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# Teachers' Work with Children with Special Needs in Kindergarten

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**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** otroci s posebnimi potrebami, vzgojitelj in pomočnik vzgojitelja, naloge, usposobljenost, vrtec

**POVZETEK** – Predšolsko obdobje je za otrokov razvoj še posebej občutljivo obdobje in zato je nujno, da je za svoj optimalen razvoj v tem obdobju deležen vseh potrebnih spodbud. Še posebej to velja za otroke s posebnimi potrebami. V našem prispevku predstavljamo pomen vzgojitelja in pomočnika vzgojitelja pri zagotavljanju optimalnih pogojev za razvoj otrok s posebnimi potrebami. Izvedli smo raziskavo, v kateri je sodelovalo 148 vzgojiteljev in pomočnikov vzgojiteljev, ki so poročali o svojem opravljanju splošnih nalog pri delu z otroki s posebnimi potrebami. Rezultati pričajo o tem, da strokovni delavci sicer opravljajo različne naloge, povezane z otroki s posebnimi potrebami, pri tem tudi sodelujejo s svetovalno službo, starši in zunanjimi sodelavci, a se za delo z otroki s posebnimi potrebami ne počutijo kompetentne. Med vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev prihaja do razlik, ki govorijo v prid vzgojiteljev.

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**KEYWORDS:** children with special needs, early childhood education teacher, tasks, competence, kindergarten

**ABSTRACT** – The preschool period is a susceptible stage of children's development, and it is essential that children receive the necessary support for their optimal development during this period. This is especially important for children with special educational needs. The present study highlights the importance of early childhood education teachers and teacher assistants to provide optimal conditions for the development of children with special educational needs. Our research includes 148 early childhood education teachers and teacher assistants, who completed a questionnaire about the general tasks they perform when working with children with special educational needs. The results show that while teachers perform various tasks intended for children with special educational needs and cooperate with the kindergarten counselling service, parents and other professionals, they do not feel competent to work with children with special educational needs. Additionally, the results indicate that there are differences between early childhood education teachers and teacher assistants, as the results are more favourable for the former.

## 1 Introduction

The number of children with special educational needs (children with SEN) is increasing (Resolution on the National Health Care Plan 2016-2025, 2016). The definition of children with SEN in the Slovenian Placement of Children with Special Needs Act (2011) includes nine groups of children with SEN as follows: children with intellectual disabilities, blind children or children with visual impairments, deaf children and children with hearing impairments, children with speech and language problems, children with physical disabilities, children with long-term illnesses, children with deficits in individual learning areas, children with autism, and children with emotional and behavioural disorders.

A similar definition of developmental disabilities of children with SEN is also formed by the Kindergarten Act (2005). In contrast, the purpose of the Act Regulating the Integrated Early Treatment of Preschool Children with Special Needs (2017) is to implement a definition of children with SEN in the Slovenian legal order, which would be descriptive, more inclusive and would not be focused on the division into individual developmental disorders. It is precisely this definition that often determines who and to what extent will be entitled to early treatment services (Murgel, 2019). Furthermore, scientific findings from various disciplines dictate that children with SEN must be provided with early detection, appropriate diagnosis and inclusion in education programmes as early as possible (Čas et al., 2003).

The fundamental document that enables the SEN children's inclusion in the educational process is the individual educational plan (IEP). The IEP is an individualized plan of educational and counselling work. Additionally, it is a unique plan for supporting the child and is placed at the top of contemporary concepts of didactics (Težak, 2006). Literature offers various aspects and definitions of the IEP (Al-Shammari and Hornby, 2020; Daniels et al., 2003; Jurišić, 2008; Kiswarday, 2018; Koßmann, 2022; Rätty et al., 2019; Vučak, 2010), however, all the definitions suggest that the IEP represents the key document for implementing the inclusion and placement decisions for children with SEN (Kiswarday, 2018; Placement of Children with Special Needs Act, 2011).

The White Paper on Education (2011) defines the IEP as a plan for the educational, developmental and rehabilitative work of an individual child. It is the basic guideline to be followed by teachers and parents in order to meet the child's basic needs. The IEP is adjusted to meet the needs of an individual child and is thus as important for the child as the Kindergarten Curriculum (1999). For preschool children with SEN, the IEP primarily aims to define adjustments related to cognitive development and social competence.

