Number of Students in Regular and Combined Classes and Educational Group in Elementary School (The Official Gazette, 124/2009),<sup>19</sup> National Pedagogical Standard of Elementary System of Care and Education (The Official Gazette, 63/2008),<sup>20</sup> National Pedagogical Standard of Secondary System of Care and Education (The Official Gazette, 63/2008).<sup>21</sup>

The data about the inclusion of students in primary and secondary education

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION - the 2021/2022 academic year			
Number of institutions	Total number of students	The number of students with special needs involved in elementary education	
921, out of which 40 are for the elementary education of students with special needs	312,011 students	22,644 students	
Regular program with individualized procedures		Regular program with content adaptation and individualized procedures	
10,645 students		7,942 students	
Partial integration: 637 students in 288 different classes			
Others: 1,439			
The number of students in institutions for students with special needs			
		2,618	

14. <https://www.zakon.hr/z/317/Zakon-o-odgoju-i-obrazovanju-u-osnovnoj-i-srednjoj-%C5%A1koli>

15. <https://www.zakon.hr/z/490/Zakon-o-suzbijanju-diskriminacije>

16. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2014\\_06\\_67\\_1279.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2014_06_67_1279.html)

17. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015\\_03\\_24\\_510.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015_03_24_510.html)

18. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2018\\_11\\_102\\_1992.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2018_11_102_1992.html)

19. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2009\\_10\\_124\\_3065.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2009_10_124_3065.html)

20. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008\\_06\\_63\\_2129.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008_06_63_2129.html)

21. [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008\\_06\\_63\\_2130.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008_06_63_2130.html)



### SECONDARY EDUCATION - the 2021/2022 academic year

Number of institutions	Total number of students	The number of students with special needs involved in regular secondary education	
403, out of which 14 are for the elementary education of students with special needs	147,018 students	4.511	
		Gymnasium	Vocational schools
		287 students	4,224 students
The number of students in institutions for students with special needs			337 students

The presented data show that there is a total of 7.25% of students with disabilities in primary education, most of whom (88%) are included in the regular primary school system. Some of those students attend regular schools, but in special classes, which is not in line with the inclusive approach, which requires care and education together with peers in the same classroom. Of students with disabilities, 3% attend regular secondary schools, which is significantly less than in primary education. The reason lies in the fact that, after finishing primary school, some of the students with disabilities enroll in institutions for secondary education for students with disabilities, and others enroll in regular vocational school programs, where they often leave the chosen program during the first year or before graduation.

## 4.1. The Principles of Inclusive Care and Education

The terms integration and inclusion can be used interchangeably in Croatia, so they will be clarified here using excerpts from the chapter "Introduction to inclusive education" of the textbook "Basics of Education Inclusion" (Igric et al., 2015).

"Integration means placing children in regular classes based on the level of functioning. This means that in the regular class there will be those students whose learning abilities correspond to other students, i.e., who can follow, with certain adjustments, lessons for all students. Various models called integration can be found in school practice. Thus, it is stated that children are integrated if they are together with students from regular schools during some special events, or if they are visited at special schools by students from regular schools" (page 8).

The most frequent type of integration in schools is physical integration, which can also be found in many forms. Physical integration is when students are only placed in a regular class, but their needs are not taken care of. Unfortunately, we are still witnessing many such examples, even when a student has a decision of the administrative body for the program adjustment. This happens especially in the higher grades of elementary school and in secondary schools for certain subjects, with teachers who are not ready to adapt teaching to students with special needs. At the same time, one should ask what mechanisms in the functioning of the school contribute to ignoring such unprofessional behavior of some teachers" (Igric, "Basics of Education Inclusion", 2015, p.9).



"One form of integration is that in which a student is included in a class but regularly goes to a "resource room"<sup>22</sup> without participating in lessons like other students. In the first research in Croatia on the effects of integration (Stancic, Levandovski, Mavrin-Cavor, 1984, according to Igric et al., 2015), this exact model was tested.

It is also considered integration when a student with difficulties is included in regular education but not in extracurricular activities and free time with other students. In integration models, it is the student who needs to adapt to the conditions and activities of the class and the school. The student's place in the school is determined according to his or her learning abilities and the student's role is to fit into that. The student is considered to be "special," an addition, a guest in the class. These students are actually "allowed to be in the class but without full rights."