Furthermore, the IEP is an overview of children's strengths, needs, interests and expectations related to their learning and performance that differ from the requirements of the programme in which they participate. The IEP ensures continuity in the fields of diagnostics, planning, implementing, and evaluating the child's development, learning and work (Končar, 2003). According to Vučak (2010), the IEP should be clear, achievable, measurable and focused on the child's development and progress. However, it should also allow room for adjustments and, most importantly, it should be designed for each child individually.

The IEP is prepared and monitored by a group of experts, who will be involved in its implementation. Additionally, both parents and children with SEN should be actively involved in the preparation and monitoring of the IEP, wherein the children's level of involvement depends on their age and maturity (Placement of Children with Special Needs Act, 2011). It is important that the ECE teacher and ECE teacher assistant actively work with the parents of a child with SEN (Alzahrani, 2020; Sheppard and Moran, 2022), as it is the parents who know the child's strengths as well as weaknesses and can therefore make a decisive contribution to improving the IEP. It is also important to work together with the kindergarten counselling service and external professionals who can help the ECE teacher and ECE teacher assistant to understand the children, and inform them about their special educational needs which may not be observed in their daily practice.

Furthermore, it is precisely the group of experts that provides the support network needed for the children's holistic and optimal development (Težak, 2006). In early childhood, the ECE teacher and the ECE teacher assistant are also members of the expert group. When performing the IEP tasks, the ECE teacher and ECE teacher assistant should cooperate, which requires a certain kind of knowledge, experience and personal engagement. In cooperation with other experts, ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants adjust the programme to the specific educational needs of each child, implement individual parts of the IEP, and continuously monitor the progress of the child with SEN. Additionally, they coordinate the work in the department and the needs of the individual child. By responding to individual children and situations, they must create a safe atmosphere in the classroom that enables optimal development for all children. One of their tasks is also to create a suitable climate for the acceptance of the child with SEN into the group, which can be achieved by setting their own example. As members of the expert group, they actively participate in the exchange of information about the child, identify problems, and suggest possible solutions (Čas et al., 2003).

Since children are constantly developing, they need constant and close monitoring by the expert group, which should identify and highlight the child's essential needs that are dictated by their deficits and disorders. The experts should also pay attention to their abilities, interests and strengths. Child support should be planned flexibly, as when the child acquires certain necessary strategies and skills, the amount of support to the child decreases, thus enabling the development of independence (Kiswarday, 2018). The IEP is therefore not merely a document that needs to be prepared and evaluated, but a process that is constantly changing (Končar, 2003). The White Paper on Education (2011) highlights that regardless of the legal provisions, there are no guidelines or instructions on how kindergartens should prepare the IEP, what it should consist of, or how they should implement the legal provisions.

The above-mentioned drawbacks are partially responsible for why professionals, both in school and in kindergarten, are often faced with the challenge of how to design an IEP that will be useful and will, with the appropriate adjustments, enable optimal development for the child (Težak, 2006). Consequently, pedagogical practice is often faced with issues regarding the implementation of appropriate adjustments for children with SEN both in school and in kindergarten, which ultimately result in an inadequate implementation of the IEP itself (Rovšek, 2009; Schmidt and Čagran, 2014; Schmidt and Vrhovnik, 2015; Topolovec and Schmidt, 2015).

According to Bratož (2004), ECE teachers often refuse to accept a child with SEN into their group due to a lack of information and knowledge about such children, which certainly also applies to the ECE teacher assistants. Moreover, their concerns often include inadequate training, incompetence or not receiving sufficient support from management and other professionals. They also fear the mental strain, the increased workload, and the possible deprivation of other children.

The study aimed to investigate the ECE teachers' performance of general tasks when working with children with SEN, their knowledge about the corresponding legislation, their cooperation with others involved in the SEN children's education, and whether they consider themselves competent to work with children with SEN. Additionally, we were interested to find whether there are differences between ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants.

## 2 Methodology

### *Research sample*

The research was conducted with a convenience sample of 148 ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants, who were employed in Slovenian public kindergartens during the school year 2020/2021. The differences in the sample include gender, age, working experiences, professional title and position of employment. Our research focused primarily on the differences in the position of employment, which are presented in more detail in Table 1. More ECE teachers (63.5%) than ECE teacher assistants (36.5%) participated in the research.

**Table 1**

*The structure of the ECE teacher and ECE teacher assistant research sample*

<i>Position of employment</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f%</i>
ECE teacher	94	63.5
ECE teacher assistant	54	36.5
Total	148	100.0

Since the condition of random sampling was not met, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Slovenian population of ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants.

### *Data collection and analysis procedure*

The data for the research were obtained with the help of an online questionnaire. ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants completed the questionnaire in March 2021. The link to the questionnaire was sent via e-mail to kindergartens in Slovenia. E-mail addresses were obtained from the kindergarten websites.

The obtained data were processed and analysed with the SPSS programme. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to process the data. First, we used descriptive statistical methods for data processing. Before further processing, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed, which showed that the variables deviate from the normal distribution, as a statistically significant difference of  $p < 0.05$  was detected everywhere. Consequently, we performed the nonparametric Mann-Whitney and the Chi-squared tests to compare two independent samples.

### *Measuring instrument*

The research is based on a questionnaire that was designed specifically for this survey. The questionnaire consists of close-ended questions and includes questions about the general tasks of ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants while working with chil-

dren with SEN, their cooperation with other professionals involved in teaching children with SEN, and their qualifications to work with children with SEN. ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants answered the questions on a scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. One question could be answered with yes and no answers.

### 3 Results

#### *Knowledge of general tasks when working with children with SEN*

**Table 2**

*ECE teachers' and ECE teacher assistants' responses to statements about performing general tasks and following legal requirements when working with children with SEN*

<i>Performing general tasks when working with children with SEN</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Level of agreement</i>				
			<i>strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
			%	%	%	%	%
I monitor the SEN children's progress and development	148	4.34	2.0	2.7	7.4	35.1	52.7
I participate in the preparation of the IEP for children with SEN	148	4.30	4.7	3.4	6.8	27.7	57.4
I participate in the preparation of evaluation reports for children with SEN	148	4.15	5.4	4.1	8.1	34.5	48.0
I am familiar with the placement process for children with SEN	148	3.97	1.4	8.1	13.5	46.6	30.4
I plan adjustments for the child with SEN on a daily basis	148	3.64	4.7	11.5	19.6	43.2	20.9
I am familiar with the content of the Act Regulating the Integrated Early Treatment of Preschool Children with Special Needs	148	3.46	8.1	14.2	17.6	43.9	16.2
I am familiar with the content of the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act	148	3.42	10.1	12.2	18.2	44.6	14.9

We find that the majority of ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants perform general tasks, such as monitoring the progress and development of the children with SEN, participating in the preparation of the IEP and evaluation reports, and planning adjustments. Furthermore, the majority are familiar with the placement process for children with SEN and the content of both the Act Regulating the Integrated Early Treatment

of Preschool Children with Special Needs and the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act.

**Table 3**

*Result of the Mann-Whitney test of differences in performing general tasks when working with children with SEN according to the position of employment*

<i>Performing general tasks when working with children with SEN</i>	<i>Position of employment</i>	<i>N</i>	<i><math>\bar{R}</math></i>	<i>Mann-Whitney test</i>	
				<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
I monitor the SEN children's progress and development	ECE teacher	94	86.53	1407.50	< 0.001
	ECE teacher assistant	54	53.56		
I participate in the preparation of the IEP for children with SEN	ECE teacher	94	85.56	1498.50	< 0.001
	ECE teacher assistant	54	55.25		
I participate in the preparation of evaluation reports for children with SEN	ECE teacher	94	88.99	1175.50	< 0.001
	ECE teacher assistant	54	49.27		
I am familiar with the placement process for children with SEN	ECE teacher	94	84.43	1604.50	< 0.001
	ECE teacher assistant	54	57.21		
I plan adjustments for the child with SEN on a daily basis	ECE teacher	94	83.44	1697.50	< 0.001
	ECE teacher assistant	54	58.94		
I am familiar with the content of the Act Regulating the Integrated Early Treatment of Preschool Children with Special Needs	ECE teacher	94	85.16	1536.00	< 0.001
	ECE teacher assistant	54	55.94		
I am familiar with the content of the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act	ECE teacher	94	85.11	1540.50	< 0.001
	ECE teacher assistant	54	56.03		