Two main purposes could be discussed for introducing classification into the education of children with special needs. One of them is the political-administrative purpose for providing the funds for "additional needs" and the other one is for the implementation of the decisions on the curriculum.

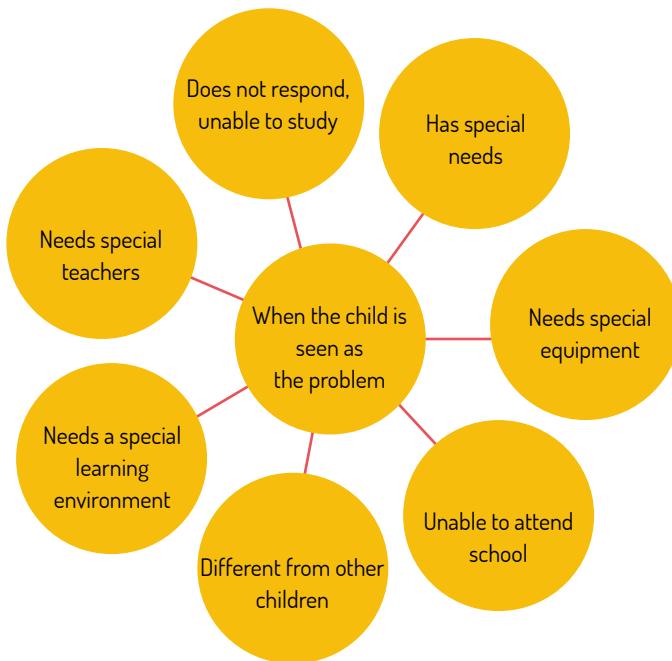


Figure 2. Integrated education (UNICEF, 1999)

22. A cabinet equipped with the necessary didactic material and equipment, where an expert for special needs works one or more students



Unlike the integrative approach, the inclusive approach presents the willingness of people to change and adjust to the needs of all the members of society. Members of a group mutually cooperate and communicate; they help each other and accept the fact that some children have different needs than the majority and want different things, and instead of competitiveness, cooperation prevails. The inclusive approach to education gives a feeling of belonging and partnership to every child. Inclusion cannot be achieved by laws alone. A change in the "feelings and attitudes of society" is needed (Skjorten according to Igrič, 2015, p.39).

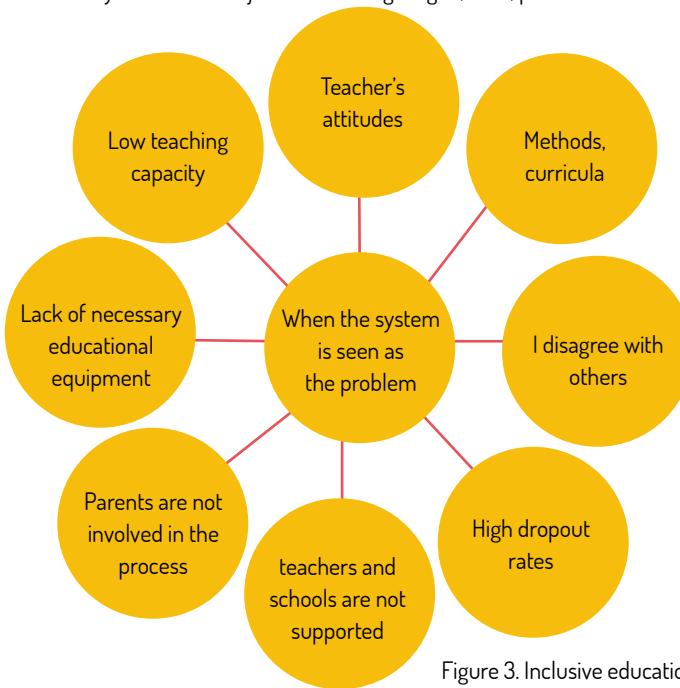


Figure 3. Inclusive education (UNICEF, 1999)

Aside from this, changes are needed in the manner and means of assessment, teaching methods, and classroom management. The teacher's role should be redefined and the existing resources relocated. To achieve the change of the teacher's role, it is important to provide for the teachers education through which they will acquire the competencies for working with all students, and focus on not only ensuring the acquisition of new academic knowledge by students, but also on encouraging the social and emotional development of children. In order to develop inclusion, the roles of existing special schools and centers will need to be changed.