The Mann-Whitney test shows statistically significant differences between ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants when it comes to performing and being familiar with the general tasks and legal requirements. We find that all differences indicate more favourable results for ECE teachers. In contrast to ECE teacher assistants, ECE teachers had a higher rate of agreement with the following statements: "I regularly monitor the SEN children's progress and development", "I participate in the preparation of the IEP for children with SEN", "I participate in the preparation of evaluation reports for children with SEN", "I am familiar with the placement process for children with SEN", "I plan adjustments for the child with SEN on a daily basis", "I am familiar with the content of the Act Regulating the Integrated Early Treatment of Preschool Children with Special Needs", and "I am familiar with the content of the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act".

*Cooperation with parents and other professionals involved with the child with SEN***Table 4**

*ECE teachers' and ECE teacher assistants' responses to statements relating to cooperation with parents and other professionals involved with the child with SEN*

Cooperation	N	M	Level of agreement				
			<i>strongly disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>strongly agree</i>
			%	%	%	%	%
I cooperate with the SEN children's parents.	148	4.09	0.7	5.4	14.9	42.6	36.5
When working with children with SEN, I cooperate with the kindergarten counselling service.	148	4.05	4.7	4.1	11.5	41.2	38.5
When working with children with SEN, I cooperate with other professionals, such as speech and language therapists, SEN teachers and inclusion pedagogues.	148	3.97	3.4	8.1	9.5	46.6	32.4

The majority of ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants reported that they cooperate with the SEN children's parents, the kindergarten counselling service and other professionals, while a minority of respondents claimed that they do not seek help from others when working with children with SEN.

**Table 5**

*Results of the Mann-Whitney test of differences in ECE teachers' and ECE teacher assistants' self-evaluation of their cooperation with others involved in working with children with SEN*

Cooperation	Position of employment	N	$\bar{R}$	Mann-Whitney test	
				U	p
I cooperate with the SEN children's parents.	ECE teacher	94	76.59	2341.50	0.402
	ECE teacher assistant	54	70.86		
When working with children with SEN, I cooperate with the kindergarten counselling service.	ECE teacher	94	83.95	1649.50	< 0.001
	ECE teacher assistant	54	58.05		
When working with children with SEN, I cooperate with other professionals, such as speech and language therapists, SEN teachers and inclusion pedagogues.	ECE teacher	94	81.39	1890.00	0.005
	ECE teacher assistant	54	62.50		

The Mann-Whitney test shows statistically significant differences among ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants when it comes to cooperation with the counselling service and other professionals when working with children with SEN. As the results of our research suggest, cooperation with the counselling service and external professionals is more typical for ECE teachers than for ECE teacher assistants. No statistically significant differences were found between ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants regarding cooperation with parents.

### *Qualifications for working with children with SEN*

**Table 6**

*ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants' responses to statements about being qualified for working with children with SEN*

<i>I am qualified for working with children with SEN</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f%</i>
Yes	31	20.9
No	117	79.1
Total	148	100.0

The majority of ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants claim not to be qualified for working with children with SEN. Approximately one in five ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants from our research consider themselves qualified for working with children with SEN.

**Table 7**

*Result of the Chi-square test of respondents' opinions about their qualifications for working with children with SEN according to the position of employment*

<i>I am qualified for working with children with SEN</i>	<i>Position of employment</i>	
	<i>ECE teacher %</i>	<i>ECE teacher assistant %</i>
Yes	27.7	9.3
No	72.3	90.7
Total	100.0	100.0
$\chi^2 = 7.013, p = 0.008$		

We find that there are statistically significant differences between ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants regarding their opinions on being qualified for working with children with SEN. Over a quarter of ECE teachers claim to be qualified for working with children with SEN, while the majority do not. Similarly, nearly all ECE teacher assistants do not feel qualified for working with children with SEN.