"If we compare integration and inclusion, it can be said that integration is a helping hand to students with disabilities, and inclusion enriches everyone included in education" (Befring, 2001 according to Igrič, 2015). Inclusion can become reality only if society takes active measures to make it happen. Each school, local community, and society at whole are invited to develop strategies that will lead to inclusion.



Although it is important to establish legislation that will regulate the right to educational inclusion, from Croatia's experience in implementing integration, which has had a legislative framework since 1980, it is seen that this does not suffice. If all the participants in inclusion are not ready to commit to it, there will always be ways and procedures to avoid its implementation in the full sense of the word. The politics for people with disabilities and children with special needs reflects the ideology of the country. No special laws are needed for regulating this policy; however, for the implementation of the legislation into practice, guides or bylaws, which will explain in more detail the purpose and implementation methods, are necessary (Igric, 2015).

The attitudes, experience, and knowledge about students with special needs are important factors of inclusion. The very knowledge that the environment can cause more obstacles to learning and development than impairment or disability contributes to inclusion, because the reason for segregation is not in the characteristics of the person but in society and its limited capabilities for a particular group of its citizens. The research that brings new knowledge about learning also contributes to the development of inclusion. The language we use and the acquired terminology in the area of special educational needs are also mirroring our attitudes.

"Inclusion is closely linked with changes in the education of teachers and doing research in the area of educational inclusion. Thus, it is increasingly emphasized how important it is that students learn content that will benefit them in life and pay more attention to social-emotional factors in the process of learning and development. In order for teachers to use contemporary findings and methods in their work and to satisfy the demands that are placed before them, teachers themselves should have an opportunity to learn the contemporary methods during their studies or lifelong learning. It is also necessary for different ministries to mutually cooperate at the state level as well as for the authorities at the local level, teachers of different subjects, elementary school teachers and parents, and schools to cooperate with organizations of people with disabilities, the civil sector in general, and the local community" (Igric, 2015, p.8-12).

## 4.2. The Forms of Inclusive Support to Care and Education

Great contributions to the accessibility of education in the past period were made by civil society. An example of good practice is the IDEM center for inclusive support, which brings together educational and rehabilitation experts from special and regular schools, university teachers, and parents. The main goal of this non-governmental organization is to promote the development of inclusive education in Croatia. The model of educational inclusion has been gradually created, during the twenty years of CIP IDEM, which will suit our conditions. A scientifically evaluated teacher education program, in which teachers acquire competencies for accepting all students, was created with the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Zagreb.



Some new forms of support for inclusion have been developed and scientifically proven. In this way, a service of mobile expert teams has been introduced and works through the centers at the local level and secures the availability of every school to children with special educational needs. Teaching assistants are at schools and have become a recognized need for support to teaching (Igrič, 2015, p.323-326). The supervision of care and education has become an equally important factor.

## The formula of educational inclusion (Igrič, 2014.)

Inclusive Support Model

=

Regular Schools

+

Inclusive Support Centre

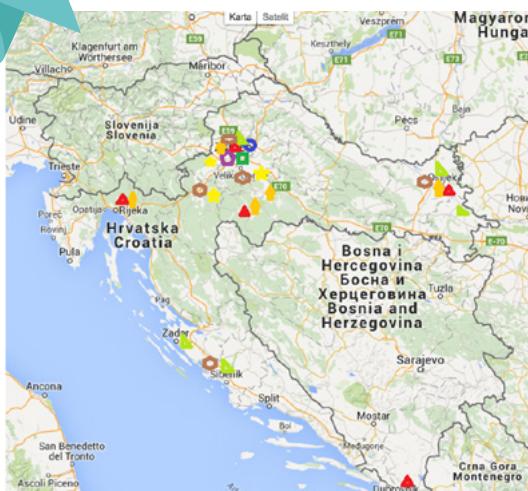
Mobile expert teams

Teaching assistants

Supervision

The goals of new forms of support are:

1. To provide efficient care and education in regular schools to students with special needs
2. To develop a model of expert support to schools that will present a reasonable adaptation of care and education to students with special needs
3. To train expert staff for the functioning of the support centers to educational inclusion