## 4 Discussion and conclusion

“The educational process in kindergarten is carried out because of and for the child” (Hmelak and Baša, 2022, p. 3). Children develop their wholesome personalities by being involved in the educational process, which must be accessible to every child, regardless of their abilities (Novljan, 2004). Children with SEN are a particularly vulnerable group of children who need an adapted environment and specialized professional help for their optimal development (Perovšek and Kiswarday, 2022).

Early childhood is a particularly sensitive period for children. Kindergartens play an important role during that period as they provide a crucial contribution to eliminating the educational gaps in the children. The basic conditions for the optimal development of all children are, first and foremost, the appropriate treatment of children with SEN and the inclusive orientation of the kindergarten (Globačnik, 2012). As defined by Jurišević and Hasanbegović (2006), ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants are important actors in shaping children’s personal and social development, and contribute significantly to meeting these conditions.

As indicated above, the most important actors in ensuring optimal conditions for the development of children with SEN in kindergartens are ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants. They are constantly confronted with new tasks, since working with different groups of children with SEN requires specific approaches that arise from the needs of each child. The inclusion of children with special needs has a positive effect on the personality development of all children (Karačić et al., 2022). However, Kermauner and Plazar (2019) suggest that the inclusion of children with SEN represents a great challenge for both the ECE teachers and the ECE teacher assistants, since they are the actors who must provide meaningful and high-quality educational opportunities for all children. Due to the aforementioned importance of kindergarten professionals, the results of our research are gratifying, as they testify to the fact that more than half of ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants perform general tasks, such as monitoring the SEN children’s progress and development; participating in the preparation of the IEP and evaluation reports; planning adjustments; being familiar with the placement process for children with SEN and the legal requirements related to working with children with SEN. However, it is alarming that just under a quarter of ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants are not familiar with the contents of the Act Regulating the Integrated Early Treatment of Preschool Children with Special Needs and that just as many are not familiar with the contents of the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act. The two mentioned acts represent the foundations for the successful inclusion of children with SEN in kindergarten.

Furthermore, we find that among ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants there are statistically significant differences in performing general tasks and being familiar with legal requirements for working with children with SEN. The results are more favourable for ECE teachers than ECE teacher assistants and indicate that this area of work is still lacking in teamwork. At this point, it should be emphasized that teamwork, and the skills it requires, must be learnt and that ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants should not only gain additional skills in working with children with SEN but should also participate in a variety of continuous specialized education programmes and/or

acquire the necessary knowledge at different stages of their education. The differences between ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants can be attributed to different levels of workload and responsibility. Similarly, Lepičnik Vodopivec (2006) claims that the reasons for different levels of workload between teachers are due to the fact that ECE teachers still carry the responsibility for the work in the department. She further suggests that the difference in assigning work to teachers is still influenced by the past understanding of the roles of ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants, as the ECE teacher's roles were associated with educational work and the ECE teacher assistant's roles with care and protection. According to Cigale (2014), their roles should be more equal, which, additionally, improves teamwork. However, the author also emphasizes that assigning an equal amount of work and responsibilities to ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants is further hindered due to the differences in the pay gap between them.

As regards cooperation, we find that the majority of ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants cooperate with the children's parents, the kindergarten's counselling service and external professionals, which indicates that teamwork is present when working with children with SEN. It is essential for the optimal development of the child with SEN that ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants cooperate with other individuals involved in the children's learning. Similarly, Logar (2010) argues that when working with children with SEN, teamwork is essential and the team members should be equal, regardless of their education and the work they perform. While Vučak (2010) agrees, she also emphasizes that the members of the expert group should work together when formulating guidelines for a comprehensive treatment of the child. According to her, ECE teachers' and ECE teacher assistants' roles are primarily to work directly with the child, adjust the programme to the specific needs of the child, implement the IEP, and continuously monitor the children's progress.

Turning now to ECE teachers' and ECE teacher assistants' qualifications for working with children with SEN, the results of our research indicate that while they perform various tasks related to working with children with SEN, they do not feel competent in performing these tasks. The majority of both ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants reported that they do not consider themselves competent to work with children with SEN. As several studies indicate, feeling incompetent can lead to occupational stress, which negatively affects the productivity, health, fluctuation and well-being of employees (Slivar, 2009). Clipa and Boghean (2015) conclude that the best measure to prevent stress among ECE teachers is to increase the qualified workforce numbers with adequate working conditions and salaries. In addition, Devjak et al. (2020) emphasize that the better the professional staff in the kindergarten is trained, the higher the quality of services that the kindergarten can offer. We believe that the kindergarten management should provide its employees with appropriate working conditions and support them by providing additional training for dealing with stress.

Modern guidelines for education highlight the importance of inclusion and claim that it is a fundamental value and challenge, and that all further development in the field of educational sciences must be aimed at meeting this challenge (Kiswarday and Štemberger, 2017; Petrova Trifonova, 2022). Both ECE teachers and ECE teacher assistants play an important role in facilitating an inclusive environment and thereby enabling optimal conditions for the development of all children. Therefore, both profiles must cooperate and receive continuous training for working with children with SEN.

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## Vzgojiteljevo delo z otroki s posebnimi potrebami

Število otrok s posebnimi potrebami (v nadaljevanju OPP) se povečuje (Resolucija o nacionalnem planu zdravstvenega varstva 2016–2025, 2016), pri čemer so OPP v Zakonu o usmerjanju otrok s posebnimi potrebami (2011, čl. 2) opredeljeni kot “otroci z motnjami v duševnem razvoju, slepi in slabovidni otroci oziroma otroci z okvaro vidne funkcije, gluhi in naglušni otroci, otroci z govorno-jezikovnimi motnjami, gibalno ovirani otroci, dolgotrajno bolni otroci, otroci s primanjkljaji na posameznih področjih učenja, otroci z avtističnimi motnjami ter otroci s čustvenimi in vedenjskimi motnjami, ki potrebujejo prilagojeno izvajanje programov vzgoje in izobraževanja z dodatno strokovno pomočjo ali prilagojene programe vzgoje in izobraževanja oziroma posebne programe vzgoje in izobraževanja”.

Podobno opredelitev po razvojnih motnjah OPP najdemo tudi v Zakonu o vrtcih (2005). V nasprotju s tem je namen Zakona o celostni zgodnji obravnavi predšolskih otrok s posebnimi potrebami (2017) v slovenskem pravnem redu uveljaviti opredelitev OPP, ki bi bila opisna in s tem bolj vključujoča in ne bi temeljila na delitvi na posamezne razvojne motnje. Kajti prav način opredelitve pogosto določa, kdo in v kolikšnem obsegu bo upravičen do storitev zgodnje obravnave (Murgelj, 2019). Znanstvena spoznanja različnih strok namreč narekujejo, da je OPP potrebno zagotoviti “zgodnje odkrivanje, ustrezno diagnostiko in čim zgodnejšo vključitev v programe vzgoje in izobraževanja” (Čas idr., 2003, str. 4).

Temeljni dokument, na katerem temelji vključevanje OPP v vzgojno-izobraževalni proces, je individualizirani program (v nadaljevanju IP), ki predstavlja načrt individualizacije vzgojno-izobraževalnega ter svetovalnega dela. Predstavlja unikaten načrt pomoči otroku (Težak, 2006). V literaturi zasledimo različne vidike, opredelitve in definicije IP (Al-Shammari in Hornby, 2020; Daniels idr., 2003; Jurišić, 2008; Kiswarday, 2018; Koßmann, 2022; Rätty idr., 2019; Vučak, 2010), iz katerih izhaja, da IP predstavlja ključni dokument za uresničevanje odločbe o usmeritvi OPP (Kiswarday, 2018; Zakon o usmerjanju otrok s posebnimi potrebami, 2011).

Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju (2011, str. 294) IP opredeljuje kot “načrt vzgojno-izobraževalnega in razvojno-rehabilitacijskega dela posameznega otroka”. Vzgojiteljem in staršem predstavlja osnovno vodilo pri zadovoljevanju otrokovih posebnih potreb. Prilagojen je potrebam posameznega učenca in je zato za otroka prav tako pomemben kot Kurikulum za vrtce (1999). Za predšolske OPP je cilj IP predvsem v opredelitvi prilagoditev, ki so izražene v ciljih na področju razvoja kognitivnih procesov in socialne kompetentnosti.