- ▲ MST MZOS 2006 supporting the inclusion of children with special needs in regular schools
- Development towards inclusive school - Practices - Research - Higher Education - Norwegian Center for International Cooperation and Research Council of Norway 2006-2014
- The right to live in the community UNDP 2007-2008
- MZSS and the World Bank in the development of referral centers for the inclusion of children with disabilities
- ↑ Professional mobile team - support for inclusion of children with special needs in education, Phare 2008-2010
- ▲ IPA 2010-2011 lifelong education for education for all
- IPA 2013-2015 professional support for education for all
- ★ Audit, contracts with local governments 2013-2016

Figure 4. The development projects of new forms of support CIP IDEM

### Mobile Expert Teams

A mobile expert team represents a team of experts from different fields intending to support schools in the education of children with special educational needs. Together with expert educators that work at a school, the team has other experts available depending on the needs. It makes the school accessible in the local community to every child regardless of the child's needs. The centers that are formed according to the available resources at the local level are responsible for the work organization and supervision of the mobile teams.

In the Regulatory Act on Education of Students with Developmental Difficulties (2015, Article 21), this form is called an expert team and is defined as follows:

(1) An expert team is a mobile multi-disciplinary service of support to schools in working with students with developmental special needs and its curriculum is approved by the agency responsible for care and education.

(2) An expert team:

- provides professional, advisory and educational support to educators, teaching assistants, and expert communication intermediaries,
- provides the support of supervision to expert educators at school,
- provides expert support in implementing temporary forms of education,
- as needed, has an advisory function in the planning and creating of a suitable program for elementary and secondary education and follows the effects of the implementation,
- suggests to the school changes needed in working with students.



It is a fact that almost no school in Croatia nor in the world employs all expert educators needed for different students' needs in care and education. It is usually the pedagogue or the psychologist or one of the educational and rehabilitation experts, educational rehabilitator or social pedagogue or speech therapist. For these reasons, an inclusive support center, which cooperates with schools, is intended for the CIP IDEM inclusive support model and the school coordinator requests certain members of the mobile team from the center as needed.

### **Inclusion Support Center**

The center's role according to the DIP IDEM model can be as follows:

- organizes work of mobile expert teams (MET),
- ensures the regular group supervision of MET members (once a month),
- choice and selection of candidates for the assistants,
- conducts basic education (up to 20 hours) for the assistants,
- conducts the supervision of the teaching assistants,
- ensures the assistant gets support from the members of the mobile expert team and the school's coordinator who will, as needed, include the required member of the mobile team.

The previously mentioned Regulatory Act on Education of Students with Developmental Difficulties (2015) has taken over some elements of the Model and states the following in Article 23:

(1) A school that, in addition to the activity of educating students, deals with providing professional and methodological support to other institutions and developing community services that students need, as a support center, may form an expert team.

(2) The support center specialized in working with students with a certain type of difficulty performs, in addition to its primary activity, the following tasks as well:

- organizes and conducts professional training for educators in order to inform them about the developmental characteristics and functioning of students with developmental special needs,
- participates in educating teaching assistants and professional communication intermediaries,
- organizes expert support in work and education of programs' leaders for the teaching assistant and professional communication intermediary,
- provides advisory support to educators,
- gives support and education to parents/guardians,
- develops new innovative methodologies and techniques of passing knowledge to students,
- cooperates with the scientific and university community.

Unfortunately, although the mobile teams are listed in the two National Strategies for Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, and in the Education Strategy, they are not yet regulated by the Ministry of Science and Education in practice. It is true that several special social institutions and schools were interested in becoming support centers, so they completed training for work in mobile teams (organized by the IDEM School), but they have not yet managed to implement this new form of support.



The Vinko Bek Center for Education has been organizing mobile teams in Croatia for years, and as far as the newer institutions are concerned, so far only the Ozalj Community Service Center has been able to organize mobile teams for schools in the territory of Karlovac County. The founder of both institutions is the Ministry of Demography, Social Policy and Youth.

After this activity was implemented and evaluated for ten years by CIP IDEM projects, for the next 5 years CIP IDEM could only provide occasional support to schools in Zagreb, because no funds were secured.

Again from 2020/21, a three-year support program was initiated through mobile teams financed by the Ministry of Labor and Pension System, Family and Social Policy which will provide the support of a dozen elementary and secondary schools in the city of Zagreb. It is CIP IDEM's intention to fill in the gap with this program until the city of Zagreb forms the Center for support to inclusive education.