Za pripravo in spremljanje IP je odgovorna strokovna skupina. Sestavljena je iz strokovnih delavcev, ki bodo vključeni v izvajanje vzgojno-izobraževalnega programa. Pri pripravi in spremljanju izvajanja IP morajo aktivno sodelovati tudi starši ter ob upoštevanju otrokove starosti in zrelosti tudi OPP (Zakon o usmerjanju otrok s posebnimi potrebami, 2011). Strokovna skupina torej predstavlja podporno mrežo za otrokov celosten in optimalen razvoj (Težak, 2006).

*Med pomembne stebre zgodnje obravnave OPP nedvomno sodi predšolska vzgoja, katere glavna akterja sta prav vzgojitelj in pomočnik vzgojitelja. Oba, v tandemu, sodelujeta pri večini nalog, povezanih z OPP, kar od njiju zahteva določena znanja, osebno angažiranost in izkušnje. V sodelovanju z ostalimi strokovnimi delavci prilagajata program dela specifičnim potrebam posameznega otroka, realizirata posamezne dele IP ter kontinuirano spremljata napredek OPP. Poleg tega je njuna naloga v tem, da med seboj uskladiata delo v oddelku in potrebe posameznega otroka. S svojim odzivanjem na otroka in situacije morata v oddelku ustvarjati varno ozračje, ki bo vsem otrokom omogočilo optimalen razvoj. Med njune naloge sodi tudi ustvarjanje primerne klime za sprejetje OPP v skupino, kar lahko najlaže dosežeta z lastnim zgledom. Kot člana strokovnega tima aktivno sodelujeta pri izmenjavi informacij o otroku, opozarjata na težave in predlagata možne rešitve (Čas et al., 2003).*

*Strokovni delavci se v praksi pogosto soočajo z izzivom, kako oblikovati IP, ki bo uporaben in bo otroku z ustreznimi prilagoditvami omogočal optimalen razvoj (Težak, 2006). V pedagoški praksi (v šolah in prav tako v vrtcih) se posledično pogosto pojavljajo težave pri izvajanju ustreznih prilagoditev za učence s posebnimi potrebami ter težave z neustreznim izvajanjem IP (Rovšek, 2009; Schmidt in Čagran, 2014; Schmidt in Vrhovnik, 2015; Topolovec in Schmidt, 2015). Kot opozarja Bratož (2004), vzgojitelji (kar zagotovo velja tudi za pomočnike vzgojiteljev) zaradi pomanjkanja informacij in znanj o OPP pogosto zavračajo možnost, da bi otroka vključili v skupino. Pogosto se počutijo premalo usposobljene, nekompetentne ali pa niso deležni zadostne podpore s strani vodstva in drugih strokovnih delavcev. Strah jih je psihične obremenitve, večje količine dela, morebitne prikrasnosti drugih otrok.*

*Kljub temu so najpomembnejši akterji pri zagotavljanju optimalnih pogojev za razvoj OPP v vrtcih prav vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev, ki se pri delu z OPP srečujejo z vedno novimi nalogami, saj delo z različnimi skupinami OPP zahteva specifične pristope, ki izhajajo iz potreb vsakega posameznega otroka. Izhajajoč iz zapisanega smo v naši raziskavi želeli dobiti vpogled v vzgojiteljevo opravljanje splošnih nalog pri delu z OPP in njihovo poznavanje zakonodaje, sodelovanje z drugimi ter vpogled v njihovo mnenje o usposobljenosti za delo z OPP. Pri tem so nas zanimale razlike med vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev.*

*Naša raziskava je temeljila na neslučajnostnem priložnostnem vzorcu 148 vzgojiteljev in pomočnikov vzgojiteljev, ki so bili v šolskem letu 2020/2021 zaposleni v slovenskih javnih vrtcih. V raziskavi je sodelovalo več vzgojiteljev (63,5%) kot pomočnikov vzgojiteljev (36,5%). Podatke za raziskavo smo pridobili s pomočjo anketnega vprašalnika. Vprašalnik je vključeval vprašanja o splošnih nalogah vzgojiteljev in pomočnikov vzgojiteljev na področju dela z OPP, o njihovem sodelovanju z različnimi akterji pri delu z OPP in o usposobljenosti vzgojiteljev in pomočnikov vzgojiteljev za delo z OPP. Vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev so odgovore podajali na lestvici od sploh ne drži do popolnoma drži. Pri enem vprašanju so izbirali med odgovoroma da in ne. Vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev so anketni vprašalnik reševali v mesecu marcu 2021. Vprašalnik je bil pripravljen v elektronski obliki.*

*Pridobljene podatke smo obdelali in analizirali s programom SPSS. Obdelava podatkov je potekala na ravni deskriptivne in inferenčne statistike. Pri obdelavi podatkov smo najprej uporabili opisne statistične metode. Pred nadaljnjo obdelavo smo opravili Kolmogorov-Smirnov preizkus, ki je pokazal, da spremenljivke odstopajo od normalne*

porazdelitve, saj se je povsod pokazala statistično značilna razlika ( $p < 0,050$ ), zato smo za primerjavo dveh neodvisnih vzorcev uporabili neparametrični Mann-Whitneyev preizkus in Hi-kvadrat preizkus.

Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da večina vzgojiteljev in pomočnikov vzgojiteljev opravlja splošne naloge, kot so spremljanje napredka in razvoja OPP, sodelovanje pri pripravi IP in pri pripravi evalvacijskih poročil, načrtovanje prilagoditev ter poznavanje postopka usmerjanja OPP, vsebine Zakona o celostni zgodnji obravnavi OPP in vsebine Zakona o usmerjanju OPP. A pri tem je potrebno izpostaviti slabo četrtino vzgojiteljev in pomočnikov vzgojiteljev, ki ne pozna vsebine Zakona o celostni zgodnji obravnavi predšolskih otrok s posebnimi potrebami, in prav toliko tistih, ki ne poznajo vsebine Zakona o usmerjanju otrok s posebnimi potrebami. Omenjena zakona namreč predstavljata osnovo za uspešno vključevanje OPP v vrtec.

Nadalje ugotavljamo, da med vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev obstajajo statistično značilne razlike v opravljanju in poznavanju splošnih nalog pri delu z OPP in s tem področjem povezane zakonodaje. Vse razlike govorijo v prid vzgojiteljem in kažejo na dejstvo, da je na tem področju dela še vedno premalo timskega sodelovanja med vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev. Razlike med vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev lahko pripišemo različni delovni obremenitvi in stopnji odgovornosti. Tudi avtorica Lepičnik Vodopivec (2006) vzroke za različno delitev dela med člani pripisuje dejstvu, da je vzgojitelj še vedno tisti, ki odgovarja za delo v oddelku. Na delitev dela po njenem še vedno vpliva tudi preteklo razumevanje vloge vzgojitelja in pomočnika vzgojitelja, saj se je vzgojitelja povezovalo z vzgojnimi delom, pomočnika vzgojitelja pa z nego in varovanjem. Njuni vlogi naj bi bili po prepričanju Cigaletove (2014) danes veliko bolj enakopravni.

Ugotavljamo, da je večina vzgojiteljev in pomočnikov vzgojiteljev poročala, da pri delu z OPP sodelujejo s starši, svetovalno službo vrtca in tudi z zunanjimi sodelavci. Za optimalni razvoj OPP je namreč nujno, da se vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev poslužujejo tovrstnih sodelovanj.

V nadaljevanju rezultati naše raziskave kažejo, da čeprav vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev opravljajo različne naloge, vezane na delo z OPP, se pri opravljanju teh nalog ne počutijo kompetentne. Tako je večina vzgojiteljev kot tudi večina pomočnikov vzgojiteljev poročala, da se ne dojemajo kompetentne za delo z OPP.

Sodobne smernice vzgoje in izobraževanja izpostavljajo inkluzijo kot "temeljno vrednoto in izziv, v uresničevanje katerega mora biti usmerjen ves nadaljnji razvoj na področju edukacijskih ved" (Kiswarday in Štemberger, 2017, str. 3). Za uresničevanje inkluzivnega okolja in s tem omogočanje optimalnih pogojev za razvoj prav vsem otrokom sta pomembna tako vzgojitelj kot pomočnik vzgojitelja. Zato je nujno, da oba profila medsebojno sodelujeta in se za delo z OPP tudi nenehno dodatno izobražujeta.

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