### Teaching Assistants

Compared to the other forms of support intended to increase the inclusion of children with special needs in schools, in Croatia, the most work was put into introducing teaching assistants. The greatest contribution to this was made by the parents of children with special needs who noticed the importance of this support to schools more than 10 years ago. In this way, the number of teaching assistants increased almost 15 times from 2009 to 2018. During the process of introducing teaching assistants in education, the experiences of other countries with a more developed inclusive education systems were used in which the experts played an important role based on the cooperation of the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences and CIP IDEM. Parallel to the introduction of this form of support, the first studies about teaching assistants and the effects of their work were conducted. Teachers marked the work of the assistants positively (Stancic, Sekusak, 2008).<sup>23</sup>

The first evaluation of the work of teaching assistants was conducted within the project WB 06/04 Development towards the Inclusive School: Practices—Research—Capacity Building based on the cooperation of Oslo University and the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences. In the Croatian leg of the project, the desire was to answer the questions: In which way does the assistant provide support in the class, and how are the interventions of the assistant connected to student D's behavior?

The authors Igric et al. (2008)<sup>24</sup> concluded:

"The actions taken by the teaching assistant chosen to work in the class that student D, whose special needs arise from the ADHD disorder, attends were analyzed.

23. Stancic, Z., Sekusak Galesev, S. (2008) Teaching assistants – what teachers and defectologists think about their inclusion // Educational inclusion, Brijuni, Croatia, 2008, <https://www.bib.irb.hr/418648>

24. Igric, Lj., Kobetic, D., Lisak, N. (2008): Evaluation of some forms of support for the educational inclusion of students with special needs, Child and Society, Journal for the Promotion of the Rights of the Child, 10, 1/2; 179-197. <https://www.bib.irb.hr/418512>



The program included a mobile expert team (MET) as a permanent form of support to the assistant in choosing the methods and procedures in his or her work.

By doing the qualitative analysis of videos of the assistant's work, along with triangulation of data on the student's behavior and other relevant data, a trend of improving the choice of methods of assistant work is noticed, and is interpreted to be a result of developing a relationship of trust between the student and the assistant and continuous monitoring of the assistant's work by consultations from MET and group supervision.

For flexibility in the choice of methods, which proved to be very important in the case of the boy with ADHD, professional support to the assistant is important, but personality traits of the assistant that will be suitable for developing a complex relationship with the boy with low tolerance to frustration is also important.

One of the categories of the assistant's activities identified here is helping other students, which was well received by the students. The student with special needs did not want others to think that it was only he who needed help. If the role of the assistant in the classroom is established to be more than just helping the student with special needs, but also helping for instance the teacher, the assistant will not contribute to the isolation and additional marking of students with special needs. Furthermore, the assistant is required to be willing to learn through expert advice, cooperation with the teacher, and cooperation with parents, which is equally important.

It should be noted that the application of group work in class proved to be very effective in terms of the student's behavior, the work of the assistant with the class, and cooperation with the teacher. The frontal form of work, which still dominates in Croatian schools, makes it far more difficult to achieve a dynamic and inclusive classroom atmosphere, which is provided by group work in the classroom. The development of the approach "school for all" will be difficult to achieve without improving the methodology of work in schools. Teachers are still not clear enough about their role in working with the assistant; they are not sure what is expected of them, how much the assistant is only intended for one student, and to what extent the assistant is a teacher's helper.

If it is fully understood what an inclusive class is, then there is no dilemma for the teacher, expert team of the school, and members of MET. Guided by the "school for all" approach, the teaching assistant becomes an important factor in supporting the school, as they help the teacher to get to know his / her students easier and faster and to match the requirements to their abilities and interests. Most teachers in Croatia, who had an opportunity to work with a teaching assistant and who, of course, had appropriate expert support, consider the assistant as very important for the success of their work in the class. Many schools had the courage to ask for an assistant from the local care and education authority, or parents themselves have provided funding for the assistant. However, when the assistant enters the classroom, it only opens a series of questions to which schools do not know the answers, and they manage as they best can.



The complexity of the assistant's work can be successfully accomplished only when this activity is regulated by implementing acts in care and education. At the same time, it is necessary to provide the teachers with lifelong education for working at inclusive schools, which is a process mobile expert teams can play a great role in" (p.193).

A certain amount of progress can be reported for the past few years in Croatia. An implementing act for the work of teaching assistants was adopted by the Regulation on Teaching Assistants and Communication Intermediaries (The Official Gazette, 2018). Most of the funding has been provided for teaching assistants at the state level through an EU project. Because the experiences of other countries have been used, the role of the assistant is mainly focused on the contribution to the realization of the right to education in the same school and classroom together with peers.

Global research so far has mainly dealt with the issue of the inclusive role of teaching assistants and the necessary competencies for this profession. It was determined (according to Igrić et al., in press) that in practice, greater importance was given to personal competencies of assistants, such as patience, sense of humor, propensity for teamwork, and understanding of students, than professional competencies and skills. When analyzing the role of professional training of teaching assistants and factors important for education policy in relation to the role of teaching assistants, the problems of temporary employment of assistants, low salaries of assistants, danger of isolation of students with classroom assistants, and their training as assistants were identified. The importance of the pedagogical role of assistants in the educational process, which contributes to the inclusive role of teaching assistants, was determined.

The experience of some countries that introduced teaching assistants much earlier, such as the UK, has been of great help to Croatian experts since 2001. National standards for the profession of teaching assistants were created as well as programs for training beginners in the UK. Guidelines on the application of the standards, issued by several national organizations, have also been developed for all school staff, with the support of scientists and experts from universities and from practice. Since teaching assistants serve as classroom support related to learning and student support, assistants should be employed in schools, and only exceptionally should some be able to act as a local government service for community schools. The basic task, according to these standards, is an appropriate approach to teaching and learning with the use of a tailored strategy and assistance to the teacher and all students, including students with special educational needs. The role of assistants in promoting and encouraging inclusion should also be emphasized. The importance of the pedagogical role of assistants has been pointed out by recent global research (Bowles, Radford, Bakopoulou, 2017<sup>25</sup>) but also by recent research in Croatia (Igrić et al., 2019).<sup>26</sup>

25. Bowles, Radford, Bakopoulou (2017) Scaffolding as a key role for teaching assistants: perceptions of their pedagogical strategies. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10039428/1/Bowles%20Radford%20Bakopoulou%20Scaffolding%20for%20TAs%20BJEP%202017%20Final%20author%20copy.pdf>

26. Marinic, M., Matejčić, K., Igrić, Lj. (2019). The quality of cooperation between teachers and teaching assistants from the perspective of teachers and assistants, <https://doi.org/10.32903/zs.651-2.21>



In Croatia, with the introduction of teaching assistants, the first non-formal education programs were implemented in 2005 by the IDEM Center for Inclusive Support, and since 2012, the Agency for Vocational and Adult Education (based on the proposal of a group of prominent inclusive experts) approved the Training Plan and Program for Teaching Assistants. In the same year, the Ministry of Science and Education approved the IDEM School to implement the first training program for teaching assistants.

Today, the role of teaching assistants in Croatian practice is not only diverse but over time, some assistant activities have been adopted, which instead of contributing to the student's sense of acceptance by classmates, contribute to their isolation.

In order to get a scientifically based answer to the questions of who the school assistants in Croatia are today, what competencies teachers - their direct associates - expect from them, what jobs they do, and who helps them in this, a one-year project called "The role of teaching assistants from teachers' and assistants' perspectives" (leaders: CIP IDEM and School of Adult Education IDEM) was carried out.

The aim of this research was to determine the competencies of teaching assistants from the perspective of these two groups of school staff and to analyze them in accordance with the inclusive approach to education. For this purpose, qualitative research was conducted using focus group interviews with 69 participants (40 teachers and 29 teaching assistants) in primary schools in three cities in Croatia. The transcribed focus group interview material, general questionnaire data, and school documentation form the empirical sources for qualitative data analysis. For a deeper insight into the perspectives of teachers and teaching assistants on the necessary assistants' competencies, an analysis of pre-defined frameworks or topics was applied. It was found that the perspectives of teachers and assistants coincide only in one part, more in relation to personal than professional competencies required for the work of assistants. The fact of the matter is that the teachers and teaching assistants, who are the direct collaborators in the teaching process, need to have a clear picture of what the role of an assistant is and what professional and personal competencies are needed to be able to work in an inclusive classroom. It is expected that during the legal regulation of the profession of teaching assistants and organization of schoolwork, the findings of this research conducted after assistants have been present in Croatian educational practice for more than 10 years will be taken into account (Igric, Marinic, Maljevac, 2021).<sup>27</sup>

27. Igric, Lj., Marinic, M., Maljevac, A. (2021). Comparison of Teachers and Teaching Assistants' Perspective of Necessary Teaching Assistant Competences <https://doi.org/10.15516/cje.v23i2.3700>



## 5. Conclusion

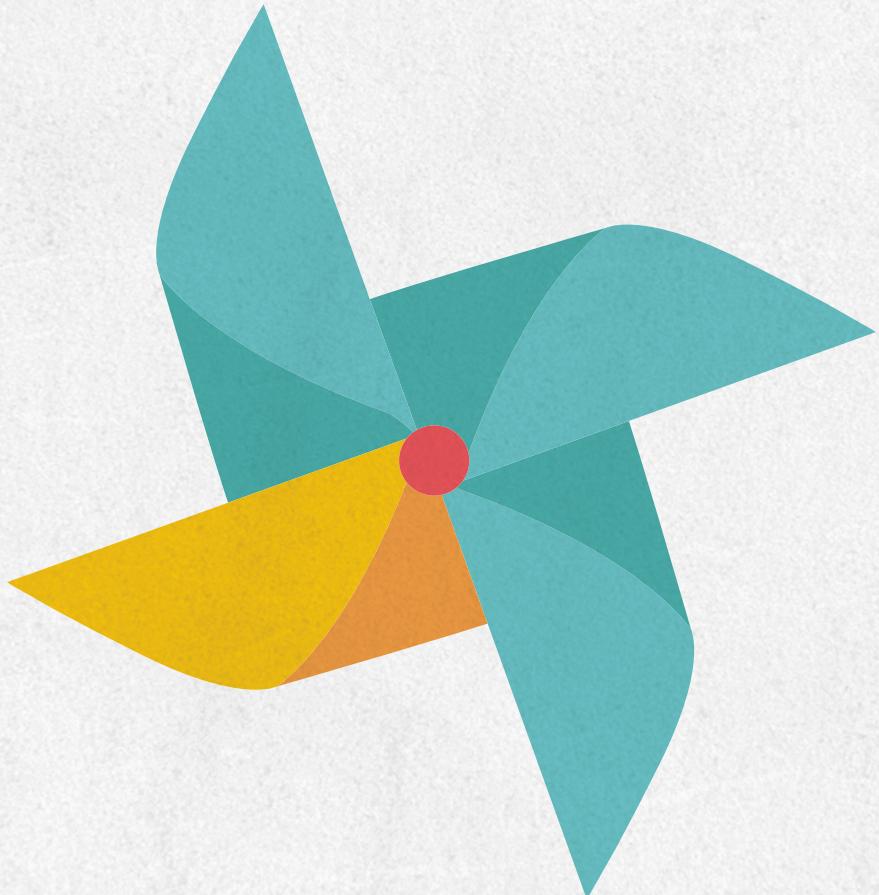
Progress can be seen in the state of inclusive education in Croatia. Children with special needs are mainly in regular schools and pre-school education institutions. The development of support systems for schools and kindergartens is being developed, but without greater sensitization of teachers to include students with special needs, inclusive education will not be possible in terms of students with special needs exercising the right to education in their environment, together with their peers. The experience of the participants in this forty-year process, whether they are teachers, parents, or experts in Croatia, indicates that this is a process that has a duration that is much longer than expected. Educational inclusion, like many other things in a community, depends on the development of society in all its aspects. From the example of Croatia, it is clear that national strategies are not enough, neither are the laws ensuring its implementation, nor the successful work of experts, be it research or direct work in care and education.

From our own experience, we believe that not enough has been done in Croatia to sensitize lecturers or parents, regardless of whether or not they have a child with special needs. Attitudes are difficult to change because they are passed down through generations, and this suggests that people with disabilities and children with special needs should be protected and their wellbeing should be ensured by separation from their environment into a protected one, whether for schooling or work.

Nevertheless, attitudes are not something that cannot be changed; they are resistant to change, but experts know how to change them. Therefore, it could be concluded from the experience of Croatia that through strong connections and cooperation between education policymakers, schools, parents, non-governmental organizations, and the scientific and professional communities, change can be accelerated and the goals of inclusive education can be reached.



This project is funded by the European Union.



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